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EDITORIAL

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A Practical Guide for Successful Revisions and Engagements with Reviewers

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Abstract

Revising a manuscript after receiving a revise-and-resubmit decision from a top-tier journal can be just as arduous as developing a new paper from scratch. In this editorial, based on our experiences revising papers over the years, we provide roadmaps and guidelines for completing successful revisions for top journals. In doing so, we offer practical tips for completing three major tasks—making sense of a review packet, revising a manuscript, and crafting responses to reviewer comments. We conclude by recommending that authors be active reviewers themselves because, by doing so, they can develop their own insights on how peer review works and become more skillful at revising their papers and responding to reviewers.

Dorothy E. Leidner was the accepting senior editor. This editorial was submitted on March 18, 2022 and underwent two revisions.

1 Introduction

Receiving a revise-and-resubmit (R&R) decision is a significant milestone in the top-tier journal publication process. Given that most submissions to top journals, such as the *Journal of the Association for Information Systems* (*JAIS*), are rejected in the first round, a manuscript with an R&R decision has a substantially better chance of being published than it did before. Therefore, receiving a revision is very good news for authors, but the question remains: "What should authors do to successfully manage the revision process?"

Once the elation of having received a revision has passed, the authors must embark upon the onerous task of revising their manuscript and responding to the often voluminous comments from the editors and reviewers. Doing so can be daunting, as the authors must complete several tasks—interpreting the feedback, developing a revision strategy, revising the paper, preparing a response document, and then polishing the paper and the response document to perfection. Contributing to this challenge, reviewers often offer critical, contradictory comments and sometimes ask for a radically different paper. Both new and seasoned authors may feel overwhelmed or even distressed at any step during the process.

We have both gone through this process numerous times and, over the years, each of us has developed our own ways of revising manuscripts and responding to reviewers and editors. Based on our experiences, this editorial offers practical tips and guidelines for authors seeking to revise their papers for *JAIS* and other top-tier journals. We provide specific guidance on how to navigate three tasks—(1) reading and making sense of review comments, (2) revising a manuscript, and (3) crafting point-by-point responses to editors and reviewers. We provide a simple typology of typical reviews and some suggestions on how to address each type of review. Our approaches for reading and responding to reviews are intended to transcend particular topics, genres, methods, or journals so that they can provide utility to the broad information systems (IS) community.

If authors embrace our guidelines, they can invite more constructive two-way conversations with editors and reviewers. This is important because even if reviewers' sentiments do not always feel positive, their questions and recommendations are meant to be constructive. How the authors answer their questions and explain how they revised their research will shape the future tone of those conversations. By keeping a positive tone in explaining how they use the reviews to improve the paper, the authors can invite a healthy, constructive discourse and are more likely to receive another revision. If the authors continue to engage in a good-faith, positive conversation, their paper will have a better chance of eventually being accepted.

2 Making Sense of Review Comments

The first step is to read the entire review package, with no purpose other than reading each and every comment. While this sounds obvious, reading through a lengthy review package that may be filled with critical comments can be more challenging than one might imagine. Some authors may find this step confusing, overwhelming, or even distressing. But as we explain below, it is of utmost importance to make good sense of the reviews in order to make a solid revision plan that will help to ensure a successful outcome in the next round.

As an aside, we note that these steps are also applicable to processing a rejection. Since authors should revise their manuscript before submitting it to another journal, it is just as important, if not more so, to read reviews objectively with a clear mind and incorporate feedback on how to improve the manuscript.

2.1 Step 1: Take a Look at the Decision Letter and Then Let It Rest

After receiving a revision decision, we recommend reading the review package once and then taking a few days to reflect on the comments. In any major revision decision, the reviews will include constructive comments, critical questions, and direct challenges regarding a paper's assumptions and framework. Because authors usually receive at least two or three sets of reviewer reports, as well as a decision letter, it can be a struggle to piece together all these comments, and authors may be confused by the conflicting and critical comments on their work. Such feelings are normal. We often find that reading review comments makes us feel overwhelmed, stressed, and bewildered. After investing countless hours of effort into a paper, comments can sometimes feel personal. However, such personal, negative feelings can impede authors from moving a paper in the right direction (Rindova, 2008).

