
Viewpoint

Learning to love the reviewer

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As a non-native English speaking author who has little choice for publishing a research paper but to write it in English, I had a “built-in” fear of reviewers’ negative comments and criticisms for quite some time. Earlier on, when facing these, I felt bad and would suddenly think of myself as incapable of doing any other research work. I simply thought so because I had not understood the reviewer’s job and my own standing in the process.

I have experienced two incidents which taught me about the nature of the peer review process and the opportunity a researcher has when working with them.

One happened 17 years ago, with one of my earlier manuscripts submitted to a Singaporean publication. It was a short paper, communicating some new observations and interesting insights about the Vietnamese newborn stock market, with simple statistics. About two months later, I received the reviewers’ report. The language and comments and criticisms scared me to death. The fear held me back from revising the manuscript, and I simply did not submit the revision. I was afraid of hearing about all the weaknesses and problems again in the next report, only to end up with a negative decision! The tone and language and negativity of those comments were “light” compared to many others I received later on for much stronger submissions, which were published. This failure means a foregone chance of being published in a good SSCI-listed journal, even though the intention of reviewers was clearly—now I know¹—not to scare me away.

The other incident was about two years ago, when I had already published various papers. I submitted a paper to a journal published by a German research institute. The paper was based on my own observations on political economy, and this topic has never been my area of expertise. This time, the comments from reviewers—now very familiar both in negative tones and tough criticisms—were no longer the ones that triggered my “built-in” fear, but the thinking that “I am not an expert in the field” did it. I once again dropped the plan for resubmission, although invited by the editor.

So how did I know that I was wrong in both situations? Pretty easy: other authors have found merit in these two manuscripts, and cited them when they were uploaded to our institutional preprint server. I learned that we can transform ourselves through working/collaborating with reviewers, not just “answering them” or “addressing the issues”. I have been taught to think about issues and weaknesses of the manuscript as the issues that research work needs to address; and I just happen to be the most committed one—for now—to resubmit. The second failure

led me to thinking that I should serve as a reviewer too. Then I tried to learn how to do that as efficiently as possible. Over time, I have become a reviewer who rarely refuses to review manuscripts that fall into my area of expertise; and in many cases I even stop my pending research work to do a review for other authors.

Here are some pieces of advice for the novice dealing with ‘the fear of reviewers’. To begin with, if you really spent time and effort on your research, you have a chance of getting it published. There are two possibilities: a) outright rejection, and b) positive feedback with request for major/minor revision before resubmission. I do not talk about the lucky ones who get an outright acceptance, because that probability is extremely low, or as Kirsten Bell put it: “Outright acceptances with no revisions required are about as frequent as verified sightings of the Loch Ness Monster”.² If a) happens, you should thank the reviewers for their comments, take your time to think, and take their advice seriously to make the manuscript stronger, and more “acceptable” according to publishing standards.³ If b) happens, a request for major revision (along with strong criticisms—yet not rejection) often indicates that the chance of getting published is higher than we would normally think, especially if we use the comments as an opportunity to start a dialogue with reviewers and editors. Most of the time this works, and we learn a lot from reviewers.

If the manuscript is reviewed and a revision is requested, no matter how serious and bad the comments/criticisms are, the process of improving it to the publishing standards is just a matter of perseverance and professionalism. If it is not done in the second revision, it might just be accepted after the fourth revision, for example. There is always some effective way for doing this if we have a love of knowledge and want to share our findings. Gradually we will love the reviewers who, for the sake of science, work with us without asking anything more than delivering good science.

References

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