



Editorial

Critical Reflection in Responding to Reviewers' Comments

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It is not uncommon for colleagues in the academe to seek advice from more senior researchers on matters relating to crafting a good response to reviewers' comments. I indulge in this exercise. To some extent, to clarify my thoughts, process check and even a discourse aimed at improving my responses. However, this may also be in part out of frustrations from deciphering the reviewers' comments. How many times have we fallen into the situation where a reviewer poses a cryptic comment on our manuscript?

Generally, reviewers may be classified into two broad categories: those who are direct to the point; and those who write in ambiguous styles. To illustrate:

- Reviewer 1: Line 345- 350 seems out of place and out of context to be placed in the discussion section. I recommend placing this earlier in the introduction section, specifically at the beginning of paragraph 4.
- Reviewer 2: For Line 345-350, why is this here?

In the above example, both reviewers inquire on the same issue, albeit differences in their review style is palpable. As an author, specifically, if I am a novice researcher starting to explore the publishing world of academia, Reviewer 1's comment is a silver lining at the end of a dark tunnel. Whereas Reviewer 2's comment may just put the same researcher in a darker rut. This does not, however, put a lesser value on Reviewer 2's comment, as both reviewers were able to pinpoint the issue on the manuscript. Nevertheless, the same novice researcher will

prefer the former. If we all live in a scholarly utopia, all our comments will come from the likes of Reviewer 1. But we don't. So, how do we respond to the latter?

Each author will have their own manner of resolving comments from reviewers. My suggested manner of responding may not appeal to some; however, I think that for novice authors, this may prove some worth. In fact, I use the same thought process when solicited for advice on similar issues. Thus, I recommend the use of critical reflection when responding to reviewers' comments, regardless of which type they may be.

Rolfe¹ proposed the concept of critical reflection. Although traditionally within the context of nursing and the helping professions, I find his concepts useful and easy and practical to adapt. The process of critical reflection involves asking three essential questions: what? so what? now what? It is a thought process that will aid the novice author in better understanding the reviewers' comments, the underlying issue and crafting a reflective response.

What?

Task: The first question you need to ask is the most obvious, which is aimed at describing the issue in detail as much as possible.

Possible Probing Question/s:

- What is the issue/problem?
- What is being conveyed?
- What action is being asked?

- What is being suggested/recommended?
- What is good/bad about the comment?
- What are the responses of others (i.e. co-authors, colleagues) on the comment?

So what?

Task: The next process is understanding the underlying significance of the issue by describing the rationale behind the issue raised by the reviewer.

Possible Probing Question/s:

- Why is this an issue/problem?
- Why is the reviewer telling me this?
- Why does the reviewer want me to act in this way?
- How can this suggestion/recommendation improve my manuscript?
- Why does the reviewer view this issue as something good/bad?
- Why are others (i.e. co-authors, colleagues) responding in such a way?

Now what?

Task: The third process realizes the need to act on the comments of the reviewer by describing the actions, by way of a response, you have undertaken to resolve the issue.

Possible Probing Question/s:

- How do you resolve the issue/problem?
- How will your efforts in addressing the issue contribute to the overall quality of the manuscript?
- How do you tell the reviewer you understood his/her comment?
- How will you act in the manner the reviewer suggests?
- How do you show the improvements in your manuscript based on the suggestion/recommendation of the reviewer?
- What do you need to do to make the manuscript better?
- What broader issues will be addressed in your response?

- What will be the consequences of your response?
- How will you apply what you learned in other parts of the manuscript?
- How do others (i.e. co-authors, colleagues) suggest proceeding from the comments?

As we navigate ourselves into the world of academia, we will inevitably encounter more than two types of reviewers. In my own experience, each reviewer is a different personality themselves. The suggested process is not foolproof. However, I think that it is a good exercise for novel authors to practice critical reflection in responding to reviewers/ comments until we reach a time when we develop our own style of handling the remarks of our peers.

References:

1. Rolfe G, Freshwater D, Jasper M. Critical reflection in nursing and the helping professions: a user's guide. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2001.