To make sense of the reviews and interpret them holistically, authors need to reach a state of mindfulness (Langer, 1989, 1992; Miralles-Armenteros et al., 2021; Thatcher et al., 2018) in which they are open to novelty and context and can look at things from multiple perspectives. What can authors do to get there? We strongly recommend *reading the review package in one sitting, closing the file, turning off the laptop, and taking a walk.* Authors should remember to take a moment to enjoy knowing that they are still in the race. We recommend *not opening the review packet for a week or so.* In the meantime, authors can work on other unrelated projects or spend time preparing for teaching. We understand the urge to commence a revision immediately. But if they do so, authors may risk missing important messages in the review package. If they focus too much on specific issues (trees), authors could miss an overarching message or the "big picture" (the forest). We encourage authors to take some time to settle their emotions; this will make it easier to evaluate the comments more objectively with clear eyes and a clear head.

2.2 Step 2: Take Time to "Digest" the Review

When feeling calmer and more subdued, authors can open the review package and reread it. With a clear head, authors should be able to read reviews from a different perspective and are more likely to find value in the comments. In this state, authors should be able to start thinking holistically about the reviews and can begin to tease out the nuances in the reviewers' points and triangulate them across the different sets of feedback.

Here, we suggest that authors take ample time to digest review comments. By digest, we mean understanding the overall sentiment of the review team and finding the "big picture" message in the review package (Rindovar, 2008) rather than focusing on specific, minor comments. Authors should take time to read and reread the comments over the course of a few days and reflect on the comments from different angles. At this point, it is a good idea to look closely at the original submission again in case some of the details of the manuscript have been forgotten after the long review process. Rereading the manuscript can help authors better understand where the comments are coming from, and they can start to ask questions like: "What do the comments mean for theory? For method? For data? For contribution? For style?"

We suggest breaking the comments out into major issues that are more difficult to deal with and minor ones that are simpler to address. Major issues usually concern contributions, theory development, or analyses. Some comments may be consistent at a high level—i.e., the motivation is not persuasive or the hypotheses require further development. When authors find similarities among comments from different reviewers, it indicates that there is a consensus among the review team about what must be done to move the paper forward. Reconciling these comments will help immensely in moving the core story forward. Authors should seek to integrate these major critiques and conversations; this is pivotal to developing a holistic message and a systematic response to the review team.

2.3 Step 3: Identify Major Problems in the Paper

When the authors have a better sense of the overall message from the review team, it's time to ask: "Where are all these major concerns coming from? What are the broad themes in the review package?"

At this point, the authors should feel more relaxed and more objective about the review package but might still feel somewhat baffled. The authors might be thinking: "Why didn't reviewers recognize our contributions? Why didn't they understand theory or method? Why aren't they buying our findings? Why aren't they getting it?"

During this stage, we urge authors to actively introspect on their initial submission. If the reviewers did not understand the key ideas or stories, it might be because the paper was not well-written enough. The reviewers might not have read the paper closely because the motivation was weak, the topics were not resonating with them, or the introduction failed to "hook" them (Grant & Pollock, 2011). If the reviewers didn't buy into the core findings, it might be because the authors didn't do a good job of explaining the method or highlighting its implications. Perhaps the initial submission contained too many stories or too much content, more than what Kane (2022) calls the "minimum publishable unit." It could be that the key message was not delivered well to the reviewers. If the reviewers did not appreciate the contributions, perhaps the discussion failed to connect to the motivation. It is possible that the introduction did not highlight an interesting theoretical tension worth resolving (Baird, 2021), that the paper failed to address an important problem, or that it did not ask a question that really matters to theory or practice.

This introspection of their work can be a painful task for authors. Often, because they are so close to their work, authors can have blind spots and miss these big-picture questions. Authors might resort to complaining that the reviewers didn't do their jobs well, but this does not move the paper forward. The authors should assume that "it's us, not them." As arduous as this can be, it is necessary for authors to thoroughly introspect on their initial submission if they hope to successfully revise their work. Hence, we strongly encourage authors to reflect on whether it was how they crafted arguments or the work itself that evoked the concerns expressed by the reviewers and to think about how to rectify these problems.

