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Recommended Citation

Gerstenschlager, Natasha and Kirwan, J. Vince (2021) "Addressing Conflicting Reviewer Feedback," *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*: Vol. 33: Iss. 3, Article 1.
Available at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer/vol33/iss3/1

Addressing Conflicting Reviewer Feedback

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*A*ddressing conflicting reviewer feedback is a common issue that all scholars face. In this Mentoring Corner, authors provide an example of manuscript feedback, including conflicting feedback, to describe a procedure for processing and organizing reviewer feedback. They describe how this process can be used to distill and address reviewer feedback in a way that may help new scholars progress manuscripts further in the publication process.

When we were new faculty in our tenure-track positions, our conversations frequently included conducting research, writing and submitting manuscripts, and receiving feedback from reviewers and editors. One day during a conversation, we discovered that we shared similar experiences within the review process that befuddled us. How does someone address all of the perspectives and points made when receiving feedback from a submitted manuscript? Moreover, how does one accomplish this when the feedback is conflicting, particularly as junior faculty with limited (if any) experience with distilling this feedback? As other new faculty may have had similar experiences, we thought it valuable to explore this phenomenon within the review process and unpack a procedure for how junior faculty might address this. In this manuscript, we will utilize an example of manuscript feedback, including conflicting feedback, to describe a procedure for processing and organizing reviewer feedback, including conflicting feedback. Then we will describe how this process can be used to distill and address reviewer feedback in a way that helps progress your manuscript further in the publication process.

Example of Feedback Received

To help the reader understand the process of receiving, organizing, and responding to conflicting feedback, we provide an example based on conflicting feedback we received in the past. The context this example comes from is for feedback received on a manuscript based on research the first author conducted. In response, they received some of the following suggestions from reviewers:

> Reviewer 1: *The introduction is strong and sets the reader up well for the following sections. The authors did a thorough job describing the methods, and it was clear how the authors collected, organized, and analyzed their data. The manuscript would benefit from more example conversations that were had in class in the results section as this section needs more description. This could be anecdotal from your memory or pulled from actual class recordings. This will help establish your findings and make your case*

stronger. Although the paper is generally well-written, you could work on making this easier to read. For example, you are not consistent in terms used or verb tense. This makes it confusing to follow. Please see my specific edits page-by-page listed below.

Reviewer 2: *The authors' introduction is sufficiently descriptive. Have the authors looked at the literature on productive discourse by Baggins and Snow (2011)? I suggest they review their work and consider linking it to their current study as there seems to be much they can apply from this work. The authors' methods section is lacking. It could benefit from more information about their data analysis process. From what sources did you pull your data? Why these sources? Was inter-rater reliability addressed when analyzing your data? How was validity and reliability achieved? The authors do a thorough job of supporting their results. I found the results section to be sufficiently descriptive and convincing. The general flow of your manuscript needs to be considered. There are several instances (I've noted below) where you could improve readability. One major sticking point - you go back and forth between calling your students "students" and then "participants." Pick one and be consistent.*

Editor: *It seems that you could benefit from reviewing Baggins and Snow's work, as suggested by Reviewer 2. In addition, please consider revising your introduction to include more background information - I do not believe you set up a strong enough case for why your work addresses a systemic problem in education.*

Notice that although there were some overlapping suggestions, not every statement made agreed across both reviewers and the editor (e.g., methods). This is a little perplexing—how does a manuscript author speak to feedback provided that is inconsistent across the reviewers? Additionally, the editor did not address this conflict in their feedback and response. How should one approach this situation? How does one organize this feedback to approach this situation in a thorough and intentional way? Although this experience does not represent all events we have had when submitting and revising manuscripts, as junior faculty with limited experience in the publication process, we found limited actionable guidance in how to approach this issue. As such, we share an actionable process for this in the next section.

