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Article

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From major revision to accept: strategies for crafting effective reviewer responses in contemporary business research

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Abstract

Purpose – The importance of crafting an effective reviewer response document to a “Revise and Resubmit” decision on a manuscript is well known to scholars across business research. The empathy and clarity with which responses are explained can play a vital role in whether the revised manuscript is accepted or rejected. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, discuss techniques like “reviewer empathy” and emotional intelligence to better “choose your battles” and second, offer strategic writing tips when responding to a manuscript peer review.

Design/methodology/approach – In this conceptual paper, the authors first lay out the scholarly publication process followed by some practical tips and strategies on how authors might craft their response document.

Findings – Through this study, the authors hope that business researchers would walk away with a greater understanding of how best to craft a response document to satisfy editor and reviewer expectations as well as be able to manage with the emotional rigors of the revise and resubmit process.

Originality/value – There is limited information or guidance available to researchers on how to write clear response documents while keeping in mind the reviewers’ perspective.

Keywords Emotional intelligence, Empathy, Writing strategies, Reviewer response, Revise and resubmit

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The revision and resubmit (R&R) process plays a vital role in the career of an academic researcher. Tenure-track business professors depend on peer-reviewed journal publications



to move through the tenure process and ultimately achieve tenure. Further, publications have begun to play a significant role as the “currency” in the career of contemporary business researchers. Publications are often the catalyst to success in present-day academia. Despite these, there is limited information or guidance available to researchers in journals or scientific writing manuals regarding how to respond effectively to manuscript reviews (Taylor, 2016). Journal articles or editorial pieces on this topic are especially hard to find in business journals.

Well-written responses to reviewer comments are beneficial to all parties involved such as journal editors, reviewers and authors, as well as for the progression of scientific knowledge. Ultimately, there are two key drivers to R&R success. First, recipients of manuscript reviews must understand that it is other humans on the other end of that review (i.e. reviewers and editors). To that end, an author’s ability to manage their own emotions, empathize with the editor/reviewer and manage emotions throughout the R&R process impact the ultimate success of the manuscript getting published. Second, the quality and clarity with which responses are explained can play a vital role in whether the revised manuscript is accepted or rejected (Schimmel, 2012). It is crucial that researchers develop techniques to “explain their thinking” when responding to R&Rs to learn how best to craft a response document to satisfy editors’ and reviewers’ expectations.

In light of these, the goal of this article is to empower authors to craft effective response documents to manuscript reviews. Our article lays out practical advice to authors on strategies to get reviewers, editors and authors all on the same page. Contemporary business researchers and early-career management researchers, in particular, would find our article relevant and useful in improving their success rate with the R&R process and, ultimately, their publication track record. The tips and strategies described in this article have been successfully used to convert a variety of article types in a range of journal outlets from “high risk major revision” and “major revision” decisions into “accepts.” Note that these tips and strategies are most helpful for the R&R process in peer-reviewed business journals in the broad areas of organizational behavior, human resource management, strategic management, entrepreneurship and social science methodology.

Empathy for reviewers and editor

The ability to monitor one’s own feelings and to understand the feelings and emotions of others to guide your thinking and actions is essential in many parts of our lives, be it within an organization, as a leader or within the review process (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Winton, 2022). This emotional intelligence (EI) allows a researcher to perceive, access, generate, understand, regulate and reflect upon the emotions inherent in the R&R process (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Winton, 2023). Fundamental to this EI is empathy. Empathy plays a foundational role in social effectiveness (Bennis, 2001). While the R&R process is not explicitly social, a series of social exchanges occur between the editor, reviewer and author. Because these exchanges are charged with a back-and-forth ripe for emotion, an author’s ability to measure their emotional response is key in determining their manuscript’s success for publication.