2.4 Step 4: Devise a "Revision Strategy"

After reflecting on the broad themes of the reviews and identifying the major issues in the paper, the authors should be ready to develop a revision strategy that will serve as a roadmap to addressing the reviewers' major concerns and suggestions and incorporating them into the revised paper (Rindova, 2008). A good revision strategy should articulate a concise summary of 3-5 major changes made to the manuscript, derived from major issues in the paper and consistent comments from multiple reviewers (see Tables 1a-1b for the revision strategies we have used in revising our own papers).

When crafting a revision strategy, authors should distinguish between major critiques and minor comments. One technique that we often use is color coding. Authors can use different colors—green for easy fixes, yellow for non-minor but more straightforward changes, blue for major overhauls, and red for the most challenging issues. A revision strategy might focus on addressing blue and red items, with reviewers' comments categorized as motivation, theory, method, data, contributions, and implications, and the source of each comment labeled (e.g., SE, AE, Reviewer 1, etc.). If more than one reviewer touches on a given theme, it can help to identify the major comments or overarching problems. Such coding can also help triangulate concerns shared by multiple reviewers.

Moreover, a good revision strategy should lay out which issues the authors need to assess, can address, want to address, and are willing to address. This nuance is important because while authors naturally want their paper to be accepted, they must also decide whether they are willing to shift theories or gather more data in order to address a concern. Generally speaking, it is better to at least try to respond to all reviewer comments. Even if it is impossible to appropriately address a reviewer's concern, the authors can at least offer a good-faith explanation for why they were unable to do so.

Beyond coding and prioritizing the reviewer comments, the revision strategy can help to assess whether the authors should conduct major changes based on at least one critique or the recommendation of *every review panel member*. For example, if the authors devise a revision strategy based on addressing the comments from one or two reviewers only, they risk alienating the remainder of the panel. A strong revision strategy should address or touch on at least one concern expressed by every member of the review panel.

Table 1a. A Revision Strategy for Pang and Lee (2022)

- Improvement in theoretical motivations and development with respect to the public sector context
- Change in the unit of analysis from a project to a federal bureau
- Sharpening the theoretical focus on IT managers
- New identification strategy with instrumental variables
- Exploring new moderating effects

Table 1b. A Revision Strategy for Park et al. (2021)

- Outlining and differentiating underlying mechanisms
- In-depth discussions of potential endogeneity threats
- Developing new estimation approaches with spatial analyses
- Additional data collection and analyses of nationwide crime incidents
- Improvement in theoretical and policy implications

When completed, a good revision strategy will achieve several goals. First, it will distinguish between major and minor critiques. Second, it will help authors determine what can and needs to be done and what cannot or does not need to be done. Third, it will help ensure that all major concerns are considered and addressed. A carefully constructed revision strategy will include a specific to-do list with a clear direction and focus, which will prevent a revision from being derailed by minor comments or conflicts among the authors about who needs to do what. Lastly, once completed, the revision strategy will synchronize the author team's understanding of the work to be completed in the weeks to come and make allocating the work more straightforward. If each author in a team is allocated different tasks involving different reviewer comments (i.e., a divide-and-conquer approach), the revision may appear to be disjointed and poorly synchronized. An effective revision strategy will ensure that all authors complete their revision tasks in a way that achieves the author team's stated goals.

2.5 Step 5: Communicate the Revision Strategy with the Senior Editor

After developing the revision strategy, the authors might consider sharing it with the senior editor and asking for advice on it. This is particularly important to do if, in the decision letter, the editor offers to assess the revision plan. While the editor's offer may read as an offer, it should be taken as compulsory. Even if the editor does not explicitly offer to do so, asking the editor to review the revision strategy can work in the authors' favor in several ways. First, doing so gives the editor the opportunity to make further suggestions about the revision—in the best-case scenario, the editor will like the authors' plan and endorse it. Second, doing so allows the authors to ask the editor about conflicting comments among the reviewers and request guidance in resolving them. This can also be helpful for the editor, who might have missed contradictory feedback from the reviewers.

