Writing Review Responses

A response to reviewers is typically in the form of a rebuttal or a "cover letter" summarizing revisions you did for something like a major revision cycle. This document outlines three aspects of *how* to write these kinds of responses: a **methodology** as a sequence of three steps and documents; good **strategies** to use when choosing what to write and how to write it; and **style** suggestions for organizing and writing your rebuttal or response. Examples of **useful phrasing** that you can adapt and reuse are also provided.

Methodology

I've found the best way to write a response is to approach it very methodically, using documents in a private shared folder on Google Drive. Using GDrive is critical to make the process fast and iterative. Using this method maintains thoughts and decisions at each step and gives all authors high confidence that nothing important was missed. Perhaps more importantly, for those busy last-minute co-authors who parachute in at the end (i.e. your advisor), this method helps them trace your final rebuttal text all the way back to the original reviewer comments with all the justifications and decisions made along the way.

Links to examples of rebuttals are at the bottom of this document.

NOTE: the process used to have 4 steps, but I simplified it to 3 steps in Fall 2022. Some earlier examples have 4 documents from the steps..

Create a subfolder in your existing project folder in Google Drive called: **"<project name> Revisions (CHI 2027)"**. You will put three documents into that folder as explained below (name them exactly like the name shown in quotes). You should start with this folder with templates for these documents.

"1 Reviews" Document

Goal: Preserve record of original reviews.

Paste all the review text, summarize the scores at the top, make the reviewer sections clear, and highlight important parts of the reviews and insert comments you have. Important parts to highlight are anything reviewers ask for clarification, and also positive and negative comments.

- If PCS didn't do it, make sure you identify which reviewers are ACs and which are externals.
- Use "Heading 1" headings for each reviewer to break apart the reviews, 1AC, 2AC, R3, ...
- Summarize the scores at the top in a table like this:

mean	1AC	2AC	R1	R3		

- Highlight important sentences of the review using colours, keep these colours subtle and light, or else the original reviews become almost unreadable later: use light yellow, light green, and light red to highlight review text. If applicable, use light blue to capture additional citations suggested by reviewers.
- Use GDoc comments to have some discussions about specific comments. You'll move some of these ideas forward to the next doc.
- **It's very important to not change or insert any text in the original reviews in this document.** You want this to always be the pristine version of the original reviews so you can trace things back to the original reviews and avoid missing anything.

"2 Plan" Document

Goal 1: Group and rank reviewer issues

The 1AC meta review should contain a list of major issues to address in your response, often expressed as a list of revisions. You'll use these to structure your response.

- Add "Heading 1" sections for the 1AC issues maintaining the exact order the 1AC used. You can make these more concise, but very important that you still use the same terminology as the 1AC so they recognize these sections.
- Add "Heading 2" subsections if the 1AC provides them explicitly or implicitly, if not you'll create subgroups when you start organizing the related reviewer comments.
- Add a final "Heading 1" called "Other" to group all other reviewer comments that don't fit into the 1ACs list. You'll add Heading 2 subsections as you organize these "other" comments, but a common one is "Miscellaneous Revisions" for small things such as typos, or small changes to how things are reported, improvements to figures, etc.

Copy relevant excerpts from each reviewer into those 1AC groups and style each as "Heading 3" (grey with slight indent). Add a [R1], etc. in front of each comment so we know where the excerpt is from. An excerpt should have enough detail so we don't have to go back to the review to understand their point, but try to also keep them somewhat concise.

Add a 1 - 3 number ranking for each reviewer comment:

- *Assign 1* if a comment directly relates to an issue the 1AC identified
- *Assign 2* if the reviewer emphasizes the comment, but the 1AC didn't seem to include it in their meta.
- *Assign 3* to minor comments like typos, fix figures, etc. that are easily addressed or comments that seem minor or asides about things we could have done, etc.

The comments from 1AC and 2AC are almost always important in terms of ranking, unless just little things like typos, etc. Also focus on comments from very positive reviewers, you want them to stay positive.

Goal 2: Start brainstorming your responses

Add inline comments below 1 or more reviewer comments for how you might handle this. Use “Heading 4” to make your inline comments yellow and indented. It will be important to keep your comments together with the reviewer's comments.

