

Navigating the Peer Review Process

Overview

This chapter will help you learn how to submit manuscripts to journals and to revise manuscripts to address the concerns of the journals' reviewers.

Manuscript Submission

Cover Letter

When you have written your manuscript in the most appropriate format, had it reviewed by an editor, decided on the best journal to which to submit it, and prepared the manuscript and figures in conformance with the requirements of the journal, what is the next step? The 1 important task that remains to be done is to write the cover letter. A cover letter is not simply:

Dear Editor:

Here is my manuscript on the ABC tumor marker. I hope you like it.

Sincerely,
John Author, M.D., Ph.D.

The cover letter is where you communicate important information that the editor will not necessarily be able to glean from the manuscript itself—information that may well determine the fate of the manuscript:

- State the full *title* of the manuscript and the names of all the *authors* and indicate that the manuscript is being submitted for the journal's consideration.

- Briefly *describe the content* of the manuscript if the article title does not adequately convey this information.
- Describe any *unique features* of the article if the journal has published others on the same topic.
- Explain *why you have selected that journal*, especially if the article is appropriate for more than 1 type of journal.
- Indicate the *category* or *format* your manuscript falls into.
- Give the reasons for *duplicate publication* of the article, in the rare case in which this applies.
- State any *conditions* that apply to the article if it is accepted for publication.
- Explain any possible *conflict of interest*.
- Recommend possible *reviewers* or specify reviewers you would prefer not review the manuscript, if applicable.
- Identify the *corresponding author*.

Many of these points do not require explanation. However, a few do.

Contents of article: Briefly describing the contents of the manuscript gives you an opportunity to tell the editor what the important message is in the manuscript. It may be what you found or how your findings will direct future research or treatment. If you are reporting negative findings, which many journals prefer not to publish, you might point out the benefits of publishing the findings. If you are reporting findings similar to those reported in other articles published in the journal, then the cover letter should describe anything that sets your article apart from these other articles. For example, did you use a different animal model? Did you use newer methodology? Were the experimental conditions better? Did your study include a larger group of patients? This sort of information may make the editor and reviewers see the manuscript in a more favorable light. Do *not* assume that such information will be readily apparent to either editors or reviewers. However, you should avoid sounding like a television commercial in your cover letter. If you have truly made the greatest discovery since Newton discovered gravity or Fleming discovered penicillin, the editor and reviewers will recognize that.

Choice of journal: If the journal to which you are submitting your manuscript may not appear to be the most logical choice, you may want to explain why you have chosen the journal and what you have done in the manuscript to make it appropriate for that journal's audience. For example, if you are submitting an article reporting the long-term outcome from a certain cancer treatment to a cardiology journal, you should probably explain that the long-term cardiac side effects of the agent will be dealt with by cardiologists rather than oncologists and point out that the article emphasizes these side effects and their treatment.

Reasons for duplicate publication: The circumstances that allow for duplicate or secondary publication were covered in the chapter "Ethical Issues in Scientific Publishing." These circumstances are rare and must be explained in the cover letter.

Conflict of interest: Conflict of interest was also covered in the "Ethical Issues" chapter. Any *possible* conflict of interest, no matter how remote it may be, should be revealed in the cover letter.

Conditions: Conditions that may place limitations on the publication of the article if it is accepted include publication after the entire paper is read at a meeting and publication in a proceedings volume after publication in the journal. Presentation of an abstract at a meeting does not limit publication.

Reviewers: It is acceptable to name reviewers whom you either recommend or wish not to review your manuscript. In recommending reviewers, you may be doing an editor a favor, especially if your manuscript is on a topic that is not commonly encountered in the journal. However, you should reassure the editor that these are people who have had no involvement in the research or the preparation of the manuscript. You should indicate that you are suggesting them because they are well versed in the topic of your manuscript. Conversely, there may be rival researchers who could benefit from either hindering or preventing the publication of your manuscript. You can name such people and ask that the editor not send your manuscript to them for review. You should explain your concerns diplomatically, however.