Second, corresponding with the editor about a revision strategy affords opportunities to confirm major pivots in the paper's structure or story. For example, one co-author of ours recently received a revision that outlined three possibilities for the paper, one of which involved employing a new analytic technique and a new structure. However, before embarking on this drastic change, the author team solicited written feedback from the editor regarding the viability of the strategy. By doing so, they not only learned how they could meet the editor's expectations but they were also able to develop a mutual understanding of what needed to be done and included the correspondence in the review package. By developing a revision plan, this author team was able to confirm that all actors understood why and how the paper should be revised.

Third, sharing the revision plan with the editor helps authors synchronize expectations and avoid surprises. By surprises, we mean situations in which the review panel finds a revision that is very different from what they had instructed the authors to complete. This can happen when authors misunderstand the guidance and direction in the review package. If authors present their revision strategy to the editor early on, the editor has an opportunity to clarify and clear up any misunderstandings between the two sides. Sharing the revision plan can help manage the editor's expectations and can make the review process much less turbulent by helping authors meet and surpass the editor's expectations.

Communicating a concise revision strategy is important because editors are typically very busy and are likely managing many other papers. Hence, in sending a revision strategy and asking for feedback, it is imperative to keep it brief, no more than one or one and a half pages, so that the editor can quickly and easily assess it.

2.6 Step 6: Consult with Colleagues or Present the Paper

One of the challenges in a revision process is that authors often feel stuck—the paper may seem to be going nowhere despite their hard work. For example, authors might be having a hard time figuring out some of the reviewers' points or may be encountering difficulties in identifying a new angle for theory or contributions, coming up with ideas for additional analyses, or crafting responses to some of the more challenging reviewer comments. Absent a catalyst to move the paper forward, weeks or even months may pass without any progress being made.

When authors find themselves in such situations, enlisting a second set of eyes to look at the paper and the review package can be invaluable for regaining momentum. Authors can ask colleagues in their departments or co-authors from other projects to take an independent look at the manuscript and the review package and ask for their guidance and advice on specific issues. For example, if authors are stuck on a theoretical issue, they can solicit suggestions on how to address that issue or ask for an assessment of the strategy to help them address the concern. If authors need help with empirical issues, it will be helpful to explain specifically why they are stuck and solicit advice on resolving the issue. The more specific the request, the more likely the authors will be to secure the advice they need to advance their paper.

Another great way to obtain advice and regain momentum is to present the paper at a research workshop. Presenting a paper is helpful in two ways. First, it forces authors to synthesize and prepare their thoughts regarding the revision. We have found that preparing for a presentation and sharing it with others can add fresh life to the project. Second, it gives authors the opportunity to obtain valuable feedback. Authors should be forthcoming about the challenges posed by the reviewers and ask audience members for their thoughts on how to specifically address the critical points. Considering the many changes they may be making to the paper, authors should solicit feedback on the updated storyline. Given that most major revisions require updating the key elements of a paper's narrative, soliciting feedback on how to unpack the updated arguments and analyses is invaluable. In the IS community, most of us are more than willing to help each other out, and presenting a paper can help authors leverage the collective intelligence of their colleagues in moving the paper forward.

3 Revising a Manuscript

After digesting reviewer comments, the authors must confront the hard part of the process—ensuring that they directly address the reviewers' comments and that the changes are properly mapped to the revision strategy. This is very different from writing an original manuscript in which authors have the liberty to develop a paper as they like. For a revision, authors need to produce a manuscript that the reviewers like while maintaining the original goals of the project. To do so, authors need to be clinical in assessing how to respond to reviewer comments. Sometimes, it requires dropping important points from the paper (Kane, 2022). Other times, responding can mean adding an extra study. In either case, keeping it clinical is important because, even if it is the right response, making major changes to the paper by cutting pages or adding studies will likely evoke frustration and discontent on the authors' end.