Use GDoc comments to get specific feedback from others, but once the GDoc comment discussion runs its course, move the decision(s) to your inline comments and “resolve” the GDoc comment.

Goal 3: Plan and track your revisions

Add inline comments (Heading 4 style) prefixed with "TODO:" After the TODO, write a brief description of what you plan to revise/add/remove and where.

When you finish the revision, then change TODO to DONE.
NOTE: Don't delete the TODO when you're done because we can't track it after. Don't use font style like strikeout because you can't search on that. You want to be able to find TODO in your doc to see all the things you still have to revise.

Each TODO should be an independent chunk of work, something you can do and mark DONE on it's own. It's common to have several TODOs for one section of reviewer comments and all may lead to a single revision description.

Goal 4: Write draft responses

In plain “Normal” text style, start writing your responses in a style you’d use in the real response. Your goal is to write a version of the rebuttal in this document.

- Under one or more related reviewer comments, write the rebuttal response. You might have multiple responses to try different approaches. See the points below about rebuttal writing.
- Add any inline comments too, to keep track of your decisions.
- Use Google comments for discussion and to assign co-authors to look at specific issues or provide data or other analysis.
- You will likely have multiple responses in a single group or sub-section, just put your draft rebuttal response and comments below one or more of the associated reviewer comments.

There is a GDoc script to count the characters and move the “content” part of the “Plan” document to the “Final” document. Use this script to keep an eye on length and preview the final response as you work in the “Plan” document.

Generate Response

IMPORTANT: Do not move to the next document (i.e. writing a draft rebuttal) until all co-authors have reviewed the “Plan” document and participated in discussion and draft rebuttal writing. If

you spend lots of time in “3 Grouped” and write good responses, it’s fast and easy to bring them forward to write your rebuttal once ready.

“3 Final” Document

Goal: Refine and format the final response

When all co-authors have had time to review draft responses, inline comments, and have discussions in the “Plan” document, then you can move the grouped responses into “Final” document. If you’re using the GDocs script, then this is automatic, you just need to set the script to not mistakenly update the final version.

- As you write the rebuttal, it’s a good idea to keep the grouping and order of the groups in document 3 synced to the rebuttal.
- The rebuttal document should be kept clean, avoid inline comments or keeping past versions below. This is what “3 Grouped” is for.
- See the points below about rebuttal writing.

Strategies

The main objective is to make (or keep) the 1AC and 2AC positive, show them we’re reasonable and competent people willing to “play ball” with some changes. For rebuttals, we want them to think our paper won’t be much work for the 1AC because we’re handing them a clear revision plan. This means they can accept the paper by saying “make the revisions proposed in your rebuttal”.

The top themes requested by 1AC or 2AC should form the majority of the response. These themes (topics, issues, items, ...) should be clearly shown using the same language as the review. They should come first, ideally in the same order laid out by the 1AC meta.

As a rule, you want to explain how you will do every single revision that reviewers directly or indirectly suggest. They have all the control, so you need to play along. But usually, you don’t have space in the response to do that.

Try to provide very specific plans for revisions. Name the section, maybe the page, is it going to be a sentence, a bullet, a paragraph, etc. Write them in a way that the 1AC can copy and paste into an acceptance email with a list of revisions necessary for camera ready. If your paper looks like it won’t be much work if they accept (e.g. they can write something quickly post PC meeting) that can help. Due to space, writing specific plans in detail isn’t always possible.

You want to emphasize that all revisions you’re proposing are “minor”. If you propose too many revisions or large revisions (e.g. “We’ll re-run the experiment ...”, “We will add a new section ...”) the reviewers may use that as grounds to reject. However if the 1AC (or 2AC) suggests what seem like large revisions, and they seem to be suggesting these are possible within this review cycle, then go for it. Just make sure your rebuttal ties it clearly back to the AC’s comment so other reviewers don’t penalize you.

If a reviewer suggests related work, the answer is almost always "We will cite all related work suggested by reviewers". Adding an extra citation is certainly a minor revision, and takes little space in the paper. Many times reviewers are suggesting their own papers. This isn't necessarily because they want more citations, usually it's because they were assigned to your paper because they do related work. Regardless of their motivation, even if it isn't closely related, at least they're showing a direct engagement with your submission.

