How to respond to referee comments for scientific articles?

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ABSTRACT

Currently, the increasing number of article submissions to scientific journals forces editors to be more selective in their acceptance of papers. Consequently, editors have increased the frequency of their use of scientific referee mechanisms. For many researchers, the publication of a scientific article in a high impact factor journal is a gradual and difficult process. After preparation and submission of a manuscript, one of the most important issue is responding to the comments of referees. However, there is a paucity of published reports in the literature describing how to respond to these comments. The aim of this review is to assist researchers/authors in responding to referee comments as part of the publication process for scientific articles.

Key words: Article; peer review; response letter; scientific referee.

Scientific publication is an important, and at the same time indispensable part of the scientific process. A scientific publication is a written, and printed report which describes, outcomes of original researches in compliance with the criteria of scientific writing. Before describing a scientific article, it will be more appropriate to define a valid research article. According to The Council of Biology Editors, a valid research article is the first declaration with adequate information which provides opportunities for the colleagues to repeat their experiments, and evaluate their observations, and intellectual procedures.^[1] Dissertations, case reports, abstracts, posters, and other literatures can be published without meeting the valid research article criteria.^[2]

A scientific manuscript is prepared to meet the requirements of a valid research article, and consists of some formal components. The most prevalently used alignment of sections in an article is Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion in that order. In publications most frequently this format is used, however many other formats have been defined, and used up to now. Before preparing the manuscript, the authors can look up "Information to the Authors" section of the target journal, and obtain detailed information on this issue.

After completion of the first draft of the manuscript, the manuscript should be reviewed many times, and required corrections should be made. Meanwhile it will be a good strategy to show your manuscript to your esteemed friends, and colleagues, and request their recommendations, and critical reviews. The manuscript should be read, and controlled many times for syntax, and spelling errors before submitting to the target journal. Since automatic grammar checkers can also make mistakes, one should not rely on them. References, contributing authors, tables, and figures should be reviewed, and their order of appearance in the text should be assured. Sometimes because of mistake(s) made in these sections, editors, and referees may lose confidence in the credibility of the manuscript or even they reject it. Don't hesitate to remove or modify sections which you are not sure of or can't find adequate supportive evidence. Carelessly written, and inadequately controlled manuscripts are usually rejected. During this process choice of the journal for submission of the manuscript is very important. Before submission of the manuscript, it is very important to know the types of manuscripts accepted by the target journal. Prior to submission of a manuscript to a journal, it will be helpful to examine "area of interest" page of the journal. Within this context, forwarding your manuscript to a jour-

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Submitted:
12.02.2013

Accepted:
24.04.2013

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nal which previously published similar articles will increase its chance of acceptance.^[3] Some editors straightforwardly reject the manuscript thinking that the submitted manuscript do not meet the requirements of the journal, and so it is not qualified for referee-review. Knowledge about the rejection or acceptance rates of the manuscripts by the journal to which the submission of the manuscripts is planned, and yearly publication rates, should be considered before choice of the target journal. In essence, many factors including editorial board, editors, time relapsed up to the publication, and number of subscribers influence the choice of the journal. However the most important parameter is the impact factor. Impact factor of a journal in any given year is the number of citations received per paper during the two preceeding years divided by the number of articles published within these two years. Publication of an article in journals with higher impact factor is more difficult than those with lower impact factors (Table 1).

The articles are sent to target journals usually via e-mail or directly ordinary postal service. Herein a cover letter containing title of the manuscript, and information about the authors should be sent with the manuscript. After submission of the manuscript with its attached cover letter to the journal, the review process begins (Figure 1). In case of prolongation of the review process, the author should communicate with the editor using a professional attitude, and a formal language. Even though the manuscripts are evaluated by the referees, the final decision for acceptance will be made by the editor, communication process with the editor should be very carefully managed.

Scientific refereeship can be defined as the evaluation of the results of the scientific study by the experienced experts as for its proficiency, significance, and originality. In some references the word referee, and in some sources reviewer are used to define scientific refereeship. In the process of refereeship, the aim is to increase quality of the manuscript, and encourage competition between papers. Scientific referees are selected by

the journal editor among experts, and the manuscript which passes the editorial review is mostly sent to three reviewers. Essentially, the most important task of the scientific referee is to perfect the manuscript, and ensure its publication. In other words, referee is not the person to make decisions about acceptance or rejection of the manuscript. Nowadays, many journals conceal the authors of the manuscript from the referees, and *vice versa*. It is essential that the relationship between the editor, referee, and the author(s) should be maintained in compliance with the principles of confidentiality, and mutual trust.

“Peer review” can be defined as evaluation of a study or a performance by the other people in the same area of interest so as to maintain and/or develop the quality of that work or performance. The concept of peer review is essentially based on the improved, and impartial detection, and evaluation of weak points and mistakes in a manuscript by a different group of more knowledgeable people than the author(s) of this manuscript. For refereeing, experts who will make unbiased comments on this field are required. These experts should not be selected among close friends, intimates, and coworkers. Peer review process encourages authors of the manuscript to comply with the accepted standards in the area of interest, and attempts to preclude publication of irrelevant data, unsupported assertions, unacceptable conclusions, and personal opinions.

