



Questions and Quandaries: How to respond to reviewer comments

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Abstract

This column is intended to address the kinds of knotty problems and dilemmas with which many scholars grapple in studying health professions education. In this first article, the authors address the question of how to respond to a request for revisions after review, including the quandary of how best to respond to conflicting feedback.

Although we have, as scholars, long enjoyed supervising and mentoring emerging researchers and colleagues (many of whom have gone on to enjoy successful academic careers), we have no secret formula for mentoring and indeed we have very different ways of working. However, we have found that we are asked the same questions, and that these questions come around again and again.

The purpose of this new column is to attempt to answer the kinds of knotty problems and dilemmas about theory, methods, and the practicalities of research with which many of us grapple in studying health professions education. In so doing, we also hope to address the often “semi-isolationist” nature of research. Only a few people are lucky enough to work in environments or communities of practice where they have sufficient and timely opportunities to ask questions and receive answers that can keep their students’ and their own research on track.

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Table 1 An Example of a Clear Editorial Steer (received for Cleland and MacLeod, 2022)

Editor's Comment	Authors' Response
<p>“In thinking through how you might address these points, I would encourage you to think about what you want this paper to do and/or accomplish. If you want readers to use more digital ethnography in their own work, I suggest providing an example of how to do this (the recent reviewer suggested this as an option, as well). If you want readers to understand that they will need to incorporate digital ethnography because COVID has shifted the teaching landscape of medical education, then let this be the focus and orient the manuscript around this idea.”</p>	<p>“Thank you, this has helped us be more explicit about our focus which is for readers to use digital ethnography. Our arguments for this are not related to Covid-19 per se, and so we have removed references to the pandemic (so readers are not distracted into thinking this is yet another Covid-19 paper).”</p>

To that end, the ‘Questions and Quandaries’ column will offer scholarly answers to common questions about aspects of the use of theory, methodology, and methods as well as about the practicalities of research. We hope that this column will establish a useful library of shared advice that can be accessed by researchers looking for insights as well as by mentors looking to help their individual mentees. We invite members of our community to suggest either questions and dilemmas which they have themselves or those which they have answered for their mentees (and would like to address for a broader audience by writing an article for this series). Suggestions can be sent to AHSEQandQ@gmail.com.

So, in this first ‘Questions and Quandaries’ article, we turn to a common question we hear from both learners and colleagues: *My paper was returned to me with a request for major revisions. I’m trying to revise it but the reviewers have said conflicting things. What do I do?*

Well, first of all, you should take a minute to be proud of yourself! You made it through initial screening by one or more editors and then had your work scrutinized by two or more reviewers – and they think it is worth their effort to help you improve it so it can be considered for publication in their journal. Now comes the hard work. Revising your work can be challenging at the best of times, and conflicting feedback definitely makes it harder. Ideally the editor(s) who received those reviews should have noticed and helped you out. So, our first advice is to have a detailed look at what the editor(s) wrote. The editor(s) who wrote back to you will have the final say, so be sure to pay close attention to what they tell you to do (and not do). Did they highlight certain revisions suggested by the reviewers? Did they disagree with some of the reviewers’ comments? Did they suggest that some comments must be addressed or that other comments could be treated as optional? If they’ve already done some of the hard work of curating the reviewers’ comments for you and clearly steering you as to what they would like you to prioritise in your revisions, so much the better. An example of an editor resolving the issue of conflicting feedback is illustrated in Table 1.

This feedback from the editor encouraged us to provide more clarity as to the aim of our paper and to include two detailed examples of how to use digital ethnography in health professions education.

If, however, you have comments that are in opposition to each other and the editor hasn’t given you sufficient direction, you will have to make some decisions on your own. In other words, you must figure out how you want to resolve the issue of conflicting reviews.

This can be freeing, since you can use the fact that the reviewers disagreed to open the way to different possible revision strategies. There are three main ways of doing this. First, if one reviewer asks you to expand on a particular point whereas another tells you to delete it entirely, you could argue that you should take the middle ground by leaving that section as is! Second, if you had really wanted to write more about that point but had limited yourself because of word count, you could use the opportunity to add another few sentences. The third option, of course, is to remove the content! This is possibly the most difficult option: it is always painful to delete words that you toiled over. However, removing words, sentences, or sections can often improve a paper – and by doing so, you free up space to expand on other points raised by the reviewers or editor.

You must then write back to the editor justifying your revisions. You will need to politely point out the contradictory nature of some of the suggestions received (without, we would advise, implying that the editor(s) should have done their job and told you what to do about them, and also without criticising the reviewers), clearly indicating which ones are in opposition to each other. You should then describe how you resolved each contradiction. If you took the middle ground, say so; if you chose one reviewer over the other, explain why you thought that was the right thing to do. If you can justify your choice(s) with a reference or two, that can add some weight.

You can take heart in the likelihood that if an editor hasn't given you clear direction about potential contradictions in your revisions, they will probably be willing to accept your resolution as long you can make a coherent argument for it. It is also likely that, if that editor really disagrees with your resolution but you have made a reasoned and polite argument for it, they will either accept your proposal or use the opportunity to give guidance on further, specific revisions rather than rejecting the paper after your revisions. In this way, revisions can become a negotiation between the author(s) and editor (albeit a negotiation where the editor has most of the power).