Following is a sample submission letter illustrating many of these points:

Dear Dr. Watson:

On behalf of my co-authors John Reed and Elihu Smith, I am submitting the enclosed manuscript titled “The XYZ Gene: Can It Identify the Alphabet Syndrome?” as a research article to *Journal of Syndromes*. There are several things that distinguish our article. First, we studied the expression of the gene in a large kinship. We also looked closely at the different effects of environmental influences. In particular, we examined the difference in phenotype between family members living on the East Coast and the West Coast. A third feature of this study was our emphasis on early treatment and the ways in which it appears to reduce the more severe effects of the syndrome. We note these distinctions in the article, and we believe they make our findings of particular interest to readers of the journal. These features also distinguish our article from that of Harrison et al. published in the January issue of the journal, which was on an outwardly similar topic.

Dr. Smith has stock ownership in the company that manufactures the XYZ assay that we used, but I do not believe that this would be perceived as biasing our study results or their interpretation. Nonetheless, I did want to bring this to your attention. If you feel acknowledgment of this potential conflict of interest is necessary, we will be glad to add a footnote to the article.

I would like to suggest Benjamin Ritters (at Rutgers), Donald Adams (at UPenn), and Albert Lindt (at Princeton) as reviewers. All are quite knowledgeable about the topic. Dr. Lindt is especially knowledgeable about the gene penetrance issues. I would also like to request that Dr. Harrison and his co-workers not be asked to review the manuscript because of the obvious competing nature of their work in this area.

If you have any questions, please be in touch with me. Thank you for your consideration of our article.

Most sincerely,
John Author, M.D., Ph.D.

Online Manuscript Submission

Most journals now have online manuscript submission software that enables authors to submit their manuscripts electronically. This has probably been the biggest change in the manuscript peer review process since researchers started publishing research findings. A few journals still allow, or prefer, that manuscripts be submitted by mail; that process is described in the next section.

During the process of submitting a manuscript to a journal for the first time, authors will set up an account that includes a user name and password. Be sure to keep a record of this information because you cannot find out the status of your article without it. It is important to be very accurate when entering information in the manuscript submission system because any misspellings or errors will appear in every document that the system creates.

The software, as most authors soon discover, will prevent authors from successfully submitting a manuscript until all requirements, even seemingly minor ones, are met. Word count limits in abstracts and articles, for example, may be strictly enforced by the software. The message here is to carefully follow all submission requirements if you want the submission process to go smoothly. Some processes may differ from those described here. If you have problems with the submission process, the journal's editorial office staff will be glad to help or to refer you to technical support staff.

The submission letter and figures are attached as separate files, but these are still essential parts of manuscript submission. Journals still prefer that the manuscript's word-processing file be double-spaced and formatted following the instructions to authors. Reviewers customarily print the manuscript and review a hard copy, and the double spacing makes this easier for them. Figures are usually submitted in separate files, but the legends are usually included in the manuscript file. Tables may be submitted as part of the manuscript file or as separate files; the instructions will indicate the journal's requirements.

Once the submission process is complete, you should receive an e-mail message saying that your manuscript has been received. One advantage of online submission is that it enables authors to track manuscripts as the manuscripts make their way through the peer review process. That means that authors usually no longer need to call the editorial office for information about the status

of a manuscript. If your manuscript seems to have gotten inexplicably held up along the way, however, you can call the editorial office to find out the source of the delay. Editorial office staff also have access to user names and passwords if you have forgotten them.

Most journals that use online submission conduct all communications by e-mail. This usually includes the decision letter.

Hard Copy Manuscript Submission

Some journals still conduct peer review using paper copies. For these journals, you should mail your cover letter to the journal with the double-spaced manuscript and its figures. The journal's instructions to authors will tell you how many copies of each item to send. (Registered mail and overnight couriers are the safest way to send your manuscript because they track your package through delivery.) Some journals also require you to send signed copyright release forms or other forms (for example, forms signed by all the authors confirming their role in the study) with the manuscript. These forms will be in the journal's author instructions or on the journal's Web site. You may also have to pay a nonrefundable reviewing fee at this time or send the manuscript on a computer disk. If any aspect of manuscript submission is unclear, phone or e-mail the journal's editorial office. The journal staff is accustomed to handling such calls. They want to assure that your manuscript can be processed without delay.

Review Process

Once your manuscript is accepted by the online submission software, you should immediately receive an e-mail message that includes the number that has been assigned to your manuscript. If you have submitted a hard copy, you should get a letter or an e-mail message with this information within 2 weeks of sending the manuscript. If you do not receive this information within the indicated time, you should contact the journal's editorial office to find out whether your manuscript was received.