Most of the journals -even if they reject the manuscript- provide feedbacks targeting betterment of the manuscript, and correction of some parts, and they request the authors to modify the manuscript in line with their comments. At this stage, a detailed reply letter should be written by the author to the editor which will explain the modifications made, and help to shorten the review process (Annex 1). It will be reasonable to begin the letter with a sentence like “Thank you for giv-

Table 1. Impact factors of some journals of urology, and rejection rates of submitted manuscripts*

Name of the Journal	Impact Factor	Rejection rate (%)
European Urology	8.493	90%
The Journal of Urology	3.746	-
The Journal of Sexual Medicine	3.552	68%
British Journal of Urology Int.	2.844	80%
Asian Journal of Andrology	1.549	75%
Turkish Journal of Urology	—	30%

*Retrieved from websites of the related journals

Figure 1. Evaluation process of a scientific manuscript

ing me a chance of revising my manuscript.” Your responses should be scientific, and systematic. You may get help from other authors or before sending your reply you may ask other authors to read, and review your manuscript. Since editors may want to know exactly what you intend to do, points emphasized by the reviewers should be responded one by one. Instead of using a sentence like “We corrected everything requested by the reviewers” it will be helpful to include your, and reviewers’ comments in your reply letter (or e-mail). Use of different fonts for your responses, and reviewers’ comments will facilitate discrimination between them. Since editor will completely, and promptly want to know your corrections/modifications, specification of paragraph, and page numbers will accelerate this process. When minor corrections for typographic errors or grammatical mistakes are requested, you can use a sentence like “I corrected all mistakes pointed out by the reviewers.” If the reviewer numbered the mistakes to be corrected or modified, you should also use the same numbers to match responses with the reviewers’ comments. Greater number of reviewers’ comments generally mean that the reviewers want to help you to perfect your manuscript. Indeed sentences indicating rejection are usually brief, and don’t give you a chance to re-submit your manuscript. If you are not in the same opinion with the reviewer, you have no obligation to do what is requested from you. However in this case you have to convince the editor that the reviewer is mistaken. Under these circumstances you should explain the situation always keeping your respectful attitude, and then it will be appropriate to send the manuscript to the editor for reevaluation. Indeed a reasonable editor will consider, and evaluate your opinions against the perspectives of these reviewers. While explaining your viewpoints, avoid using harsh sentences as “I don’t agree with the opinions of the reviewers” or “Reviewers have no idea about the subject.”

Table 2. Main reasons for rejection of the manuscripts

The study has no scientific significance
The study is not original
Suggested hypothesis was not tested
Erroneous methodology was selected
Violation of the planned method because of practical difficulties
Poor study design
Inadequate sampling
Absent/inadequate control group
Faulty/inappropriate statistical analysis
Results unsupported by evidence
Conflict of interest
Bad writing style

Instead the expressions as “I am ready to make their requested corrections/modifications, however in the light of the above-mentioned considerations, I think the other way around” should be used. Our contrary opinions should be indicated in the reply letter with the aid of new references or evidence. If any data supporting your point of view on the relevant issue have not been published yet, then you can discuss the matter with another expert. If the expert agrees with you, then you can emphasize this condition in your reply letter. Since editors are extremely busy people, reply letter should not additionally contain unnecessary or superfluous information. Writing longer, and detailed explanations, and sending new supportive material are mostly considered as an unnecessary, and unwanted behaviour by the editors.

During reevaluation process of the manuscript by the journal, the leading role is again played by the editor. Following evaluation of the modifications you made, the editor can accept or reject the manuscript or re-send the corrected form of the manuscript to the referees, and ask them to reevaluate, and make their decisions. At this stage, a meticulously prepared correction letter will be very helpful since it facilitates the work of the referees, and shortens the second evaluation process.

Even if the manuscript is rejected completely, corrections made in the manuscript in line with the feedbacks of the editor, and the referees will increase the chance of acceptance of the manuscript by a journal with a lower impact factor (Table 2). Since a referee who rejected your manuscript may also work as a reviewer in another journal, it won’t be a rational approach to send your manuscript without making any correction. Therefore it is recommended to send the rejected manuscript to a second journal after making necessary corrections in consideration of feedbacks.

The secret of reapplication passes through making referees, and editors feel themselves esteemed without depriving ourselves. To that end, it is very important to submit a clearly structured, and itemized reply letter which facilitates the work of referees, and the editor. Since many referees, and editors are not so much willing to accept a renewed application, and assume a defensive attitude, comments of the reviewers should be responded fully, and within the frame of respect, and logic. The author who responds to the comments of the referees should not entertain thoughts of personal assault, and should concentrate on responding the reviewers’ concerns in an elegant, objective, and evidence- based manner. As said by the Irish playwright, and poet Oscar Wilde “Experience is the name of one’s faults”. As is the case in every issue, during the

writing process, certainly mistakes will be made in our way to perfection. However during this process patient, careful, and attentive steps should be made.

References

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Annex 1. Responses to the reviewers

We thank reviewers for their constructive criticism, and time spent to analyze this manuscript, The responses, and explanations related to their comments are listed below:

Reviewer 1

1. As a response to the reviewer's comment we emphasized the fact that some of our patients needed additional treatment.
..... (Results section 1. paragraph)
2. As a response to the reviewer's comment we deleted 2 columns from Table 4, and added to the main text.
..... (Results section 5. paragraph, 3. sentence)
3. As a response to the reviewer's comment, we changed the first sentence of the Discussion section as follows
..... (Discussion section 1. sentence)

Reviewer 2

1. As a response to the reviewer's comment, we have written the full name of the abbreviation "PNL" at its first mention in the text (Introduction section, 2. sentence).
2. We agree with the reviewer's comment concerning this issue. However, since many patients had undergone their first operation at another medical centers, inadequate data were available about previous clinical stages of the disease. Therefore unfortunately we can't provide information about them.
3. As a response to the reviewer's comment, we changed the sentence in the Results section.
..... (Results section, 4. sentence)

Reviewer 3

1. As a response to the reviewer's comment, the methods of selection of each treatment modality has been described in detail (Material and Method section 2. paragraph).