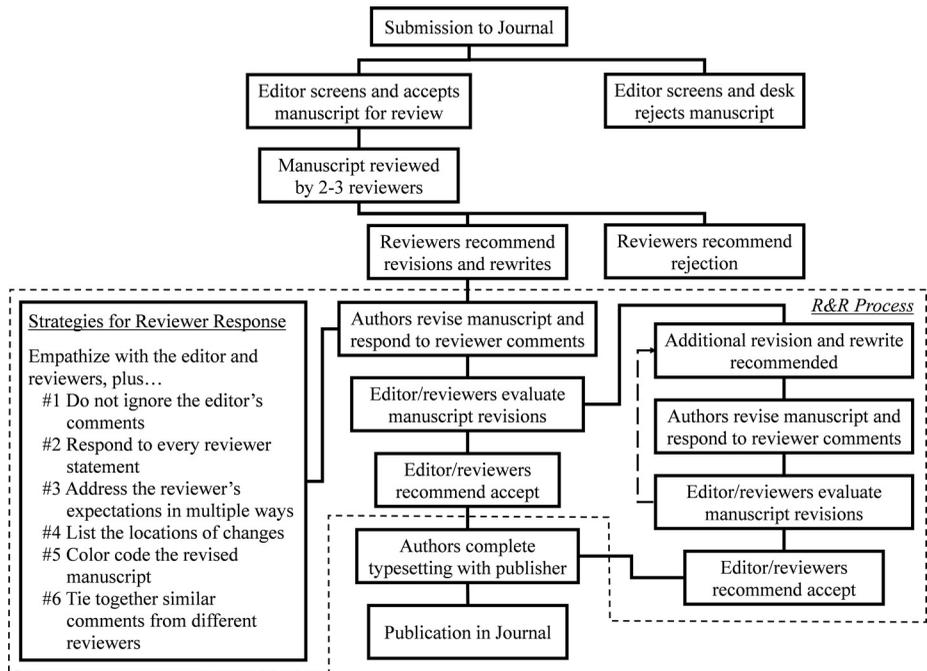
What does this EI and empathy look like in this process? Even before the notice of revision is received, authors need to focus on managing their own emotional state by patiently waiting for the conclusion of the initial review. Through awareness and control of one’s own emotions, authors can set themselves up for success in the formal back and forth of R&R. Just like parting, waiting can be such “sweet sorrow,” but it does not have to set an emotional precedent for authors as they receive the initial reviews. Authors want to walk into the R&R process ready for success. Leaning on EI abilities allows for this to happen by being

aware of their emotions and the emotions that might occur in the R&R process, acknowledging them and limiting the potentially volatile emotions that might occur (Winton, 2023). The manner in which these EI abilities could be integrated into the publishing process is discussed throughout the practical tips listed ahead.

Overview of the scholarly publication process

The scholarly publication process begins with submitting a well-prepared manuscript to a journal whose research scope aligns with that of the manuscript (Figure 1). Every submitted manuscript is initially reviewed by at least one editor of the journal, wherein the paper is checked against the journal's submission guidelines and desk rejected if the manuscript deviates from expectations and scope. If the manuscript meets all expectations, the editor then forwards it to the review stage and selects 2–3 peer reviewers from the journal's database whose expertise lies in the topic area of the manuscript. Once selected reviewers accept the editor's invitation to blind review the manuscript, they are granted access to the author-information-redacted version of the manuscript and given a certain timeframe to complete their review. Reviewers anonymously enter feedback comments for the authors as well as their recommendation of whether the journal should give a revise, reject or accept decision to the paper.

If at least one reviewer recommends a revision and resubmission, the editor could decide to either forward the manuscript to the R&R process or reject the manuscript. The R&R process officially begins when the editor provides an R&R decision letter to the authors. A



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 1. Overview of the scholarly publication process

typical decision letter would include the editor's own statements/comments encapsulating all reviewer comments, followed by the journal's standard guidelines for submitting a revised manuscript. The decision letter ends with each reviewers' individual comments. Authors receive these comments regardless of the decision. If an R&R decision was made, authors begin their role in the R&R process by uploading their revised manuscript and "responses to reviewer" document in the journal system within a prescribed deadline. The R&R process could continue in a cycle of review, comment, revision and resubmission until the editor/reviewers receive a manuscript version that they deem acceptable. A rejection decision is also possible in any iteration of an R&R phase. The practical tips described ahead are useful throughout this iterative R&R process.

