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Making the Most of the Peer Review Process

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Making the Most of the Peer Review Process

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In this brief mentoring corner article, we focus on defining what different editorial decisions mean (e.g., accept with revisions; revise and resubmit; reject: revise and resubmit), discussing factors you might consider when deciding what to do after receiving a decision (e.g., resubmit or move on) and considering how to best approach the revisions. We also provide guidance on effective communication with editors, including an example of a successful response to review table and cover letter.

Keywords: mentoring, publication process

Introduction

So, your manuscript was not accepted outright? Not to worry, the editors of the *Midwestern Educational Researcher* (MWER) are here with advice! In this brief mentoring article, we will provide insights on how to proceed after receiving a first decision from MWER (or another journal).

First, it is helpful to keep in mind that having a manuscript accepted at first decision is exceedingly rare. At MWER, about 30% of manuscripts that are submitted will eventually be published, but almost all of those will first undergo one or more rounds of revisions. This process strengthens the quality of your manuscript and the journal's contents. But for new authors, the process might feel harsh and tiresome.

Embarking on the publishing process hoping for high quality feedback and the opportunity to revise and resubmit (R&R) might help to temper any disappointment you might feel upon reading that first decision email from the editors. In our experience, this attitude often needs to be cultivated over time. People who submit their work for publication in academic journals have often been high achievers for many years and are accustomed to receiving positive feedback and "good grades" when they submit work. We suspect that even when emerging scholars are coached to anticipate that—at best—they might be invited to revise and resubmit a paper, there is a lingering expectation that while *other* people might get less favorable outcomes, *they* will have a better one. But, it is important to release this expectation. One of us had a mentor who described missing the opportunity to publish a timely research study because she received an invitation to revise and resubmit at a top-tier journal, and she believed that it meant that her work

was unworthy of publication. She said nobody ever told her an R&R was good news! So, we are here to tell you, lest you give up on high quality work that just needs some revision: an invitation to revise and resubmit is an opportunity. Though it is not a guarantee of eventual acceptance, we believe that in most cases it is worth the trouble of reworking your manuscript.

At MWER, the outcome of your submission will fall into one of five categories. If not accepted outright—and they almost never are—you will receive one of the following decisions:

- Accept with minor revisions
- Revise and Resubmit
- Reject: Revise and Resubmit
- Reject (Desk Rejected or Rejected after Review)

For more detailed information about the peer review process, check out our previous mentoring corner article (Horner & Horner, 2023). Though this may differ across fields and journals, much of this information and advice is likely transferable widely across peer-reviewed journals in the social sciences.

In the following sections, we will provide advice about how to proceed after receiving each of these decisions from the editorial team. For each possible decision, we will first explain what the decision means, help you think through the decision-making process (e.g., should you resubmit, or try another journal?), and outline specific strategies for producing high quality revisions and communicating effectively with reviewers and editors. We begin with a discussion of the invitation to *revise and resubmit* and then move to discussing *accept with minor revisions*, because manuscripts typically go through multiple rounds of revisions before they are accepted. Then, we cover the three types of rejection, helping you strategize your next move.

Revise and Resubmit

To receive a decision of *Revise and Resubmit* (R&R), the manuscript has typically made it through two rounds of reviews. First, an editor reviewed the submission and deemed it appropriate for peer reviewers, and then the editor received comments from those reviewers that indicated promise.

What Revise and Resubmit means

As we explained in our previous mentoring corner article, “this designation signifies that the revisions would be a reworking of some important elements of the paper; however, the majority of the paper remains the same or similar to the original. If the author resubmits, the revised manuscript is typically sent back to the original reviewers for feedback. The resubmission could have any of these decisions, including a rejection” (Horner & Horner, 2023, p. 75).

Weighing the decision to revise and resubmit

Although we would typically recommend taking the opportunity to revise and resubmit a manuscript, there are some circumstances in which you might consider submitting to a different journal instead. If you disagree with important aspects of the required changes, and this cannot

be resolved, it could be best to pursue another outlet. This might be for reasons of feasibility (e.g., they want you to collect an additional wave of data, and you lack the time, resources, or desire), or because of philosophical, theoretical, or methodological disagreements.

It is okay to 1) contact the editor to ask for clarification or to respectfully discuss the suggested changes, and 2) decline to make a change you disagree with, and instead offer sound justification for your approach within the response to the reviewers. If you do resubmit, we recommend you avoid dismissing any of the reviewers' or editor's suggestions outright. It is better to state, "while we did not have the resources to collect another wave of data, as suggested, we conducted an additional analysis..." or "we added a statement in our limitations section..." than it is to state, "we decided not to collect another wave of data." We find that in most cases, these differences of opinion or misunderstandings can be resolved or worked around. However, if you are unable or unwilling to make the bulk of the changes suggested, submitting elsewhere may be a better strategy.