After you have successfully submitted your manuscript, the editor-in-chief or a senior editor looks at it and chooses

reviewers who are experts in your field of study. The reviewers are contacted and asked if they are willing to review your manuscript. Potential reviewers may refuse because they are too busy or they do not believe the topic of the manuscript falls within their area of expertise. If that happens, another potential reviewer will have to be contacted. The process of establishing reviewers generally takes less than 2 weeks.

Then comes the review itself. This is when experts in your field—typically 2 but sometimes 3—scrutinize your manuscript and determine whether it sufficiently meets the standards of that journal and of that field to merit publication. Reviewers are generally allowed up to 3 weeks to do their reviews. After that, staff members in the journal editorial office begin to follow up on late reviews. Despite the staff's best efforts, however, reviews can be late by several weeks or even, unfortunately, several months.

If 2 months have passed since you first submitted your manuscript and you have not received a decision letter, it is OK to contact the editorial office and ask about the status of your manuscript and the review process. Be polite and considerate when you call or e-mail. Remember that yours is not the only manuscript out for review. Depending on the journal, there may be as many as 100 or more manuscripts out for review at any time.

When the journal office receives the reviews, the editor-in-chief or senior editor decides on the basis of the reviewers' comments whether the manuscript should be accepted for publication as is, returned for revision, or rejected. A decision letter is then e-mailed, faxed, or mailed to you along with the reviewers' comments.

If the editor judges your manuscript acceptable without revisions, then you do not need to do anything more at this point—except maybe celebrate. Acceptance without revision is unusual, however.

If your manuscript is rejected or returned for revision (the most common response), you will need to decide how to proceed. Your options are outlined in the following 2 sections.

Responding to Rejection Letters

A letter of rejection should make it clear that the manuscript was unacceptable and that the journal will not review a revised manuscript. Following is an example of such a rejection letter. There are no instructions on how to revise the manuscript, and the editor points out that even some favorably reviewed manuscripts are rejected.

Dear Dr. X:

Thank you for submitting your manuscript to [name of journal]. The reviewers and I concur, however, that it is not suitable for publication, and we enclose pertinent comments for your records.

Given the large volume of manuscripts we are currently receiving, we are now having to reject more manuscripts that report findings that are not of the highest priority. Therefore, favorable reviews are not always sufficient grounds for publication.

We appreciate your interest in [name of journal] and hope you will consider it for publication of your future work.

Yours truly,
Editor-in-Chief

If the editor rejects your manuscript, you do not necessarily have to give up. Talk with your colleagues and look at the reviewers' comments. Sometimes they can be very encouraging.

If your paper is rejected outright, you will most likely decide to modify it and send it to another journal. Making the changes recommended by the first journal's reviewers will generally improve your paper and increase its chances of acceptance by the second journal to which you submit it.

The reviewers may indicate that you need to get more data. They may believe you have sent your article to the wrong journal. They may believe you need to redo some of the experiments because of concerns that the technique was flawed. The editor may believe that the findings are not of high enough priority for the journal. Every researcher has had a manuscript rejected—sometimes even ones that report very important findings.

Here is an example of a reviewer's comments on a manuscript that was rejected. (Because reviewers' comments are confidential, we have written sample reviewers' comments based on actual comments rather than using actual comments.) The review follows a standard format for reviews of journal articles: an introductory paragraph summarizing the findings of the article followed by major and minor points. Most reviewers present their ideas objectively and constructively, but some do not. A rude or intimidating review reflects poorly on the reviewer rather than on the paper. Even in these cases, however, the reviewer's actual criticisms may be valid, in which case addressing them can improve the article. We have inserted comments in brackets about how to revise the article.

Review 1

The authors performed microarray analysis to compare gene expression in untreated Y cancer cells and Y cancer cells treated with agent Z. Z has been in clinical use for some time, although its mechanism of action is not known and it has substantial side effects. Presumably the authors' goal is to determine that mechanism to reduce the side effects, but that is not stated in the paper. **[Add the goal to your revised manuscript.]**

Major points:

This paper is a mess. How the authors thought they could state that treatment with Z changed the levels of some genes but not name the genes absolutely escapes me! Haven't these people ever read a microarray paper??? **[The reviewer expected an article more like previously published ones. Try to model your article on those.]** Unless the genes are named and shown to have a role in Y cancer, **[Name the genes, and in the Discussion describe their possible or known roles in Y cancer. You probably have this information but may have left it out because you thought that the data were too preliminary or that the journal didn't have the space to publish them.]**, this paper is drivel. The English is barely understandable too. **[This may be true, or it may simply reflect the reviewer's disappointment in your omitting the names of the genes or his or her own incorrect grasp of English. Have your editor improve the language.]** This is an excellent example of a carelessly written paper submitted too soon. There is no way I can recommend publication of this paper.