Practical tips and strategies

#1: Do not ignore the editor's comments

Editors typically offer their comments and suggestions in their decision letters. Editors provide a holistic picture of the rework authors need to complete to revise their manuscript successfully. Because these comments highlight the points most important in the eyes of the editor, they likely include the most important points that need response. In most cases, these highlighted important points are like a "cheat sheet" to acceptance. Our strong suggestion is to pay close attention to the editor comments when reworking the manuscript and respond to every statement or comment the editor offers.

From an EI standpoint, authors are forced to infer editor and reviewer emotions from the comments they provide (Mayer & Geher, 1996). Essential to this inference is empathy, and specifically, editor/reviewer empathy. Authors should try to put themselves in the position of the editors and reviewers, understanding that these are people who are busy, overworked volunteers who receive little to no benefit from the time and effort spent reviewing (Seals, 2023). Responses will not always be easy to follow, detailed, complete or especially thoughtful. Leaning on their EI will allow authors to understand that such a lack of detail or thoughtfulness does not imply any particular negative emotion toward them. Authors can regulate personal emotions, empathize with the job of the reviewers and use this empathy to productively respond to those details the review provides. This emotional coping allows authors to successfully navigate the demands and pressures of the R&R process (Bar-On, 1997; Winton, 2023).

Ideally, the authors' response document should begin with a reply to the editor's decision letter, which should be addressed directly to the editor while being cognizant of the editor's emotions. Authors should use this reply to address all comments offered by the editor, even if responding to the editor seems redundant. A smart way to respond to editor comments that offer a summary of all reviewer comments is to offer a reply that summarizes broadly what revisions/edits/changes the authors have made in the manuscript.

Communicating directly with the editor signals to the editor (and the reviewers) the authors' motivation to actively engage in the R&R process with the journal representatives in ensuring the successful outcome of their manuscript. The goal is to be aware of how the editor feels, empathize and understand that this is a potentially highly emotional experience (Barhate, Winton, & Maugh Funderburk, 2024; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Essentially, a review process is a three-way conversation that occurs among the reviewers, authors and editor – the only differences being that this conversation is in writing and lasts several months or years! Emotions are bound to occur along the way, as with any communication process. Similar to how verbal communication is most effective when the recipient validates and responds to each of the sender's messages, thereby clarifying and enhancing the communication process (Jabarzadeh, Sanoubar, Vahdat, & Khosravi Saghezchi, 2019),

authors can make most of this manuscript revision stage by acknowledging everyone's comments. This acknowledgment allows every party on the other side of the conversation to feel like their opinions matter. Moreover, authors should aim to build the editor's trust in their ability to understand and respond to the reviewers' concerns right from the first revision stage. Building a trusting relationship with the editor can also be helpful if, in future rounds of the review process, authors need to seek additional support/clarity from the editor regarding a reviewer's comment.

#2: Respond to every reviewer statement

The most important thing to keep in mind when responding to reviewers is that they are people and have varying writing styles, expectations, expertise and personalities. Regardless of a reviewer's positive, neutral or negative remarks, authors should do their best to acknowledge and respond to every statement. The act of responding to all remarks suggests to the reviewers and editor that the authors paid keen attention to their remarks and are active "listeners." Simply put, it relays respect and consideration despite the content of the remark, thereby removing any emotional hostility or emotional roller coaster (Mayer & Geher, 1996; Winton, 2023).

Within a comment, the reviewer often tries to begin with a positive statement and follow up with their general or specific concerns. Polite pleasantries acknowledging the reviewer's positive evaluation is a good starting point. Even for a neutral statement such as, "Here are my comments and suggestions," a response sentence appreciating their time helps build trust in the author-reviewer relationship. The authors want to manage the stress of this situation for all sides simultaneously to "fly over" the rigors of the R&R process, thereby further building trust among involved parties (Winton, 2022).