We take this opportunity to also make three more general points which are important when revising a paper after review. The first is that a lot of feedback, particularly contradictory feedback, does suggest that some of your messages were not sufficiently clear, precise, or engaging. Take a long, hard look at your revised paper or ask a colleague to review it with clarity in mind before resubmission. The second is that it is okay to push back on some feedback points, particularly those which cannot be addressed without carrying out another, different study! The trick is to be pleasant yet assertive. We give examples of this in Table 2.

In the upper example (received for Young et al., 2021), the reviewer is suggesting a different, atypical approach to the analysis. To step around the issue, the authors highlight that the reviewer's point raises important considerations and explain that they have taken several steps to clarify language and to be consistent with the conventional statistical approach taken.

In the lower example (received for Paton et al., 2020), the reviewer suggests that the authors expand on a minor point in their paper that the reviewer finds interesting and proposes a number of complex theoretical directions they could take to do so. The authors politely agree that the point is interesting but that it is extraneous to their main point and that expanding upon it is beyond the scope of their paper, so they indicate that they will instead remove the minor point entirely.

Table 2 Two Examples of Pushing Back

Reviewer Comment	Authors' Response
<p>"A very important issue, however, is the temporal ordering of measurements and the assumed direction of causality between task and emotion. I think that the truest picture (hard to model) would be that there is influence in both directions. The task induces emotions, and the emotions one comes in with either cause the task to be more difficult, or cause one to experience it as more difficult. However, the entire paper - theoretical framework, models, and discussion - take only one of these causal direction into account."</p>	<p>"Several important considerations are raised here. First, our design only allows us to identify correlations, not causation. We chose words like influence, associate for that reason. When describing results from the regression analyses, we follow convention in using the term 'predict'. We have closely re-read the manuscript and edited to make the language is as clear in this regard as possible."</p>
<p>"Is the middle class really dominant? Arguably it is the super wealthy corporations that dominate the media, politics etc - the middle classes can also suffer and be manipulated (although typically not as much) ... a dialectical (Marxist?) reading of haves and have nots erases those in the middle of the continuum of oppression. That this disregarded middle often sides with the powerful (Arendt's 'banality of evil', MAGA etc) is a key issue here I think. Lorde's master's house analogy after all appeals to the middle not to ally themselves with the masters but with the outsider. Could also link to Gramsci's subalterns and petit- bourgeois critiques."</p>	<p>"This is fascinating. We would agree on reflection that the myth of middle-class dominance is a form of symbolic violence perpetuated to keep the middle class acting against their own self-interest and to the benefit of the super wealthy. The length of discussion this would take to explain and contextualize this within the rest of the paper is likely prohibitive. Since this was a relatively minor point in the paper, we have just deleted the reference to 'middle class' but could revisit this if necessary."</p>

Our third, more general suggestion is a practical one. If you haven't written responses to revisions before, you may want to ask colleagues for copies of successful responses to revisions they submitted for now-published papers. This can help both with understanding the niceties of the genre (e.g., the importance of thanking the reviewers and acknowledging when they have made "interesting points") and with getting a handle on the general format. You should be aware, however, that every journal has different, specific formatting requirements for responses to revisions; these are usually specified in the revision letter from the journal and/or on the journal website. Some of the common requirements you may encounter are listed in Table 3. Be sure to follow these requirements so you don't get your revision returned to you for reformatting!

Good luck! Although the revision process may be frustrating, remember that reviewers and editors really do want to help improve your paper – and take heart that this work will probably lead to a published paper.

Table 3 Common Requirements for Formatting Responses to Revisions

Aspects of Responses to Reviewers	Common Options
Which editor and reviewer comments should be explicitly included in the response to revisions document?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – include all comments (even those that don't suggest any changes) and respond in some small way to all of them vs. – include only those comments that suggest changes
How should responses to revisions be organized?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – keep comments and responses to them in the order they were suggested by the editor or reviewer vs. – group comments and responses to them by the section of the paper to which they refer
How should responses to revisions be presented?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – present comments and responses as a table with two columns: editor and reviewer comments on the left, responses on the right vs. – present comments and responses in alternating paragraphs, using formatting (e.g., fonts, indentation) to differentiate between them
How should you respond to a comment that you've already addressed elsewhere in your document in response to a comment from different editor/reviewer?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – number every comment and response within your document and use those numbers to refer to previous responses when appropriate (e.g., "please see response #3 above for a detailed consideration of this issue") vs. – refer to previous responses in terms of the reviewer's comment(s) to which it was responding (e.g., "please see the responses above to Reviewer #1's suggestions for this section of the paper") vs. – repeat the response each time it is relevant
When you make edits in the text, how much of those edits should you copy verbatim into the response to revisions document?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – indicate that you have added text to (or removed text from) a particular page, paragraph, or section (this works best if you are expected to upload a version of the revised manuscript with your changes tracked, so the editor can see the details clearly there) vs. - include the full text of the edits within the response to revisions document (this works best for discrete edits that each affect only one section of text)

Most journals have specific requirements for aspects of Responses to Revisions documents; if you do not follow these, the editor will likely send them back to you to reformat them before considering the revised manuscript. Other aspects are left to the discretion of the authors; this table includes some common options from which you can choose

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