Minor points:

1. There is a typo in the title! **[Reviewers make spelling and grammar errors, too. Your typo is embarrassing but easily corrected.]**
2. The lanes in Figure 1 aren't labeled. **[Easily corrected.]**
3. The Introduction is too long. **[See "Unclear Letters and Comments" below.]**
4. The differences in microarray spot intensity are difficult to see in the photographs and should be quantified and presented in a table. **[Easily corrected.]**
5. There should be spaces between numbers and "mM." **[A very minor point, easily corrected.]**

Rejected manuscripts are usually revised and submitted to other journals. However, what if a reviewer has obviously misinterpreted your data? Or the reviewer is obviously biased? What if you believe you can address the reviewers' concerns? A rejection decision is not always final. If you believe that the situation warrants, it is possible to appeal a rejection. Do not, however, under any circumstances call the journal editorial office or the editor and unleash your fury. Instead, call or write to the editor and explain in a professional and objective manner the reasons for your concern and your suggestions for solving the problem. If you believe a reviewer has been unfair, biased, or mistaken, you can request that the manuscript be sent to an additional reviewer. The editor may say the decision is final, or the editor may say he or she would reconsider a revised and resubmitted manuscript. Under the right circumstances, appealing a rejection may be the right thing to do. However, it is almost unheard of for a journal to accept a previously rejected manuscript without any revisions. Be prepared to make most of the requested changes.

Sometimes a journal will reject a manuscript but allow the author to revise and resubmit anyway. That might happen if the editors were very interested in a study and wanted to encourage the authors to report it in the editors' journal. Here is an example of a decision letter rejecting the article but encouraging the authors to revise and resubmit it. The letter states that the manuscript is not acceptable but that a revision will be considered. There are instructions on how to revise the manuscript, but the journal

states that publication is not guaranteed and that the manuscript may be rejected again.

Dear Dr. X:

Thank you for submitting your manuscript to [name of journal]. It has been reviewed, and we concur that the manuscript is unacceptable in its current form. We would, however, be willing to reconsider it after it has been revised in response to the reviewers' comments, and we have enclosed the relevant reviewers' comments. A revised manuscript would be thoroughly reviewed and could be rejected again. We are taking a particularly tough stance in our acceptance of papers, because of both the increasing number of manuscripts that are being submitted to the journal and our firm belief that we must publish manuscripts of only the highest priority.

Your resubmission should be accompanied by a point-by-point response to the reviewer comments, as well as a copy of the revised manuscript on which you highlight the areas where revisions have been made. It is essential that authors consider and respond to the comments and recommendations. The updated Instructions to Contributors (which can also be found at [journal's URL]) reflect guidelines and style from the *Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals* and the *American Medical Association Manual of Style*, 9th edition. Included in these Instructions are criteria for authorship. Any alteration of the byline after final acceptance of the manuscript can be expected to delay publication.

We appreciate your interest in [name of journal]. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact our editorial office.

Yours truly,
Editor-in-Chief

Responding to Requests for Revisions

Decision Letters Asking for Revisions

The most common decision letter that authors receive is a request for revisions before a final decision is made. Revisions are often categorized as “major” or “minor.” Major revisions may involve repeating experiments, adding more data, or completely rewriting the manuscript. Minor revisions are often explaining or clarifying specific points in the text or making minor changes in figures.

Here is an example of a decision letter requesting major revisions. Note that the final decision about acceptance has been postponed until the revised manuscript is received.

Dear Dr. X:

Thank you for submitting your manuscript to [name of journal]. Based on the comments of our reviewers, we must request major revisions before a final publication decision can be made. We are willing to reconsider the manuscript after it has been revised in response to the reviewers’ comments, and we have included the relevant reviewers’ comments.

Your resubmission should be accompanied by a point-by-point response to the reviewer comments, as well as a copy of the revised manuscript on which you highlight in yellow marker the areas where revisions have been made. It is essential that authors consider and respond to the comments and recommendations. The updated Instructions to Contributors (which can also be found at [journal’s URL]) reflect guidelines and style from the *Uniform Requirements for Manuscripts Submitted to Biomedical Journals* and the *American Medical Association Manual of Style*, 9th edition. Included in these Instructions are criteria for authorship. Any alteration of the byline after final acceptance of the manuscript can be expected to delay publication.