Reviewing and Organizing Reviewer Feedback

After receiving feedback like the example above, we first put the feedback in a table, and then sorted the feedback according to what seems to be related (see Table 1). We began by color-coding, identifying feedback that is thematically similar by the same color. Although possible to categorize in other ways (e.g., cut and paste portions of the review into the same cell), color-coding in this manner allows for identifying commonalities amongst feedback while also keeping them in their original context.

This organization is helpful for two reasons. First, color-coding each review allows you to break down the feedback shared into manageable chunks, positioning you to begin thinking about whether you will make those changes. Second, color-coding the feedback provides a visualization that allows you to quickly see what is related, and how frequently those related items are identified.

After identifying and color-coding the feedback as we suggest above, we created a second table (see Table 2) organizing this feedback by theme, collecting the same color-coded sections together in a single cell. The names of columns in the table can vary, but we have found it helpful to organize feedback with columns for the source (i.e., Reviewer 1, Reviewer 2, Editor), the feedback excerpt/quote, whether to address the issue (i.e., Yes/No), and how to address the issue. We have found this structure for the table to be particularly helpful when crafting your rebuttal letter if the manuscript is asked to be revised and resubmitted. An example of what such a table might look like is below.

Table 1
Thematically Color-Coded Feedback Responses Organized by Reviewer

Source	Feedback Excerpt
Reviewer 1	The introduction is strong and sets the reader up well for the following sections. The authors did a thorough job describing the methodology and it was clear how the authors collected, organized, and analyzed their data. The manuscript would benefit from more example conversations that were had in class in the results section as this section needs more description. This could be anecdotal from your memory or pulled from actual class recordings. This will help establish your findings and make your case stronger. Although the paper is generally well-written, there could be some work on done in regard to making this easier to read. For example, you are not consistent in terms used or verb tense. This makes it confusing to follow. Please see my specific edits page by page listed below.
Reviewer 2	The authors' introduction is sufficiently descriptive. Have the authors looked at the literature on productive discourse by Baggins and Snow (2011)? I suggest they review their work and consider linking it to their current study as there seems to be much they can apply from this work. The authors' methodology section is lacking. It could benefit from more information about their data analysis process. From what sources did you pull your data? Why these sources? Was inter-rater reliability addressed when analyzing your data? How was validity and reliability achieved? The authors do a thorough job of supporting their results. I found the results section to be sufficiently descriptive and convincing. The general flow of your manuscript needs to be considered. There are several instances (I've noted below) where you could improve readability. One major sticking point - you go back and forth between calling your students "students" to "participants." Pick one and be consistent.

Editor	It seems that you could benefit from reviewing Baggins and Snow's work, as suggested by reviewer 2. In addition, please consider revising your introduction to include more background information - I do not believe you set up a strong enough case for why your work addresses a systemic problem in education.

Table 2
Thematically Organized Feedback

Source	Feedback Excerpt	Address Issue?	If yes, how to address?
Reviewer 1, 2	The introduction is strong and sets the reader up well for the following sections. (R1) The authors' introduction is sufficiently descriptive. (R2) In addition, please consider revising your introduction to include more background information - I do not believe you set up a strong enough case for why your work addresses a systemic problem in education. (Editor)		
Reviewer 2, Editor	Have the authors looked at the literature on productive discourse by AUTHOR? I suggest they review her work and consider linking it to their current study as there seems to be much they can apply from AUTHOR's work. (R2) It seems that you could benefit from reviewing AUTHOR's work, as suggested by reviewer 2. (Editor)		
Reviewer 1, 2	The authors did a thorough job describing the methodology and it was clear how the authors collected, organized, and analyzed their data. (R1) The authors' methodology section is lacking. It could benefit from more		