Our experiences suggest that five broad types of comments require major efforts to address; here, we provide a few high-level recommendations on how to accommodate and respond to each.

3.1 Contributions—Making the Case Why This Research Matters

Nearly every first-round review package questions the contribution of the paper. In fact, in our experience, in nearly every round of review, an editor or at least one reviewer challenges the paper's contribution because every reviewer has a different perspective on what is meant by a contribution. What counts as a contribution also differs widely by disciplines and research streams.

However, one way to revise the paper based on this type of comment is to make the case for why the research matters to theory and practice. Reviewers raise critiques when they cannot find good answers to the question of: "Why do we care?" It is a wise strategy to bolster the significance of research topics and questions from the perspectives of researchers, practitioners, and/or policymakers.

Addressing questions about contributions also requires connecting the paper's practical motivations to discussion and contributions. This can be difficult because the authors have already invested substantial effort in addressing questions about other elements of the paper. However, in doing so, the authors sometimes lose sight of the connections between the disparate parts of the paper. Therefore, it is important to make this connection as transparent and easy to find for the reviewers as possible. One effective strategy for this is to construct a table or figure that places the motivation at the top, followed by key elements of the contributions. Contribution paragraphs can then be written using that table. One of our co-authors has found this approach to be particularly helpful in structuring their thoughts.

3.2 Theory—Providing Nuances and Boundary-Conditions

Most review packages ask questions about what is theoretically novel in the manuscript. For example, reviewers might query: "How does this manuscript offer new theoretical insights beyond the prior literature?" Particularly harsh reviewers might state, "This is what we already know," often without support for their assertion. This critique is tough to digest because authors typically do not write papers on questions they believe have been answered. Such questions are a tell that the authors have not explained the arguments well or explicitly contextualized their work to the domain or the literature. Hong et al. (2014) and Johns (2006,, 2017) offer guidance on contextualization. It's not simple and should have been the first step in constructing the initial draft of the work.

To address the questions about theory, we suggest a three-pronged approach. First, authors should clearly articulate how the study probes nuances or the boundary conditions of a theory. Authors need to clearly explain their paper's theoretical foundation and how the paper extends that foundation in a novel way. This can be achieved by demonstrating, for example, that a theoretical relationship established in the literature works differently in certain conditions or for certain groups. Second, authors should clearly articulate how the analysis affords opportunities to extend the theoretical understanding of a problem. This can be achieved, for example, by demonstrating moderating effects that change the direction of established relationships. Third, authors should clearly articulate how investigating the phenomenon creates opportunities for rich theoretical contributions. Doing so requires demonstrating that a phenomenon cannot be clearly explained by an existing theory or a combination of theories. This can be achieved, for example, by illustrating how theory fails to explain an objective reality.

3.3 Method—Demonstrating the Robustness of the Key Results

Every review package poses questions about methods and empirical execution. As both authors and editors, we have observed that the expectations for rigor are continuously rising, and it is imperative for authors to do their best to meet such expectations. Reviewers are increasingly asking for more rigorous analyses and more credible causal identifications. Sometimes, authors are required to learn new methods to address such concerns. But it is also the case that given the limitations in data, empirical settings, or research ethics, it is not always possible to present the perfect analyses. No study is free from limitations. Nonetheless, it is incumbent upon the authors to demonstrate the robustness of their core findings.

To address questions about the method, authors must offer data analyses that are as credible as possible. This statement has different meanings for empirical work than it does for design science, qualitative, or more discovery-oriented research. What does this mean for empirical research? First, it assumes that the authors have adhered to prescriptions for data collection found in the relevant method literature. Second, it assumes that the authors have adhered to the "script" for data analysis; in other words, they have conformed to best practices in the field. Third, it means that the authors have provided the reviewers, either in the main document or in a supplemental one, with all requested analyses. It is a good idea to follow Baird's (2021) suggestion to utilize tables or figures to present the results. However, this may involve devoting hours of effort to provide a one-sentence response to a reviewer's comment. Finally, if certain analyses are not feasible, the authors need to tactfully and clearly explain why they are not possible. Usually, this explanation is unlikely to completely satisfy the reviewer who requested it; however, it may persuade the editor or the remainder of the review panel, which is equally important, because manuscripts are rarely accepted with unanimous support from all reviewers.