While starting with a cordial introduction is important, responses to reviewers should be detailed; here, saying less is *not* more. If the R&R process were to be likened to a face-to-face meeting, one might form their responses by imagining the reviewers seated in a board room listening to the authors verbally respond to each of their comments. In doing so, authors can better humanize responses and tap into a balanced approach of both assertiveness and kindness (Goleman, 1998). However, as a long-drawn process entailing only written communication, the response document essentially becomes the "spokesperson" for the authors. The responses must pitch the case on their behalf during the R&R process. When seen from this perspective, one might argue that authors would benefit from elaborating and explaining in detail every (even minor) action they took when revising their manuscript. Strategies #3 through #6 below offer insights on the various ways in which authors can add detail to clarify and elaborate their response actions.

In addition to these overarching suggestions, there are common situations that authors may find particularly challenging to navigate. The manner in which authors tackle these types of comments could play a key role in determining the future of the manuscript at the journal.

A particular situation is when the reviewer's comments are too short, unclear or vague. An example of this type of response might read as follows, "...there are still some pending issues that readers may find unclear and incomplete in the data analysis subsection." Before responding to the reviewer or reaching out to the editor, authors should try their best to interpret what the reviewer intended to communicate through that comment. This interpretation can involve taking commentary or cues from similarly themed suggestions. Alternatively, an external friendly review of their manuscript and reviewer comments can be helpful. No matter where the interpretation comes from, authors should do two things when responding to a minimal comment situation. First, based on their best interpretation, address

the concern in the appropriate manuscript section. In the example comment above, authors may choose to make minor edits in the data analysis section for additional clarity. Second, make it clear to the reviewer that the comment was unclear or vague. Remove any emotion from this response; rather, focus on cordiality and the goal to answer the reviewer's comments. An author's response to this comment could be structured as follows:

- acknowledge the comment and list the minor changes authors made to the data analysis section for additional clarity;
- let the reviewer know that the comment is somewhat uninterpretable (the authors could quote the reviewer's words, "some pending issues"); and
- explain why the authors believe the data analysis section is clear and complete (offer citations to support the claim).

Another challenging situation to navigate could occur when comments from reviewers are erroneous, invalid or something that authors disagree with. Reviewers cannot be knowledgeable about all subjects and apply them perfectly despite editors doing their best in selecting proficient reviewers who can provide substantive comments on a paper. Once again, there is a human element that authors need to be aware of and sympathetic to. A common experience with R&Rs comes in instances where a reviewer chooses to offer comments on a subject matter (especially methodology) that they are not entirely adept in. In cases where authors find specious remarks or disagree with the reviewer's comments (and have cited evidence from the literature), authors must lean into their EI when crafting a response. Self-regulation (i.e. taking action to limit the effects of negative emotions) enables authors to craft a considerate response to the reviewer as they refute the erroneous request with kindness and tact (Winton, 2023). Remember that the goal is not to win an argument but to publish the article; hence, choose your battles.

To that end, authors can politely educate the reviewer with evidence from well-cited papers published in reputed journals. This removes the potentially combative nature of the communication and focuses instead on, "What does the literature say?". Authors can also, if appropriate, acknowledge that they took the reviewer's comment into consideration and bolster the arguments made to refute the reviewer comments without directly pointing out the error of the comments (Strategies #3 and #4 can be helpful in this process).

An application of this process occurred in a publication by Philip and Kosmidou (2023). The article used a methodological approach that was rather uncommon in behavioral management research. In the R&R process, a reviewer suggested that a more traditional progression of the article sections was necessary (i.e. introduction to theoretical development to methodology) and that explicit hypotheses needed to be included. Because that research methodology does not adhere to the traditional empirical research paper structure, the authors politely refuted the suggestion in a two-pronged approach by showing related evidence in rigorous published articles and by incorporating two research questions. In doing so, the authors attempted to qualify the use of the alternative manuscript structure, support this assertion and consider the feelings of the reviewers by including response comments that potentially addressed the uncertainty expressed by the reviewers.

As a final note on responding to every reviewer comment, reaching out to the editor for clarifications on a reviewer's comment, negative or otherwise, should be a last resort. We suggest proceeding through at least one round of revision in good faith, following the recommendations outlined herein. In doing so, authors project legitimacy, assuredness and respect for the double-blind review process that forms the foundation of academic publications. Further, these actions allow authors to maintain trust with the editor as they

manage the emotions of all parties involved in the review process ([Druskat & Wolff, 2001](#)).

