How to Respond to Reviewer Comments

Reviewers put a lot of time and energy into reading, editing, and commenting on research papers. At the JSSJ, we are particularly fond of our reviewers, and we want to make sure the entire publishing process is as easy as possible for everyone involved, from submitting your paper to reviewing it. Below are a few simple instructions for writing a reviewer response. For more in-depth guidelines and helpful tips, you can read Top 10 Tips for Responding to Reviewer and Editor Comments, by Thomas Annesley (2011). Also take a look at examples from other open-access journals, to make sure your responses follow the certain academic and social etiquette that is expected from any peer-reviewed journal.

1. **Write a cover letter**
   Write a brief, two-three paragraph cover letter to the editor, who will see the revisions first. The first paragraph should say something like
   
   *Dear Reviewer,*

   *As per your request on (date of review), I am submitting a revised version of the manuscript “Title of Paper,” by John Smith et al., to the Journal of Sustainability and Social Justice.*

   *This letter is in response to the comments made by the reviewers. I have addressed each comment, and include here a summary of how each comment was addressed and where revisions were made. (Here you can make a statement about whether additional changes were made, and whether they were large – like a new experiment/survey/interview – or small – like a change in writing style).*

   *Thank you for considering the manuscript for publication in the Journal for Sustainability and Social Justice.*

   *Sincerely,*

   *Jane Doe*

   *Department of International Development*

   *Awesome University*

2. **Copy and paste the exact comment before writing your response**
   It may have taken you some time to respond to your reviewer’s comments, so don’t expect them to remember exactly what they wrote. You also don’t want to ask them to bring up their old comments document, and constantly flip between your response and the original comments to make sure you are addressing everything. Keep the comments exactly as they were written, number each one, and write your response directly below it. It might also be helpful to put the comment in italics, or a different color, to make it very clear which part is the comment and
which part is the response.

3. **Be polite**
   Our reviewers are volunteering their time out of busy schedules to help you make your work the best it can be. We know that it’s hard to see your work criticized, but it’s usually safe to assume that the reviewer has read hundreds (maybe thousands) of articles in his/her career, so take the advice gratefully. Try to start out most of your responses with, “Thank you for this comment,” then address the issues themselves.

4. **Address each item in the comment**
   Don’t skip over some details and hope the reviewer won’t notice. In these cases, it’s better to write too much in response to a comment than too little. Make sure you have read each comment carefully and that you don’t leave anything else. Often, a response to a comment is longer than the actual change to the manuscript.

5. **Use page and line numbers**
   When you make the changes that are suggested by the reviewer, use the page number, the line number, and copy and paste the actual text changes in your response. For example:

   **Comment # 6: Section 3.2 Page 7 - The text says six variables were used, but only 5 are listed**

   Thank you. I have revised the sentence to include all six variables. On Page 7, lines 135-138 read: “This study completed a basic assessment of the demography of those census tracts exhibiting clusters of high CAFO densities, using the following six socioeconomic variables: percent black, percent Hispanic, percent Asian, percent elderly, percent children, and median household income.”

6. **Copy and paste from your manuscript**
   The example above shows that the author responded to a comment and included the exact text that was changed. This is helpful when a few words or sentences are removed, replaced, or added – the reviewer does not have to go searching for the change. When longer paragraphs or sections are changed, it is not necessary to do this.

7. **Don’t send a track changes document**
   Some journals request this, but for the most part it is messy and unnecessary. Send a fresh, clean version of your submission to the reviewer, along with your responses to the comments in a separate document.

8. **Disagree with the reviewer only when it is necessary**
   As Thomas Annesley says in his article on the subject, choose your battles wisely. You are likely to get many comments, suggestions, or requests for revision in the writing process. While it’s okay to disagree with the reviewer, it is bad form to disregard or disagree with many comments,
and it makes it seem like you are not taking the process seriously. Choose one or two things to defend, if you must, and only if it is pertinent to the research. If you must defend something (like the placement of a section, a particular statement, the use of an analysis), do so as clearly as possible, emphasizing why it is important to you in this particular study. You might even discover, in writing your defense, that it is not as important as you thought! In any case, make sure to be polite as always, while defending your position firmly and with confidence.

9. Don’t take it personally

The review process is tough. Most of us have never had our work scrutinized like this before. Often, your reviewers are coming from different fields, different parts of the world, and have different perspectives. But to write a good research paper, particularly in a trans-disciplinary journal like JSSJ, your work has to be readable to a range of people. Some research is geared more towards a particular audience, of course, but reviewers that are not experts in your field are at least experts in the writing process. Take their advice seriously. Get angry, be hurt, but then let it go and get to work. This process is hard, but it is worth it – you’ll never believe your work could be so good! Remember, the student editors at JSSJ are always here if you have questions or concerns, and we want to help you get published. Email us anytime, with anything.