We appreciate your interest in [name of journal] and look forward to seeing the revised version of your manuscript.

Yours truly,
Editor-in-Chief

The letter below asks for minor revisions. Note that the editor says that the manuscript was well received but that some changes need to be made.

Dear Dr. X:

Thank you for submitting your manuscript to [name of journal]. The manuscript has been reviewed favorably and tentatively accepted pending satisfactory completion of minor revisions. We have included comments we consider to be relevant for revision.

Your resubmission should be accompanied by a point-by-point response to the reviewer comments, as well as a copy of the revised manuscript on which you highlight the areas where revisions have been made. It is essential that authors consider and respond to the comments and recommendations. The updated Instructions to Contributors (which can also be found at [journal's URL])...

To facilitate the editorial process, we ask that you revise and return your manuscript as soon as possible. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact our editorial office.

Yours truly,
Editor-in-Chief

Reviewers' Comments and Authors' Responses

Some authors see a decision letter asking for revisions as the next best thing to an acceptance, and in some ways, it is. However, whether the manuscript is accepted depends on how well you revise the manuscript in accordance with the reviewers' comments. These comments therefore need to be taken very seriously. View the comments as an opportunity to make your data shine and really make them worthwhile to the scientific community.

Here is an example of a thoughtful reviewer's comments on a manuscript accepted pending revisions. It is customary to include with a revised manuscript a letter or list that includes point-by-point responses to each comment by each reviewer, and after the comments below is an example of an author's response to them.

Review 2

The purpose of this study was “to identify patients with Z cancer most likely to respond to inhibition of X or Y by examining X and Y gene expression in matched Z cancer and normal tissue samples.” **[The hypothesis was so well written that the reviewer quoted it!]** The study did that, and the paper is well written (except for the Introduction and Discussion, which are too long, as stated below). The description of the controversy on the role of Y gene expression in Z cancer is especially clear. The study’s large sample size and the inclusion of a wide variety of ethnic groups make this report a valuable addition to the field. **[Compliments, but...]** However, several points need to be addressed before I can recommend publication. **[As usual, some changes are still required.]**

Major comments:

1. Two different Y antibodies were used for the Western blots, and one detected one band and the other two bands. The authors should repeat the experiments using just the antibody that detected two bands.
2. The exclusion criteria for patient selection were not clear. Had the patients from the San Antonio hospitals received previous treatment? Listing the exclusion criteria in the text would make this clear.
3. Figure 3 should be removed, as it shows only negative results. The results should be described in the text in one sentence followed by “(data not shown).”
4. The percentage of tumor samples overexpressing X is similar to that reported in the literature, but the percentage overexpressing Y is much smaller. Is this because of the ethnic mix of the study sample? This needs to be addressed in the Discussion section. Will these differences affect possible clinical applications of this study?

[The preceding 4 comments repeatedly tell the author what he or she “should” do. Reading that over and over can be depressing, but the reviewer has said exactly what needs to be changed to get the manuscript accepted for publication.]

Minor comments:

1. The Introduction is too long. The long beginning paragraph on Z cancer as a public health problem should be shortened to two or three sentences. The information on the X gene's possible role in Z cancer is mentioned twice—the first time should be deleted. The Introduction also seems to meander somewhat from topic to topic and should be organized in a more linear format. A good scientific editor could help the authors resolve these problems (and also those with the Discussion). **[Your editor will be a great help to you.]**
2. The Discussion is also too long, by about two pages. The authors should remove the first page, which just reiterates the results, and also the paragraphs on pages 20 and 21 about the role of the X and Y genes in Z cancer, which was adequately addressed in the Introduction.
3. Page 10, line 4: Shouldn't "below" be "above?" This line doesn't make sense otherwise.
4. Reference 16 is incomplete.

Below is an example of an author's response to Review 2. Each point is addressed in the order in which it was listed in the reviewer's comments. (Make a separate response sheet for each reviewer.) A common format for responses is to briefly state the reviewer's comment, address it or answer the question asked, and then state where in the revised manuscript you have added the required information. Note that, as in the response to the first comment below, it is not always necessary to do everything the reviewer asks, but you must address every request, if only to explain why you did not make the change.