#3: Address the reviewer's expectations in multiple ways

As an addendum to Strategy #2, authors will often need to address reviewer concerns in multiple ways to show complete regard for the comments made. This can take various forms. For example, a reviewer's comment might be pointed at multiple sections of the paper. In this case, it is appropriate to address the comment across different sections of the paper in a cohesive manner, tying the comments together. Further, a reviewer's comment might be complex enough that a series of arguments becomes necessary to satisfactorily respond to the comments. In the previous example of [Philip and Kosmidou \(2023\)](#), the authors addressed the concern about not having formal hypotheses by using these tactics simultaneously. First, the authors offered explanations in the theoretical development section. Second, the authors created two new research questions, offered new citations from the requested literature and included new language requested from relevant articles within the publishing journal. Together, the use of multiple ways of answering a single comment shows that the authors are engaging in a rigorous and thoughtful approach in the R&R process. As a note, the authors should gauge the gravity of the reviewer's comments, take cues from editor commentary and focus on those comments that necessitate the use of this strategy.

Further, the authors would do well to continue to integrate empathy and EI as they assess the seriousness of comments and address them in multiple ways. When authors appraise the emotions of reviewers, they are able to limit any intrusion of negative emotions and rather focus on drafting generous, constructive and flexible responses in the face of any apparent sligh in the review comments ([Mayer & Salovey, 1997](#)).

#4: List the locations of changes

The response document should serve as a roadmap for the reviewer as they try to piece together how authors revised the manuscript to address the concerns of everyone involved in the R&R process. To this end, clearly listing where all changes were made in the paper is essential. Not only do authors want to create a roadmap; they should ensure the roadmap is easy to follow. The goal is to ease the reviewer's workload as they engage in the R&R.

In easing this workload, authors can continue to be empathetic and tap into their EI. Researchers are expected to regulate their emotional response to the reviews, rapidly recovering from the psychologically taxing process of creating the R&R roadmap ([Wong & Law, 2002](#)). Further, the emotional stability displayed by the authors in their response document written in a positive affective tone could, in turn, help reviewers constructively manage their own emotional responses when reviewing the manuscript ([Butts, Becker, & Boswell, 2015](#)).

There are several options for listing the location of changes in the response document. The simplest option is for the author to include the location of any change to the manuscript by stating the paper section (e.g. Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, etc.) and the paragraph number within that section. This type of reference to location might look something like the following if addressing a comment in multiple sections: The Purpose/Contributions of the study are now incorporated in:

- Introduction (paragraph 4);
- Discussion and Research Findings (paragraph 1); and
- Theoretical Implications (paragraph 2).

In this example, it is easy to see how the reviewer would relatively easily find the changes made to the manuscript.

There are more complicated options for highlighting the roadmap of changes made in the manuscript. However, with complication also comes caution. Authors might include page/line numbers as location references. While this does give a direct line to the changes made, this could cause confusion for reviewers because the page and line numbers shown in the journal's submission system may vary from that shown in the authors' document. Yet another more complicated method lies in the duplication or quoting of newly added content from the manuscript in the response document. While this quoting method does make it easier for the reviewer to find changes, this duplication also takes the changes out of the context they were made in. The reviewer may still need to read the new content within the context of the manuscript to ensure that the changes made were contextually appropriate. While the quoting method may be appropriate depending on the response, providing reviewers with the location reference is the best way to keep the R&R roadmap simple and effective. At the same time, this also reduces the cognitive bandwidth necessary on the part of the authors.

#5: Color code the revised manuscript

Along with the location of changes, journals often prescribe the submission of color-coded or track changed manuscripts as part of the R&R process. Assuming the former request is made, our suggestion is to pick a color that is soothing to the eye (i.e. greens, blues and purples). The authors' response letter to the editor should clearly state that the revisions/edits are in a different color. Regarding track change requests, the goal should be to keep the track-changed manuscript as simple and clean as possible, limiting track change highlights only to those pertinent to the reviewer comments. Finally, on color coding/track changes, this method of documenting changes to the manuscript could be used whether the journal requests it or not. Whether the authors choose to use color coding or track changes, caution should be the order of the day when adding any complication to the R&R files submitted.

