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Writing in Practice: Revising

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- Revising at the level of the complete document, the subsections/subheadings, and detail work

While this “Writing in Practice” piece covers more advanced writing, the advice is applicable to all writers. We all go through the process of getting feedback and feeling discouraged about it and/or not knowing how to respond. Dr. Holstein’s advice is as useful to those writing first drafts of papers for their undergraduate courses as for those who have received a “revise and resubmit” recommendation on an article.

WRITING IN PRACTICE

by James A. Holstein

Most sociological publications go through multiple revisions before appearing in print. There isn’t a publishing sociologist around who hasn’t submitted a paper (seemingly honed to perfection) and subsequently been asked to “revise and resubmit” the paper for further review. It’s vital that authors don’t take this as rejection but, rather, as an opportunity to enhance, enrich, and otherwise upgrade the manuscript—to make it really good.

Over the years, I’ve submitted dozens of journal articles, but only a couple of these manuscripts were accepted without substantial revision. I’ve also served as editor of a major sociological journal that considered hundreds of submissions annually. As editor, I never accepted a paper without requiring some form of revision. Most articles go through at least two or three new drafts before publication. Thus, revising a paper—sometimes dramatically—is par for the course, even for the most successful authors. It’s an integral part of the writing and publishing process. Journals are typically peer reviewed—that is, critiqued by a number of experts in the field—and, like your professor, the reviewers’ job is to offer *constructive* criticism. Responding to conscientious professional reviews is an opportunity to improve your paper. To that end, I’ll offer some suggestions about approaching the revision process from a positive perspective.

Don’t (Over) React Immediately or Defensively

If asked to revise a paper, don’t be disheartened. Resist the initial impulse to throw the request in the trash. Read the explanation and/or reviewers’ comments, but don’t dwell on them. Set the comments aside and let your thoughts “mellow” for a day or two. As emotions subside, read the comments again, carefully assessing what they say.

Take Stock

Make a careful, comprehensive outline of things you need to address. Don't omit issues from your list just because you disagree with whoever has reviewed your paper. The critiques are there; don't kid yourself about being able to ignore or finesse them. If a professor or set of reviewers identifies concerns, you need to deal with them.

Ask the Editor or Professor

Perhaps the most daunting aspect of revising is dealing with countervailing or contradictory suggestions. Nothing is more vexing than for one reviewer to suggest "X" while a second reviewer suggests "not X" and still another thinks the issue is really about "Y." One way to deal with the quandary is to seek the professor's or journal editor's guidance. The editor may have already offered suggestions in her or his appraisal of the paper (if so, take this to heart), but a straightforward request for advice and direction, either in a phone call or e-mail, is perfectly appropriate. Remember that the editor has a vested interest in seeing your paper published, too, so she or he is highly motivated to help with a successful revision.

Create a Strategy

There are many ways to address criticism, but you need to be clearly responsive to the reviews. Frequently, you can address reviewers' comments straightforwardly, as matters of clarification. Setting emotion and ego aside, develop a list of changes that can easily be made. More problematic issues will require additional consideration. Here are three common approaches that writers take to dealing with major criticisms, with some thoughts about their appropriateness:

- **"I didn't say that!"** (Or, alternatively, **"That's what I said!"**) If you didn't say what a reviewer claims you did, or if you think you said precisely what a reviewer said you ignored, look carefully at your manuscript to determine why the reader misunderstood you. Ask how *you* might have caused the confusion. Was the writing unclear or the logic faulty? Did you assume too much about what readers would or would not know? Clean up your argument and be very explicit about what you mean to say.
- **"I don't want to say/do that!"** After carefully considering reviewers' comments, you may disagree with some suggestions or criticisms. Rather than ignoring those comments, anticipate them in your text. Engage alternate arguments and potential criticisms, briefly outlining those lines of thought and explaining why

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your approach is more appropriate. You don't have to agree with a critic to engage the critic's argument and state your case.

- **"I never thought of that!"** When reviewers' comments "make sense," take advantage by exploring the possibilities you may have previously overlooked. Don't be stubborn when new opportunities arise.

Pay Close Attention to the Writing: Make It Crystal Clear!

- *Read your manuscript aloud.* This helps identify unclear writing.
- *Don't assume anything is self-evident.* Make your arguments clear and explicit.
- *Explain your analytic vocabulary.* Eliminate gratuitous jargon while making sure the reader knows exactly what you mean by the specialized terminology you use.
- *Don't skimp on the methods section.* This is where you demonstrate that your arguments have empirical merit. It's where you convince readers to believe what you say.
- *Streamline!* Make arguments and prose simple, direct, and parsimonious. Write in an active voice. Avoid redundancy. You can usually reduce wordiness without sacrificing anything but length. "He said X" is three words. "X was made evident in conversation by him" is seven. Do the math!

Dealing With Advice That Seems Conflicting

Here's a common challenge that makes authors cringe: "Say more about several issues, but cut the paper by 2,000 words." The reviser's dilemma: How do you say more with less? First, decide what is absolutely essential to the paper. Then ask the editor for advice on what you might reasonably cut. Do the best you can to address problematic issues while continuing to streamline.

Write a Succinct, Comprehensive Memo Explaining Your Revisions

If you are submitting to a journal, editors often ask authors to submit memos of explanation or letters to the editor along with their revised manuscripts. Invited or not, this is an excellent opportunity (1) to indicate how you've taken reviewers' comments to heart and (2) to explain why particular comments haven't been incorporated into the revision. This memo helps reviewers discern how you've addressed criticisms, and, at the very least, shows the editor and reviewers that you didn't simply ignore or dismiss them.

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