What does this mean for other forms of research? First, it assumes that the authors have articulated a clear logic for how they are studying a phenomenon. Typically, this means that they can point a reader to an approach for conducting the research and a rubric for evaluating such work. Second, it suggests that the authors can map their work and associated inferences to each step of the research process. For example, if the authors are conducting design science research, they should be able to walk a reader through kernel theory, their design choices, and how they validate those choices. Third, given that explaining their choices can consume many pages, authors will likely need to offer appendices with detailed information. For example, authors might provide snippets from interviews in the main paper and richer illustrations from interview data in an expanded appendix. What is important here is that the authors offer enough evidence to allow the reader to assess the strength of the analysis. Finally, like empirical analysis, if authors are not able to provide information in the detail or the quantity needed to assess the work, they should offer to do so in supplemental materials, including the data or the artifacts that were utilized to reach the conclusions. By accurately, truthfully, and thoroughly describing how they reach their conclusions, the authors can persuade the reviewers that their work merits publication in a journal such as *JAIS*.

3.4 Literature—Keeping Up with the Current Literature

Most review packages point authors to opportunities to strengthen the literature review. Typically, reviewers raise one or both of two issues. First, they often complain that the literature review is too long. Of course, it is equally plausible that the section is simply too long. But there is also an opposite case; reviewers often point to a short literature review or the absence of up-to-date literature. Either way, an overly long or overly short literature review can undermine the paper's core ideas (Kilduff, 2006), because the quality of the exposition limits the authors' ability to connect the phenomenon, theory, and hypotheses.

The authors' response to this critique should be to step back and ask how the literature review adds to or subtracts from the paper's overall story. If the literature review is overly long and invests in recapping the entire literature, the authors should consider spinning out some part of it into an appendix or even a separate literature review article. If it is too short, the authors should consider carefully outlining the review again. In either case, the authors need to step back and re-outline the literature review, taking care to focus the narrative and deciding what is necessary to support the core story and satisfy the reviewers. This is not a simple task and should involve extensive conversations among the author team. Tuning a literature review to illustrate that the authors know a topic, add value to an intellectual conversation, and do not belabor a point requires paying attention to the reviewers' comments and an eye for detail.

We note that getting the literature review right is especially critical for a second-round review. On the first submission, the authors do not know the review panel's expertise. On the second submission, the authors should better understand what the panel wants and what they need to deliver. We offer three tips: First, authors should take time to update the literature review. Yes, authors should cite classics to demonstrate their mastery of the literature. Yes, they also need to cite recent publications to demonstrate awareness of the current literature. No, they should not cite every paper in the literature. Second, in doing so, authors should provide evidence demonstrating their solid understanding of current thinking in other disciplines that are similar or related to the manuscript. This is important because the reviewers are likely to be aware of those papers. Finally, authors should cite the papers suggested by the reviewers or explain why they did not. The reviewers took the time to find these references and the authors should respect their effort. In sum, we recommend that authors respond to the reviewers' comments by focusing on the literature review, selectively integrating out-of-discipline papers, and purposefully incorporating the papers suggested by the review panel.

3.5 Educating the Reviewers

Once in a while, authors might encounter reviewers who are not necessarily well-versed in a given paper, literature, theory, or method. While most editors do their best to invite reviewers who have sufficient expertise on the literature, theories, or methods of the submission, sometimes this is not the case. Indeed, we have both had several opportunities to review or handle submissions about which we were not very knowledgeable. In this case, the authors might need to "educate" the reviewers.

So, how should authors educate them? First, authors should investigate the comment. It is incumbent upon the authors to explain to the reviewers that there is more than one way to approach a problem. Before investing energy in explaining the position, authors need to make sure that they understand the different perspectives and their implications. Second, authors should ask themselves: "Does fighting with the reviewer matter that much?" In most cases, the answer is no. If a reviewer requests an additional bit of analysis, authors should run with it and report the result in the response to that reviewer. In doing so, authors can mention to the reviewer that they are willing to add it to the paper if deemed necessary (even though they might not prefer to do so). Third, if the reviewer has misinterpreted the literature or an argument, the authors can politely explain the current state of the literature and how their worldview is consistent with recent work. In doing so, it is important to note how the work builds on earlier conceptualizations in order to acknowledge that the reviewer's comment was spot on at one point in time.