Response to Review 2

We thank the reviewer for his or her insightful comments and clear suggestions, which we believe improved the quality of our paper. **[Optional opening statement. Editors and reviewer appreciate a sincere "thank you."]**

Major comments:

1. Use of two different Y antibodies: We believe the results from antibodies Y-12 and Y-83 are comparable. This
-

study was begun in 1999, when Y-12 was the only commercially available Y antibody and was nearly universally used for Western blotting of the Y protein. In 2002, Y-12, which was manufactured by ABA Antibodies, was replaced by Y-83, which also detects a smaller band (Y-related protein) as well as Y. ABA Antibodies has assured its customers that results from Y-12 and Y-83 can be compared if only the major band detected by Y-83 is considered (see Lee and Hernandez, *BioTechniques* 85:25-31, 2002). **[Cite references in your response, if they are necessary to support your contentions.]** Our conclusions about Y expression are therefore based only on the intensity of the major (Y) band, and we feel that we do not need to repeat the experiments with just one antibody. In the original manuscript we did cite the *Biotechniques* paper as a rationale for comparing results from the two antibodies, but I see now that we did not make this point clear enough. In the revised manuscript, we explained the use of two antibodies in more detail, in the second paragraph on page 7. **[Give locations of all changes—page number and paragraph number (or line number).]**

2. Exclusion criteria: None of the patients, including those from the San Antonio hospitals, had received previous treatment. We have now listed the exclusion criteria, on page 6 of the revised manuscript.
3. Figure 3: Figure 3 has been deleted, and the results are described as “Northern blotting showed that the one subject with Y underexpression produced intact, full-length Y mRNA (data not shown)” on page 11, line 3.
4. Percentage of samples overexpressing Y: We believe the difference in the percentages of Y-overexpressing samples in our study and previous ones is partly due to ethnic differences, as we are the first to examine this in Mexican-American subjects, and very few of their samples overexpressed Y. We have expounded on this in the Discussion (last paragraph, page 20).

Minor comments:

- 1 and 2. **[It is OK to combine similar comments.]** Too-long Introduction and Discussion sections: We shortened the Introduction and Discussion as recommended. The
-

Introduction is now 1 page shorter and the Discussion 2 pages shorter.

3. “below” instead of “above:” You are right; “below” should have been “above.” We made this correction (now on page 11, line 15).
4. Reference 16: Reference 16 was completed.

Do *not* make changes in your manuscript other than those requested by the reviewers. If for some reason you need to do anything else to your manuscript—for example, redo the statistics, change your conclusion, add some data, add a table or figure, or rewrite the introduction or discussion—then you are doing something to it that has not been seen and evaluated by reviewers. If such a change is necessary, you must *always* bring it to the editor’s attention. Depending on the change, some editors may treat extensively modified manuscripts as a new submission.

Occasionally, you will get a review that is poorly or inadequately done. The reviewer may be cursory in his or her review, or the reviewer may misinterpret or misunderstand some of your data, your study design, or your study purpose. Some requested changes may be unreasonable, irrelevant, or even impossible. Because editors do not have expertise in every area covered in their journals, they cannot always detect a badly done review. They have to assume that the reviewers are correct in their judgment. Therefore, if you return the manuscript without doing what a reviewer requests, you will be seen as not responding to the reviewer’s comments, and your manuscript may be rejected.

So what do you do if this happens? First, revise the manuscript in compliance with all the reviewers’ comments that you can. If you cannot do everything asked, explain *why* you cannot. Keep your tone professional; be logical, reasonable, and clear; and never show anger or harshly criticize the reviewer. Editors are generally receptive to a well-reasoned explanation for not complying with some reviewer requests. You might also consider having the revised manuscript and cover letter (along with the reviewers’ comments) edited before resubmitting the manuscript to the journal.

Unclear Letters and Comments

Unclear Letters

Sometimes it is difficult to tell from the decision letter whether your manuscript was rejected outright or whether you may submit a revised version. Below is an example. The letter tells you your manuscript is not acceptable, but would the journal review a revision?

Dear Dr. X:

Thank you for submitting your manuscript to [name of journal]. Your manuscript has been reviewed by experts in the field, and based on their comments, we are unable to accept the manuscript for publication in its current form. The reviewers' comments are enclosed for your consideration.

