

EDITORIAL

EDITORIAL DECISIONS AND RESPONSES BY AUTHORS: HOW TO PREPARE A REVISED VERSION OF YOUR MANUSCRIPT AND THE COVER LETTER

The wait is over. After what seemed an eternity, finally the preliminary decision on your manuscript has been made. A quick read of the decision letter indicates that while the topic of the manuscript is of interest to the journal, the reviewers and editors have a more or less long list of queries and suggestions that need to be addressed before the manuscript can be accepted. Blast! And you thought that the manuscript was so clearly written! To add insult to injury, the reviewers may ask for re-analyses of the data, consideration of alternative explanations, and improvement of the clarity of writing. In sum, quite a lot of work will be necessary to get the manuscript into final shape. Often, the first reaction to such criticism is anger and disappointment. Taking criticism is hard, it often feels personal, and authors may think that reviewers and editors are seeking out the weaknesses in the manuscript to reject it. While seriously flawed manuscripts will (hopefully) be rejected, at *Ornitología Neotropical* a great majority (>75%) of the manuscripts that are reviewed will be accepted (manuscripts deemed to be outside the scope of the journal [see Delhey 2015] by a member of the editorial board are usually returned without further review). Thus, by and large, the main role of reviewers and editors of *Ornitología Neotropical* is not to be the rulers of what gets published but rather to help authors improve their manuscripts and to publish good papers.

Reviewers are not rewarded for their job and spend hours crafting a critical yet constructive review while instead they could be working on their own papers. Very often the most extended and detailed reviews with many suggestions/comments come from the most helpful reviewers. Writing that everything is OK with a manuscript is the easy way out, while critically thinking and arguing for changes or clarification requires much more effort. Thus, rather than hostility, critical reviewers deserve praise and thanks.

In general, the first editorial decision on a manuscript that has been sent out for review will indicate that the manuscript is potentially acceptable after satisfactory revision. This decision is usually taken by a member of the editorial board based on her/his assessment and the aid of the reviewer's comments. This initial decision could be considered as a preliminary acceptance of the manuscript. This does not mean that the manuscript is accepted, final acceptance will be given only if (and this is a big "if") the comments by reviewers and editors are satisfactorily addressed. Rarely will a manuscript be given final acceptance after the first round of revision, although this is, of course, possible. The extent of suggestions and changes is highly variable (i.e. minor to major revisions). If the required revisions are rather minor the editor handling the manuscript may assess the revised version directly. However, if the reviewers' comments are substantial, the editor handling the manuscript may decide to send the revised version to the same reviewers so that they can assess whether the changes to the manuscript are satisfactory. This often means that more than one round of revisions is needed and that it is highly likely that reviewers will be asked to assess whether the changes made are appropriate.

If your manuscript has been preliminarily accepted and we have requested a revised version, the best way to ensure that it gets finally accepted swiftly is by taking the comments of reviewers and editors seriously, revising the manuscript with those comments in mind, and writing a respectful cover letter detailing how these suggestions were dealt with. The importance of this

cover letter goes often underappreciated, and at *Ornitología Neotropical* we regularly receive revised manuscripts without, or with inadequate, cover letters. A cover letter that details how changes were made and that justifies clearly why some suggestions were not followed is a way of helping the editor and reviewers to make sense of the revised version. It allows assessing the changes without having to go back and forth between files, and will speed up the editorial process.

Given the importance of the cover letter I provide below a series of tips to craft a successful one. These constitute a combination of my own experience with similar tips gathered from the web and other sources (e.g., Annesley 2011, Woolston 2015). While I have tried to adapt these to the needs of *Ornitología Neotropical*, most of them are general and apply to other journals as well.

- 1) *Respond to all comments.* Copy and paste all editorial and reviewer comments in a separate document and explain how you have dealt with all of them. This is done usually by following each comment with “REPLY” and stating your response to the comment and where (quote line numbers) on the revised manuscript the change can be found. Authors can also decide to highlight changed sections of the text using a different colour. This may sound excessive for small changes but it really makes a difference for reviewers and editors. For small changes you can simply write ‘DONE’ and give the line numbers, for more complicated changes you will have to explain how you addressed them. After all, by facilitating the work of reviewers and editors you are hopefully helping to speed up the manuscript towards publication.

Going through all the comments also enables you to gauge how difficult it will be to comply with each of them, and allows you to mentally classify them into those that are easy to deal with, those that will require a lot of work, and those that you may disagree with. I usually start with the easy ones while I think how I will deal with the complicated ones. In the course of this process, it sometimes helps to number all comments and refer to these numbers.

- 2) *Justify your responses.* This is particularly important if you disagree with a comment or suggestion. It is not enough to state that you disagree but you need rather to explain why and provide evidence that supports your point of view. Reviewers and editors can be wrong and are receptive to a well-thought explanation that shows a different point of view. If reviewers or editors are wrong, however, pause to think why they got it wrong. Often it may simply be a misunderstanding, and using different wording can solve the problem. The process of having to explain it will frequently lead to insights on how to change the text, minimizing the chances that other readers have the same problem. In other cases, you will need to cite papers or even show results from extra analyses to make your point. In some cases, simply showing the evidence will be enough, in others these extra tests or analyses may end up added to the manuscript and, in all likelihood, will strengthen your findings.

Pick your battles! To paraphrase a comment I once read on the web: If a change suggested by a reviewer will improve the manuscript substantially, make it; if the change will improve it a little, make it; if the change will not improve but does not harm, make it; and only if the comment will harm the manuscript you should challenge the suggestion and explain why. While this may be a tad excessive it shows that you are open to criticism and

that you are taking the comments and suggestions seriously. Challenging every suggestion made by reviewers or editors certainly does not indicate it, and likely will be even counter-productive in terms of final acceptance. In the end, however, this is your work, and you should decide whether a change is worth making or not. Incorporating a clear mistake into the manuscript simply because a reviewer or editor suggested it is certainly not a good idea.

- 3) *Responses should be polite.* This point is especially important when you disagree with a particular comment. For example, if the reviewer suggests to consider the alternative hypothesis X as a potential explanation of your results rather than stating “*Hypothesis X is wrong because...*”, you could say: “*While hypothesis X could be seen as an alternative because of [...], we think that it does not apply in this case because...*”. The final result, in terms of message conveyed, is the same but both reviewer and editor will be more receptive to the second alternative as it indicates that you have critically thought about the merit of the suggestion. In some cases, it might also be useful to indicate to the editor that you are willing to make the change if she/he thinks it is absolutely necessary.

These three recommendations should go a long way to craft a good cover letter. Moreover it is often good to start the letter by summarizing the main points raised by the reviewers and how they were dealt with. Thanking the reviewers for their efforts in the Acknowledgments is also advisable. Remember, reviewers are smart people that are devoting hours of effort towards improving your work at no cost to you. As such, reviewers and editors – rather than being the final hurdle to clear before publication – represent the final opportunity to save authors from publishing mistakes. In the end it is up to you to take their comments into account – or to ignore them at your own peril!

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REFERENCES

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