Fourth, authors should never appear combative in tone with reviewers. It is imperative to remain professional, even in disagreeing with the comments of a review panel member. It is important to remember that reviewers usually offer those comments in good faith. If that is not the case, it is up to the editor to manage them. If necessary, authors should ask for the editor's advice on how to respond to a specific reviewer. This is a polite way of signaling concern that a reviewer is off-base and unreasonable. In our experience, fighting with a reviewer is a good way to end the paper's progress in the review process.

4 Crafting Responses to Reviewers

Even with a thoughtful response strategy and a solid revision, it's normal for authors to feel overwhelmed when responding to reviewers' critical comments. In some cases, writing an actual response document might be the most difficult of all the work required to publish in a top journal and may take more time and effort than writing the main paper. Below are our recommendations for writing effective response notes to the reviewers.

4.1 Lay Out Major Revision Points at the Beginning of a Response Document

Authors can use their revision strategy to craft the first one or two pages of the response document, outlining their substantial revisions in response to the major review comments. A strong beginning in the first two pages of a response document will let the review panel know that the authors took their comments seriously and did their best to improve the paper. It can also demonstrate that the revision incorporates key feedback from each review panel member. If the major revision points are presented effectively at the beginning of the response document, it sets up a good expectation for the reviewers on what to expect from the rest of the document and the revised paper.

4.2 Take Every Comment Seriously and Respond

In the previous section, we recommended categorizing comments as major or minor to help develop a holistic understanding of the reviews and devise a revision strategy. However, in responding to the comments, the authors should not reveal to the reviewers how they categorized them.

Instead, the authors need to respond to every comment as if it were major. We understand that authors may feel that some comments are irrelevant, out of scope, or that they just make little sense. Nonetheless, the authors should provide thoughtful, deliberate responses to all of these comments. For example, if a comment discusses something irrelevant or beyond the boundary of the study, the authors can explain that it is not within the scope but they are willing to include it as a future research direction. If the authors think a reviewer has somehow misunderstood a point, they can apologize for causing confusion and provide more detailed explanations on the point. In rare situations where the authors read hostility from a reviewer, it is wise to provide a calm response and solicit advice on addressing their concerns.

4.3 Do Not Fight with Reviewers

This might be obvious and we mentioned this above, but let us emphasize this one more time, because it is just too important: Authors will not win a fight with the review panel. Taking a negative tone with reviewers will not only elicit adverse reactions from them but will also shape how the editor sees the authors. It will not help the authors develop a positive reputation in the community. It is important to be respectful in crafting every sentence in the response document.

4.4 It Is Okay to Disagree with the Reviewers but Be Respectful

We recognize that it often takes courage to disagree with reviewers, but sometimes the authors just have to do it. And it is actually okay to disagree with the reviewers, but it must be polite. Instead of pointing out why a reviewer is wrong, the authors can explain why their point is valid. They can acknowledge the value of the reviewer's point and explain what it has made them think about. In doing so, it is a good idea to use prior literature, seminal references, and other authoritative sources—let somebody famous disagree with them.

4.5 Explain Why Some of the Reviewers' Requests Could Not be Implemented

Good reviewers should understand that authors cannot implement all their recommendations in one revision. Nonetheless, telling reviewers "We couldn't do it" does not suffice. The authors must explain why they couldn't do what they were asked to do.

When explaining why something can't be done, authors should be honest. For example, if reviewers request that the authors acquire more data, for which they do not have a budget or time, they can confess that they do not have enough resources. If they request a revision that the authors think is beyond the scope of the work or try to redirect the study in a different direction, the authors should state it as such. If the reviewers recommend trying a method that does not work for the dataset, the authors should explain why it does not. The authors could respond to the reviewers that the editor suggested a different approach or that they are bounded by a journal page limitation. These are some of the reasonable "excuses" that we have seen authors resort to. What is important here is that the authors offered an explanation, or at least an excuse, for why they couldn't implement all the recommendations.