How to respond effectively

Before you respond or make any changes, consider how you're feeling about the reviewers' feedback. If you notice your heartrate increase while reading the comments, or you find yourself engaging in imaginary, heated arguments with pesky reviewer #2, it is probably best to close that file for a week or so (Lloyd, 2019). Typically, you will have plenty of time before the response deadline to allow yourself to cool off so you can be more open to the reviewers' comments. Coming to the revisions from a place of humble (but critical and careful) curiosity rather than defensiveness is key to a successful R&R experience.

When you're ready to roll up your sleeves and dig into the revisions, we suggest starting by making a spreadsheet or table to organize the comments. Making a reviewer response table can help you to systematically address all comments as well as communicate with the editors and reviewers about exactly how you did so. Appendix A shows one way you might create and organize such a table (only the first page is shown). We suggest organizing the comments by section, and then by reviewer so that you can consolidate feedback from across all reviewers and consider how to integrate these as you make revisions. As you make the revisions, take the time to add a description of what you did and why while it is still fresh in your mind. If you have multiple authors working on revisions together, use a shared document and add a column to identify who will complete each revision and response. Adding a column for due dates could help all authors with timeliness also. These columns can later be deleted. In this case, we recommend first having a meeting to discuss the comments and make decisions, divide up the tasks, strategize about logistics (e.g., will you merge documents at the end, or work in a shared cloud-based document), and set a timeline.

Sometimes, multiple reviewers make similar comments so that you can make one change that satisfies related concerns from several individuals. Other times, you may find that two reviewers have made suggestions that are in conflict. When this happens, the editor will sometimes weigh in with advice in their email. If the editor hasn't already specified which approach they prefer in their own comments to you, consider emailing them with a concise explanation of the

discrepancy, your preferred approach (if you have one), and a request for them to provide more guidance. Or, if you feel strongly about the direction you would like to go in the revision, simply make the revisions you see fit. Then, in your response to the reviewers and editor, you can briefly note that reviewers offered conflicting suggestions, state the choice you made, and justify that choice. Be careful to avoid insulting the reviewer who made the suggestion you did not take!

In most cases, there will be something you can do to respond favorably to every single comment. Remember, you are less likely to win over pesky reviewer #2 by saying, “nope, not gonna do it!” than you are by saying, “though we did not have the data necessary to address x, we clarified the nature of the data sources (page 28, line 5) and added a statement to the limitations section (page 32, line 11).”

When you are ready to send your revised manuscript, you will also need to prepare a detailed response to the reviewers and a succinct cover letter addressed directly to the editors. The revised manuscript should not include tracked changes or comments (unless this is specifically asked for by the editor), so it is important to respond to each reviewer comment with a detailed but succinct description of what you changed and exactly where to find those changes in the manuscript. If you have created an organized reviewer response table while doing the revisions, you can adjust (e.g., delete columns not related to reviewer comments) and send it to the editors and reviewers. Then, you can craft a summary in the cover letter to the editor. Appendix B contains an example cover letter (with names masked) and a portion of a reviewer response table from one of the authors.

Accept with minor revisions

To receive a decision of *accept with minor revisions*, sometimes called a conditional acceptance, the manuscript has often been through multiple rounds of reviews, starting with the initial desk review by an editor or associate editor. Though it is possible to receive a decision of accept with minor revisions on first review, it is more likely that a decision of revise and resubmit preceded the acceptance, and the editor (and/or reviewers) found the revisions to be acceptable.

What Accept with Minor Revisions Means

Accept with minor revisions indicates that after receiving the results of the peer review, the editors have decided that the manuscript is a good fit for the aims and scope of the journal and that in general the quality is high enough to pass muster. However, the manuscript needs some minor work before publishing. Both the reviewers and the editors will typically provide areas that need work, and the editors will consolidate this feedback in the acceptance email. After receiving the revised manuscript, the editors typically review the changes without sending them back to the reviewers and proceed with the rest of the process for publication if the resubmission meets the requirements (Horner & Horner, 2023).

Weighing the Decision

Though we are tempted to say that there is really no decision to be made, and that celebrations are in order (and you should get to making those minor revisions!), there might be rare exceptions. For example, if the editors require a change that you are not willing or able to make, this may prevent you from publishing in that specific journal. Before pulling the paper from consideration, though, try communicating with the editors directly and respectfully about the issue. Another reason you may decide not to submit a revision is if you have learned something about the journal to which you've submitted that makes you think twice about publishing there (for example, perhaps you have found out it is a predatory journal).

How to Respond

The acceptance letter from the journal's editors will outline everything you need to work on and typically gives you a deadline. If you need more time to make the changes, request an extension as far in advance as possible, as it will help the editors plan for publication (for example, if the journal publishes issues on a certain timeline).