We appreciate your support of [name of journal].

Sincerely,
Editor-in-Chief

If you are not sure whether the journal will allow you to submit a revision, call the journal office and ask for clarification.

Unclear Comments

Even if the decision letter is clear, the reviewers' comments may be vague, which makes revising the manuscript difficult. In this case, too, consider calling the journal office and asking for assistance, especially if the comments involve additional experiments. Unclear comments about the quality of the writing can be even more problematic, because the reviewers may not be able to tell you how to change the writing—they may only feel it is not right. Your colleagues and editor may be able to help you interpret what reviewers meant if the reviewers criticize your writing. Here are some specific questions to ask your colleagues and editor.

How to Address Unclear Comments about Your Writing

<i>Comment</i>	<i>What you can ask your colleagues and editor</i>	<i>What to try if they say yes</i>
Poorly written The English is poor	Have I made any grammar errors? Have I left out articles (<i>the</i> and <i>a</i>)? Have I used punctuation incorrectly? Have I made a lot of spelling errors?	Reading <i>Hodges' Harbrace College Handbook</i> Taking an English class Having the paper edited Using spellchecker function of your word-processing program
	Have I used words incorrectly?	Reading a lot of papers Looking up unfamiliar words in dictionary; asking people what the words mean Keeping a list of words you might use and their definitions
Terminology is confusing	What terms are confusing?	Asking what the correct terms are Using the same terms throughout the paper instead of varying them
Choppy	Are the sentences too short?	Making sentences an average of 15-20 words long (but not all the same length)
Wordy	Are the sentences too long?	
Hard to follow	Have I left out ideas?	Asking what needs to be added and adding it
	Did I express the ideas in the wrong order?	Applying the funnel of knowledge: stating ideas from general to specific

<i>Comment</i>	<i>What you can ask your colleagues and editor</i>	<i>What to try if they say yes</i>
Too long	Is the paper too wordy? Are my sentences too long?	See “Wordy” above
	Have I said too much? Are particular sections too long? Did I give too many examples?	Asking the readers what they thought was unnecessary and deleting that

Resubmission Process

Some journals may give you a deadline for returning the revised manuscript. If you cannot meet this deadline, it is important to let the journal staff know and ask for an extension so that they do not close your file and treat your revised article as a new submission when it is finally received.

The package containing the revised manuscript should generally include the following items:

- A cover letter
- The authors’ response to the reviewers’ comments
- The revised manuscript (2 or 3 copies, depending on the journal)
- A red-lined or highlighted copy of the revised manuscript showing the places where the manuscript has been revised
- The requested number of sets of figures, in the case of a hard copy resubmission
- A diskette with the revised manuscript, in the case of a hard copy resubmission

The requirements vary from journal to journal, so always consult the author guidelines before sending the manuscript.

Here is an example of a cover letter for a revised manuscript:

Dear Dr. [name of editor-in-chief]:

Thank you for reviewing our manuscript “X and Y Gene Expression in Z Cancer: Possible Treatment by Inhibition of X and Y” (manuscript 1286). **[Refer to the manuscript by the number the journal assigned it.]** We have revised the manuscript in response to the reviewers’ comments.

Enclosed are a detailed response to the reviewers’ comments and the revised manuscript. **[Check the journal’s author instructions and the original decision letter to see exactly what to send with the revised manuscript.]** We believe that we have addressed the reviewers’ concerns, and we appreciate the opportunity to revise and resubmit our paper. Please contact me if you need any more information.

[Standard polite thanks to the journal.]

Yours truly,
John Author, M.D., Ph.D.

What happens after the revised manuscript is received by the journal editorial office? If the manuscript was returned for major revisions, the editor may send your manuscript back to the original reviewers for another review. If the requested revisions were minor, the editor may make a decision himself or herself. You can expect to wait from a week to a month for the final decision. If after a month you have still not heard from the journal, then it is acceptable to call and politely inquire about the status of your manuscript. Eventually, when your revisions are deemed adequate, you will receive a decision letter like this:

Dear Dr. X:

Your manuscript has been reviewed by experts in the field, and I am pleased to inform you that it has been accepted for publication in [name of journal]. It will be processed for production by [name of publisher], and you will receive page proofs and information regarding reprints directly from the publisher. Should you have any questions in the interim, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Thank you for submitting your manuscript to [name of journal].

Yours truly,
Editor-in-Chief