#6: Tie together similar comments from different reviewers

With multiple reviewers offering suggestions on sections of the paper, authors are likely to find similar comments from different reviewers that can be addressed in a single response. The following provides an example of this situation:

Editor comment: Contribution: As both reviewers point out, the contributions of this research are still unclear. The paper should better justify the importance of xx and yy in the specific context.

Reviewer #1, Comment 2: the Introduction fails to clearly identify why xx is an issue that needs to be studied.

Reviewer #3, Comment 9: even though the Discussion section describes a contribution of the research, more clarity is needed on why this is a contribution.

When addressing similar comments, our recommendation is that authors respond to each comment separately. In these responses, authors should then also cross-reference responses to common commentary. In the example noted above, the response to Reviewer #1's Comment 2 could state that Reviewer #3 raised a similar concern in their Comment 9, followed by the various ways in which they addressed each comment (see Strategies #3 and #4).

Overall organization of the response document

The most common structure that authors follow in their response document is to provide an author response underneath each reviewer comment. This common method can be effective if the structure is used to create a cohesive narrative response to reviewer comments. We suggest referencing the section of the paper the comment concerns, quoting the comment and including any interpretation of the comment the authors make. This would be followed by the authors’ response in line with the strategies offered above.

A secondary way to organize the response document is to place a comment and its corresponding response side-by-side. Numbering the comments and presenting each response visually aligned with each comment allow the reviewer/editor to see the comment and response with ease. An example of this structure is as follows (Table 1).

Conclusion

With the R&R standing as a gatekeeper to the publication of articles, the importance of efficiently and effectively navigating the process cannot be emphasized sufficiently for business researchers. Therefore, it is no understatement to say that just like the manuscript is the medium through which authors communicate their research ideas and findings to academics/practitioners, the response document is the authors’ sole medium to convince the editor and reviewers of the efficacy of their research. Hence, it is crucial that authors dedicate sufficient time and effort to preparing and crafting the response document. Without any sense of hyperbole, crafting the response document often stands equal in importance with the writing, revising and editing process of the manuscript itself.

This article contributes to the literature on academic writing and publishing in two ways. First, guidance on how to be mindful of the emotions involved in the R&R process equips authors with a “secret weapon” to fully use the practical strategies discussed. Second, journal editors could reference these practical strategies when providing their feedback comments to authors to better equip authors to deal with the emotional rigors of the R&R process. The R&R process rises or falls based on the emotional abilities of the authors, the practical strategies used in the response and the overall organization used in

Table 1. Organization of the response document

Comments from editor	Author responses
Both reviewers have identified positives in the revised manuscript, but they have also highlighted some concerns.	Use Strategy #1. Also, see Strategy #2 (acknowledge the positive evaluation)
<i>Comments from Reviewer #1</i>	<i>Author responses</i>
Comment 1.	Address Comment 1 using Strategies #2, #3, #4 and #5
Comment 2. (similar to Reviewer #2, Comment 1)	Address Comment 2 using Strategies #2, #3, #4 and #5. Next, use Strategy #6 to tie the response to that for Reviewer #2, Comment 1
<i>Comments from Reviewer #2</i>	<i>Author responses</i>
Comment 1. (similar to Reviewer #1, Comment 2)	Address Comment 1 using Strategies #2, #3, #4 and #5. Next, use Strategy #6 to tie the response to that for Reviewer #1, Comment 2
Comment 2.	Address Comment 2 using Strategies #2, #3, #4 and #5

Source: Authors’ own work

that response. Together, this article provides a road map for authors on how to clearly signal to editors and reviewers that the authors heard their suggestions, carefully responded to them and appreciated the journal representatives' time and dedication. To get these signals to pay off with an acceptance, authors must embrace a two-part game plan of empathy and strategy.

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