When you submit the revised manuscript, your response letter to the editors should include all revisions made to the manuscript based on the reviewers' feedback. If the editors requested additional materials, such as author notes, bios, or appendices, make sure to provide this information.

Types of Rejection

Types of rejection vary somewhat by journal. At MWER, we designate three types of rejection, which are also common across many journals. During the initial screening, the editor could decide to *desk reject* the manuscript, if it does not fit the journal's scope and content or if it is missing some basic quality indicators. The editor could also decide to *reject* a manuscript after receiving feedback from peer reviewers. Finally, the editor could decide to reject with an option to revise and resubmit. See our earlier Mentoring Corner article (Horner & Horner, 2023) for more details.

Regardless of the type of rejection, receiving a decision of *Reject* can be extremely disappointing and even ego-crushing. This can be especially true for Ph.D. students and early career faculty since they have less experience in the publishing process and haven't had time to develop a 'thick skin.' After reading the rejection letter, we recommend that the author leave it alone until they feel they can read it without high emotions. When receiving a rejection, one of the editors sometimes doesn't even finish reading the letter the first time. Then, after several hours or even days, she will read or even just skim the whole letter. Sometimes she will start to re-read the letter but realize that she still isn't emotionally ready to process the information, so she will set it aside for longer. Finally, when she is ready, she will read it for the specific details.

What Desk Reject means and how to respond

How you respond to a desk reject depends on the reason for the rejection. If the manuscript does not fit the scope or content of the journal, then you need to send it to a journal that better fits the manuscript. If there is a fatal flaw in the research itself, which the editor should mention, there is no reason to resubmit it (see below about treating it as a learning experience). However, if it is a quality of writing issue, then the editor might suggest fixing the issues and resubmitting. For instance, updating the literature review to include recent research or adding in more specifics on the methodology used are areas of a manuscript that could be added then you can resubmit the manuscript. If you aren't sure whether the editor will accept resubmission of a desk rejection, we recommend emailing them and asking them for advice.

What Reject, after peer review, means and how to respond

With a rejection after peer review, typically you cannot resubmit the manuscript to the same journal. However, all may not be lost since you have multiple options to choose from. One option is to send it out to another journal without making any changes. This could be the best choice if you disagree completely with the editor and reviewers' comments. Or, if you have a time pressure (going up for tenure) and you believe it could be accepted at a lower-tier journal with a lower impact factor than the one that rejected you. For instance, if it was rejected from a high-impact journal because it had a small sample size, it could be accepted by a lower-tier journal if it is a solid study and well written.

Another option is to revise the manuscript based on the editor and reviewers' comments and then send it out to another journal. The suggestions we have given for a revise and resubmit can be followed in this case also, except you do not need to detail the changes you made or include the response to reviewers. We highly recommend this option in most cases. Remember that even when editors and reviewers recommend rejection, many times they give solid feedback about how to improve the manuscript, assuming that the authors may rewrite and submit it elsewhere.

Still, another option is to completely give up on the manuscript. This option could be the best choice if there is something majorly wrong in the research itself and it cannot be corrected. For instance, you used a scale that you didn't realize has recently been found to be invalid or unreliable or failed to collect crucial information from your participants.

A final option when dealing with a major flaw is to turn the manuscript into a learning experience. This could be the best choice when there is something majorly wrong or missing in the research itself, but it can be adapted. For instance, if it was rejected for a small sample size, you could continue to collect data to build a larger data set. Or, if the invalid scale or missing crucial information is only part of the study, you could treat it as a pilot study, adjust the measures and collect more information. In these instances, much of the manuscript (e.g., literature review, research questions) would not need to be rewritten or perhaps slightly updated.

We suggest that you prepare for a possible rejection before you even begin writing your manuscript. We always have a list of 2-4 journals, rank-ordered by preference, to which we could submit the manuscript. Though journal aim/scope and quality/impact are a high priority in

the selection process, we try to find journals that have similar requirements regarding length, formatting, and style of writing so we won't need to make drastic changes if we need to submit our manuscript to a second (or third) journal. We also try to have different tiers of journals; that is, we typically send a manuscript to the journal with the higher impact factor first then we can send it to a lower-tier journal after a rejection. By having a list of possible journal outlets available from the beginning, some of the sting of a rejection is taken away, and it decreases the amount of time it takes to send the manuscript back out. Plus, it is more difficult emotionally to find possible journal outlets for a rejected manuscript than for one that you are just writing.

What Reject: Revise and Resubmit means and how to respond

With a reject: revise and resubmit, the editors are leaving the door open for you to submit an overhauled version of your manuscript to the journal. Typically, papers rejected with the option to revise and resubmit are treated as new submissions rather than revisions. Though the editors are indicating that there is a chance of eventual acceptance, this decision communicates that there are currently substantial flaws that would need to be remedied. In this case, your options are to send the manuscript to another journal, do the major overhaul and resubmit to the same journal, or to discard the manuscript (or, as mentioned above, turn it into a learning experience).