Better yet, if the authors cannot directly address a comment, they can go beyond excuses and offer an alternative solution to the concern. The authors could make the case that it is still a good paper even though they couldn't implement a reviewer's suggestion. If they are asked to conduct an analysis that is impractical or gather new data that is hard to obtain, the authors could propose an alternative. For example, if a reviewer asked the authors to do a field experiment, they could instead conduct a lab experiment. Another "time-honored" response is: "We mention your point as a limitation (or a future research direction)." Again, this would not be a response that the reviewers would want, but such responses indicate that the authors appreciate their feedback and take it seriously.

5 Be an Active Reviewer

Our last recommendation is not directly related to paper revisions but is perhaps the most important one of all: We strongly recommend that all authors be active reviewers themselves.

There are a number of reasons why authors should actively participate in peer reviews. It is everyone's responsibility as a member of an academic community to contribute to its scholarly development. Accepting a review invitation forces one to sit down and read a paper. All papers are reviewed by voluntary reviewers who set aside time in their busy schedules to help us; as such, we are all obligated to pay it forward by reviewing others' submissions.

However, the biggest reason to be an active reviewer is that writing reviews can build the author's skill in revising their own papers. Reviewing helps anyone become a better author. Each review helps improve one's understanding of how the review process works and how other referees do reviews. One senior scholar once described a peer review process as a "game" (Rindovar, 2008). While it's debatable whether this is an appropriate description, by being active reviewers, authors can be active players in this game, and to be good at it, it's a good idea to know how the game plays out within the system. We prefer to view active reviewing as a learning process whereby one can learn current issues that are on the minds of members of review panels. By doing so, we can learn what issues to anticipate or address in our own work.

A couple of months or so after reviewers submit their reviews, they too will receive a decision letter from an editor to the authors. In the review package, they can find the comments from all those on the review panel. By reading them closely, reviewers can see how the other reviewers have evaluated the manuscript. It is a good idea to compare one's own review to the others. What did the other reviewers and the editor point out? What did the editor emphasize? What developmental suggestions did they provide to the authors? If their reviews are more positive or negative, why?

By taking a close look at the full review package, one can better understand what reviewers, in general, will want to see from top-tier journal submissions. This understanding of the reviewers' "psyche" is very helpful for writing and revising one's own papers. It can help authors craft a paper that reviewers like from the very beginning and can help authors develop the skill to read between the lines in reviews, which can be helpful for understanding what reviewers did not explicitly state in writing.

Furthermore, when the paper comes back after a major revision, reviewers should take a close look at the authors' point-by-point responses to the review panel. Did they provide good responses to the review comments? If so, how did they do it? What was their strategy? If the responses do not read well, why not? What can be learned from their responses? By doing so, authors can also learn how to respond better to reviewers. This exercise, if practiced many times, will greatly help develop the skills of communicating with reviewers effectively, educating them convincingly, and disagreeing with them respectfully.

6 Concluding Remarks

As alluded to above, as authors, we have had our own share of struggles and failures in the review process. It is still difficult and overwhelming for us to conduct major revisions and come up with point-by-point responses, even after years of experience. At the same time, however, we genuinely believe that most of our own work has improved dramatically thanks to constructive feedback from reviewers and editors. We are very much indebted to all of our reviewers and editors over the years.

While it might be hard for some authors to believe this right now, we can say that any published paper will become much better than an initial submission if the authors can successfully navigate the review process and reach the finish line. This is more likely to happen if authors view reviewers as contributors to their work rather than adversaries, appreciate the value of their input, and take advantage of their feedback to raise the paper to the next level. Yes, reviewers can be collaborators, and for this collaboration to work out, it will greatly help to hone communication skills and develop open-mindedness and kindness. Doing so will increase the joy and excitement felt once the paper is eventually accepted and published.

We wish you the best of luck with your revisions and research!

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