Many HCI reviewers are very picky about a subjective metric related to the ratio of contribution over page length (especially at UIST or the "UIST" subcommittee at CHI). If you have a big contribution, they want a "long" page paper. If you have a small contribution, they want a "short" paper. This relates to how CHI and UIST used to have only short 4-page papers and long 10-page papers. And to this day, "short" papers usually have shorter presentation slots. So, if the reviewers seem to be complaining that the paper seems too long and they point out one section as superfluous, AND they specifically say it should be removed, then consider offering to remove it (even if 1 or 2 pages) and publish that part as a separate appendix or separate tech report. Be clear in your response that removing this section would have no real effect on the paper (even if that isn't exactly true). As a rule, revisions that remove a lot of content (even pages of content) are easier to convince than adding content.

Mainly for Rebuttals

Don't propose any revisions that aren't "Minor" unless an AC explicitly requests it (like removing a section). The revisions you propose isn't a binding contract, but you should be realistic since if the paper is accepted, the AC will expect to see them done. On occasion, I've proposed a revision or two in the rebuttal, then when the paper is accepted, I discover it doesn't fit in or doesn't really make sense anymore. You can break your promise for some revisions, just be upfront and honest when you submit the change log with the camera ready.

Be careful about revisions that increase the length of the paper. If space in the rebuttal allows, explain exactly what section or figure can be trimmed to create a bit more space. Reviewers may reject it if it seems like you're proposing so much that it might add another page or so. In truth, I've proposed revisions that I said would not increase page length, and then after it was accepted, I asked for an extra page in camera ready and they've always said yes. However, I wouldn't count on that strategy.

Writing Style

Writing a review response isn't the same as writing a paper.

Make it easily scannable: long paragraphs are bad, clear short sections and headings are best.

Rebuttals are plain text pasted in an HTML form, so no formatting, no nice looking bullets, no typeset indentation. **Make sure the document style is set up for no space before or after normal text. You need to separate sections with hard returns.**

Avoid things like ======== to underline or make sections, it burns your character count. The best is to use some simple markdown, "#" for headings, "- " for bullets. Using ALLCAPS for headings is also fine (just don't SHOUT at reviewers).

Rebuttals are very short, so be concise from the start: some conferences even count whitespace!

One way to keep it short is not to paraphrase a reviewer comment, just give the answer and avoid any obvious contextual details.

For example this is long:

> R1 asked about why we use a red target in experiment 1. This color makes it easier to see …

This is better:

> R1: A red target is easier to see …

It's ok to use contractions (e.g. "We'll revise to …"). It makes it sound friendlier and saves space.

It's ok to address reviewers directly (e.g. "and R4, thanks for motor recommendation!")

You can use abbreviations, but don't go overboard. Unless the abbreviation is very obvious (e.g. HCI, VR, GUI) you have to define it the first time it's used (e.g. Control-Display Gain (CD Gain)). Don't use abbreviations as a way to condense your paper (e.g. "In our experiment design section (EDS), we … . The EDS will be …". Reviewers read your rebuttal *very* quickly, so anything that requires more cognitive load will detract from your core message.

Mention the reviewers by [*AC] or [R*] when possible. They want to scan the rebuttal and see where *their* review comments are being addressed. I usually use 1AC and 2AC for the primary and secondary even though have R* numbers in PCS. The reason is that the mapping of R* to AC varies with every paper, and most 1AC and 2AC won't remember if they were R1, R2, R3, or R4. Make it easy for them to see what comments are theirs.

Keep the language and terminology close to what the reviewers used, even if it might be a little wrong or different than what's in the paper. If you rephrase too much, they may not recognize that their comment is being addressed. Again, reducing the cognitive load on reviewers.

Formatting Style

If several reviewers had the same comment for a section or subsection, you can list the reviewers in the heading like:

> Experiment 2 Details [R1, R2]

If you comment is specific to a single reviewer, write it like a response like

R1: We used a red target because ….