Some factors to consider when deciding how to proceed after a reject: revise and resubmit are 1) the caliber and audience of the journal, 2) your experience with the journal so far, and 3) the quality and feasibility of the reviewer feedback. If you agree with what the reviewers and editors are asking you to do, the turnaround time has been reasonable, and the journal would make a good home for your manuscript and allow you to reach your intended audience, it probably makes sense to do the work and resubmit to the journal. The suggestions we have given for a revise and resubmit can be followed in this case also, except you do not need to detail the changes you made or include the response to reviewers. When you resubmit it, you will want to inform the editors in the cover letter that you have previously submitted it. Otherwise, it may make more sense to move down the list of possible journals you prepared and send the manuscript to the next in line. Like we have done previously, we recommend setting the reviewer comments aside for a few days to a few weeks (until they don't sting so much when you read them!), and then decide which, if any of the recommended changes you want to make. Of course, you could choose not to make any revisions at all, but we suggest capitalizing on the investment of time that you made when you sent it off for review and making use of the investment of time the reviewers have made reading and commenting on your work.

Conclusion

Publishing in a peer-reviewed journal is a *process*. Most manuscripts are not accepted outright, so managing your expectations and responding effectively to feedback is important. Based on our own experiences as authors, reviewers, and editors, we have provided advice about how to successfully navigate the publishing process. Hopefully, we have helped you to think through key factors as you decide how to respond to various editorial decisions. We wish you the best as you embark on your journey; be strategic and persevere!

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Appendix A

Here is an example of one page of a response to reviewers that one of the authors sent to the editors of a high-quality journal. This paper was eventually accepted. Note that the revisions can easily be found in the paper, and the table itself includes a thorough description and justification of the changes.

Section	Reviewer	Comment	Response	Change Location
Title	1	Because the study focuses on a specific group of adolescents, I recommend that the authors include African American and boy/male into the title	We have made this change; the title now reads: 'You Never Know Who's Looking at Your Page!': African American Male Adolescents' Perceptions of Emotional Display Rules Online	Title page
Abstract	Editor	Please ensure that the abstract contains more of a conclusion/take home message.	We have revised the abstract to include a summary of the main findings	Abstract
General Intro/lit review	1	A general concern I have is the length of the paper. It indeed contains rich information, but the authors may need to consider whether it's absolutely necessary to keep everything they currently have in the manuscript (especially the Results section).	We have decided (based on your comment and comments by others) to reduce the length of the findings section. This change is described in greater detail in response to your comment about the focus on the 4 emotions we chose.	Results
	Editor	Reviewer 2 requests that you better rationalize the significance of studying African American boys. This should occur in the introduction and discussion. Further, I wondered whether this came up at all in their responses--e.g., reference to their gender or ethnicity. If so, please include those results and if not, please consider what this might mean. For example, would you expect a sample who did so to report different themes/rules.	<p>We have added a more explicit rationale to the manuscript (in the "current study" section), several paragraphs that address race in connection with the concepts of interest in the literature review, a subsection in the findings about gender and race, and more consideration of race in the discussion. We offer further insight into our decision process here:</p> <p>We do think that evidence suggests that perceptions of display rules are likely to vary by race and gender (as well as other factors). This is a key reason that we decided to use homogenous sampling. Replicating this study with other groups of youths (e.g., white females) would provide a basis for comparison.</p> <p>Also, although this study was not about whether/how adolescents' perceptions of display rules are informed by racial identity (etc), that would be an interesting future study. There were a couple of comments about gender (which we will address)</p>	p. 9-10 p. 12 p. 18 p. 29-30

Appendix B

Here is the cover letter to the editor provided with the response to review table in Appendix A. An effective revision cover letter should include a brief overview of the major changes to the manuscript.

Dr. [First and Last Name]
Associate Editor
[Journal Name]

Dear Dr. [Last Name],

We are grateful for the opportunity to submit our revised manuscript (“You Never Know Who’s Looking at your Page!” African American Male Adolescents’ Perceptions of Emotional Display Rules Online) to [Journal Name]. The comments that you and the reviewers provided helped us to improve the quality of this manuscript drastically. In particular, we focused on addressing race more explicitly throughout the paper. We also included a rationale for the inclusion of the specific emotions we selected, and pared down (as well as reorganized) the results section by focusing on the most important findings. Further, we re-wrote most of our discussion to focus on the most important findings and connect these more explicitly with previous literature.

With our resubmission, we have included a revision table that details these and other changes that we made and directs reviewers to the page/section where each change can be found.

If you have any questions as you consider this revision, we would be happy to provide more information. Thank you for your time and consideration!

Sincerely,

[First Author’s Signature]

First Author’s First and Last Name
Address
Contact information