	information about their data analysis process. From what sources did you pull your data? Why these sources? Was inter-rater reliability addressed when analyzing your data? How was validity and reliability achieved? (R2)
Reviewer 1, 2, Editor	The manuscript would benefit from more example conversations that were had in class in the results section as this section needs more description. This could be anecdotal from your memory or pulled from actual class recordings. This will help establish your findings and make your case stronger. (R1) The authors do a thorough job of supporting their results. I found the results section to be sufficiently descriptive and convincing. (R2)
Reviewer 1, 2	Although the paper is generally well-written, there could be some work on done in regard to making this easier to read. For example, you are not consistent in terms used or verb tense. This makes it confusing to follow. Please see my specific edits page by page listed below. (R1) The general flow of your manuscript needs to be considered. There are several instances (I've noted below) where you could improve readability. One major sticking point - you go back and forth between calling your students "students" to "participants." Pick one and be consistent. (R2)
Editor	In addition, please consider revising your introduction to include more background information - I do not believe you set up a strong enough case

for why your work addresses a
systemic problem in education.

Now that we have organized our feedback in a way that makes addressing it systematic, we can describe how we would approach each piece of feedback.

Distilling and Addressing Contradictory Feedback

We will work through the current example by exploring each row of feedback individually and describing how we would approach addressing the reviewers' and editor's concerns. Examining Table 2, we can see that the first row of feedback (what is colored in blue) demonstrates an example of conflicting feedback. Specifically, the reviewers indicate that the introduction is sufficient, however the editor believes this not to be the case. In situations where the editor includes feedback, we have found addressing the editor's feedback productive. As such in our example, we chose to address this feedback. The manner this feedback would be addressed is noted in Table 3 below. Note that the text in the right-most column is written in such a way that prepares us for writing the rebuttal letter. As such, we write our justification in this column as if speaking to the reviewers and editor.

Table 3
Thematically Organized Feedback with Decisions – Item 1

Source	Feedback Received	Address Issue?	If yes, how to address?
Reviewer 1, 2	The introduction is strong and sets the reader up well for the following sections (R1) The authors' introduction is sufficiently descriptive. (R2) In addition, please consider revising your introduction to include more background information - I do not believe you set up a strong enough case for why your work addresses a systemic problem in education. (Editor)	**Yes.**	**As per the Editor's feedback, we revised our introduction. Specifically, you will see statements describing why our problem is systemic in education and why it should be addressed.**

In this second row, we see that a reviewer has suggested a particular set of literature for review to add to the manuscript. As the editor agrees and we do not have any conflicted evidence, the approach taken would be to read that author's literature and make connections as appropriate. If we feel that the literature does not relate to the manuscript, we should be clear about describing why in the table. The statement we would include in our rebuttal letter can be seen in the right column of Table 4 below.

Table 4
Thematically Organized Feedback with Decisions – Item 2

Source	Feedback Received	Address Issue?	If yes, how to address?
Reviewer 2, Editor	Have the authors looked at the literature on productive discourse by AUTHOR? I suggest they review her work and consider linking it to their current study as there seems to be much they can apply from AUTHOR's work. (R2) It also seems that you could benefit from reviewing AUTHOR's work, as suggested by reviewer 2. (Editor)	**No.**	**We reviewed AUTHOR's work and determined that their study is not related to our current study. Particularly, AUTHOR examined how students learn mathematics via discussions that are teacher-led. However, our work focuses on how students learn mathematics via discussions that are student-led. Given this change in focus, we do not feel AUTHOR's work is applicable. If the reviewer has a different way of viewing AUTHOR's work so that it does benefit our work, we would appreciate hearing that perspective so that we may incorporate it into our manuscript.**

Now, let's consider the third row of feedback. In this row, we see that we have another piece of contradictory feedback. Reviewer 1 believes the results section needs more evidence. Reviewer 2 found this section to be "sufficiently descriptive and convincing." In this case, the editor has not commented on this reviewer feedback. Consequently, we must decide how to approach this conflict. In this case, address the reviewer asking for more information satisfies the critique raised and can increase the detail of the manuscript. However, if you find that the addition causes you to exceed your word count or space limitations for the manuscript, we have found making the addition but calling this to the attention of your editor in the fourth column productive. Hence, this part of the table has been updated, and this update is shown in Table 5:

Table 5
Thematically Organized Feedback with Decisions – Item 3

Source	Feedback Received	Address Issue?	If yes, how to address?
Reviewer 1, 2, Editor	The manuscript would benefit from more example conversations that were had in class in the results section as this section needs more description. This could be anecdotal from your memory or pulled from actual class recordings. This will help establish your findings and make your case stronger. (R1) The authors do a thorough job of supporting their results. I found the results section to be sufficiently descriptive and convincing. (R2)	**Yes.**	**We have pulled more example conversations from our study and included those in the appropriate section. These can be found on pages # and ##. By making this addition, we have exceeded our word count by ## words. We defer to the Editor on this issue. If you feel that the addition is not necessary, we can remove it. However, if it is needed, we ask that you consider allowing for our word count to exceed the expectations or advising us on where we can trim to reduce the word count.**

In another row, we see that both reviewers suggest some readability edits. This is common and should be addressed through editing and refining the language choices and flow of the manuscript. As such, this part of the table has been updated, and this update is shown in Table 6.

Table 6
Thematically Organized Feedback with Decisions – Item 4

Source	Feedback Received	Address Issue?	If yes, how to address?
Reviewer 1, 2	Although the paper is generally well-written, there could be some work on done in regard to making this easier to read. For example, you are not consistent in terms used or verb tense. This makes it confusing to follow. Please see my specific edits page by page listed below. (R1)	**Yes.**	**We have made the changes suggested by the reviewers. We appreciate this feedback to improve readability.**

> The general flow of your manuscript needs to be considered. There are several instances (I've noted below) where you could improve readability. One major sticking point - you go back and forth between calling your students "students" to "participants." Pick one and be consistent. (R2)

This process of working through each row (i.e., common feedback theme) by reading the feedback, identifying whether to address the critique raised, and if so, how, continues until all rows in the table have been addressed. As noted, the right-most column in this table can then be consulted when writing your rebuttal letter to accompany your revised manuscript after making these changes.

General Suggestions

In this section, we offer some general suggestions about this process. First, we recognize that receiving constructive and/or negative feedback can be difficult and taxing. It is not always enjoyable to read someone's critical view of your work, sometimes leading to taking the feedback personally. As such, we encourage you to read your feedback, and before you decide to do anything with the feedback, take a few days to digest the information received. This processing time allows for you to reapproach the feedback with a more rational view before beginning to organize this feedback.

Second, it is important to recognize that editors do their very best to assign reviewers who can provide constructive feedback on your ideas based on their work and experience. Additionally, these editors are there to support you. If needed, contact the editor to ask them questions to clarify any aspects of the feedback that is confusing or unclear. The editor is your ally to whom you should bring any questions you have regarding their or the reviewers' feedback.

Third, after creating this table but prior making the edits, we encourage you to re-read your manuscript, keeping in mind the feedback received. This re-reading can sometimes unearth hidden issues in your writing that you did not notice at first. For example, perhaps you truly did not support the claims made well enough, or maybe your methods could use some further detail. We suggest focusing on the sections where conflicting feedback was received. Ask yourself if you can make sense of how the two (or more) reviewers approached the section differently. Do you see each reviewers' perspective? What sections do you think you could be worded more clearly to help the reviewers? Make notes of these ideas in your feedback table, but in a distinct way (e.g., different color text, comment feature, new column in table). If this re-reading and contemplating on the feedback still leaves you uncertain, reach out to a trusted colleague who would be willing to read your manuscript considering the feedback you received. This critical friend can help you to make more sense of the feedback and consider how to address critiques raised.

Concluding Remarks

These suggestions for organizing and addressing reviewer feedback reflect the most common experiences we have encountered as research faculty who were becoming more established in their careers. Although not exhaustive, approaching manuscript writing and revising in a focused, intentional, and systematic manner has helped us in moving from conducting original empirical research to a published manuscript. The combination of working in an organized, systematic manner in conjunction with support from colleagues and editors for guidance (when needed) have been productive tools we have found in producing published research products.

Author Notes

The authors are listed alphabetically and contributed equally to this article. They share first authorship.

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