Useful Phrasing

If space allows, and it makes sense, it's nice to open with something short to acknowledge the reviewers, and to address them directly. You can also summarize how your rebuttal has all the answers. An opener also makes it seem more personal to reviewers, and even though it seems like a waste of space, I think reviewers find it odd if it's missing..

- "Thank you for your constructive feedback and very encouraging remarks."
- "Below we respond to questions, outlining minor revisions to address them."
- Thank you for your thoughtful reviews. We're encouraged by your comments: the solution "has merits" (2AC), it's "interesting and creative" (1AC), "clever and well motivated" (R2), "useful" (R2, R3), "intriguing" (R3, R4), and the prototype is "convincing and works well" (R2).

If a reviewer's comments suggest they misunderstood something or didn't read the paper closely, you can politely correct them with a statement like "We realize from the reviews this wasn't clear, what we meant was ….".

If the reviewer's comments are just wrong or untrue, be careful how you correct them.

- *From Cito (this one was a little risky):* "'incremental' is a subjective and relative concept. We respectfully disagree that focusing on smartwatch actuation makes our work incremental because smartwatch research is popular. At the same time, we wholeheartedly agree actuation could be pushed even further. For now, our paper is about closing the gap between actuation and existing wearable form factors. "

If you can justify your response to reviewer comments with citations, use them (even better if it's a paper you cite in your submission already):

- "We respectfully disagree with R1 that X is wrong, Smith et al. [23] showed that X is right."

If a reviewer's comments suggest you did something else, but you know that something else doesn't apply, doesn't work when you think more closely about it, etc., try a phrase like this: "To be honest, we considered X at first, but we quickly realized that it wasn't <relevant/practical/useful> for these reasons."

How to phrase your plan for "minor revisions", "Minor revisions can add extra detail about X in the <blah> section." If space is really tight, at least include something like "We believe minor revisions can address all these points."

Try to always answer comments with a plan for how "minor revisions" can address it, "Minor revisions can add extra detail about X ." You want to show the reviews you're ready to play ball, and that all revisions you're proposing are minor.

Final Thoughts

Remember, reviewers aren't bad people. They're just busy people who don't always dedicate enough time to reading your paper, thinking about your paper, and writing their review. Many do it last minute in a marathon where they read and review 8 to 10 papers over a day or two. If they "don't get it" right away or they get confused because they're rushing or tired, then they'll start to find reasons to reject. So think of their comments as a measure for how clear you were at explaining what you did and how important it is. Clear, concise, paper writing is disproportionately important compared to the actual research results. Luckily, a rebuttal can give you a second chance to explain yourself and hopefully, after more consideration with less time pressure, a reviewer may reconsider.

Response Examples

NOTE: If you're a member of the UWaterloo HCI Lab, or collaborating with me (Dan Vogel) on a rebuttal, you can request access to these examples. If you don't fall into those categories, you won't be able to see these examples.

CHI R&R Response Examples

- AI Margin Notes Response (CHI 2026), was accepted.
- SewFab (CHI 2026), was accepted.

Rebuttal Examples

These UIST 2024 rebuttals are good examples of using the latest method in terms of style and content.

- Gait Gestures (UIST 2024). Paper was accepted.
- Constrained GPT (UIST 2024). The paper was rejected in the end, but definitely not because of the rebuttal.

Other Examples Using Previous Methodology

These use a previous methodology with four documents. The new methodology merged the older "2 Ranked" and "3 Grouped" into what we now call "2 Plan", so for these older examples looking at "3 Grouped" and "4 Rebuttal" is most useful for organization and rebuttal style.

- This Unimanual Pen+Touch Rebuttal (UIST 2018). Was accepted and a great example of a very strong rebuttal.
- VR Amplification (UIST 2019). The paper was rejected in the end, but definitely not because of the rebuttal.

- This Mode-switching (CHI 2017) rebuttal uses 4 documents, just like the ones explained above. This also uses 4 documents and is a good example.
- This folder has more past rebuttal examples. Note that most use an older 3 document method, but I think using 4 documents is better.
- In that folder, I think the Cito (CHI 2017) rebuttal is a particularly nice example where the reviews were very borderline, but we convinced them to accept.