



# HOW TO RESPOND TO **PEER REVIEWER COMMENTS** 10 TIPS FOR SUCCESS

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## 10 TIPS FOR SUCCESS

### Introduction

Few people like criticism, although many will admit that constructive comments can improve an article. Although journals often give guidance about how to prepare your manuscript, advice about responding to reviewers' comments is harder to find, yet it is an important stage in the peer review process.

### Tip 1 – Don't panic!

It's easy to get disheartened by a negative comment and it's human nature to focus on it whilst ignoring positive comments. Similarly, it's easy to get cross about something you disagree with and forget that you don't have to do absolutely everything the reviewer suggests. So, after scanning the reviewer comments, send them to all your co-authors, saying you'll contact them again when you've had a chance to consider them properly. In the time it takes to write the email, you'll have calmed down. If not, have a cup of coffee, or do something else for 30 minutes before carefully re-reading the comments, which usually seem more reasonable on second reading.

### Tip 2 – Remember it's a negotiation, not an ultimatum

Authors need to address all the reviewers' points but they don't have to make absolutely all the changes the reviewers suggest. For example reviewers may ask for something the authors can't do (e.g. supply data that wasn't collected). The editors at *Drugs in Context* make every effort to resolve conflicting comments from reviewers before sending authors a detailed peer review report,

but this is not the case for many journals and in some cases reviewers' suggestions may clash (e.g. one asks for more detail and another suggests there is too much) so be prepared to argue your case in response. If you aren't prepared to accept most of the reviewers' suggestions (say, at least 3/4) then you should probably consider withdrawing your article and submitting it to another journal. But if you have good reasons why you don't want to make a change that has been proposed, you should explain why, if necessary citing references to back up your position.

### Tip 3 – Adopt a humble attitude

If a reviewer (or editor) has misunderstood something, instead of getting cross, consider whether this might be your fault for not explaining it clearly. If reviewers have overlooked something in your manuscript, rather than gleefully pointing out their error, consider if you could have made this clearer or more prominent to make sure readers don't do the same.

### Tip 4 – Remember readers' needs

Remember that if a reviewer misunderstands part of your work, it's likely that readers will do the same, so even if it's clear to you, try to make it unambiguous. Don't forget that *Drugs in Context* is an international journal. This means that many readers won't be native English speakers, so plain and simple language will be more comprehensible than long, complex sentences or a strongly idiomatic style.

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Written by Dr Elizabeth (Liz) Wager



## Tip 5 – Remember the criticism is about the work

The editors at *Drugs in Context* insist that reviewers address the work and not the authors and whilst critical and rigorous review is essential, the aim is to help authors to improve their article where possible. There is no excuse for rudeness and even if you feel the reviewers have not been as courteous as they might have been, resist the temptation to bite back with a personal comment. Both the review and the responses should be about the work, not about who did it.

## Tip 6 – Don't forget the editor's requests

Although you aren't expected to do everything that the reviewers request, you do need to follow the editor's instructions. With *Drugs in Context* these will be included in the accompanying email, so always read this carefully. For example, an editor may say that your article is too long but would be acceptable if it's cut by 20%. In this case, you need to respond to the reviewers' comments and make sure the article is reduced to an acceptable length.

## Tip 7 – Involve your co-authors

The whole team should have a chance to see the comments as well as the revised version and it's often helpful to delegate tasks to different people (e.g. ask your statistician to respond to statistical queries).

## Tip 8 – Answer every single point

Don't ignore any comments but respond to each one, point-by-point, explaining what change you've made, or why you don't agree to the change suggested. The editors at *Drugs in Context* ask you to respond with a document that includes your specific responses to each of the numbered editorial and reviewer comments and the revised manuscript with tracked changes to show all additions and deletions.

## Tip 9 – Make the editor's life easy

As well as supplying a version of your manuscript with changes tracked, also describe your changes clearly in your response to reviewers. For example, instead of simply saying 'we have revised this', it is more helpful to say 'on page 8, last paragraph, we have added a sentence...'

## Tip 10 – Check the deadline, and request an extension if necessary

As for many journals, the editors at *Drugs in Context* will ask you to respond within a certain period. Most journals will grant an extension, especially if you need more time to make extensive revisions or complete further analyses. If you can't meet the deadline specified or decide not to pursue publication and opt for an alternative journal (in spite of an invitation to revise and resubmit), let the journal know as soon as you can.

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*'I would very much like to thank the expert reviewers selected by Drugs in Context for their insightful comments. I'm sure that the incorporation of their recommendations resulted in a much improved manuscript.'*

Eva Vivian, Associate Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Pharmacy, Madison, WI, USA



## Further reading

Fraser J. *How to Publish in Biomedicine*. Radcliffe Publishing, Oxford, 1997  
Wager E, Godlee F, Jefferson T. *How to Survive Peer Review*. BMJ Books, London, 2002



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## About Drugs in Context

*Drugs in Context* aims to motivate improvements to clinical practice by publishing rigorously peer-reviewed original research and journalistic articles quickly, continuously and open access. In line with the principle of providing context for health care professionals (HCPs) to properly inform and improve disease management in real world medicine, we especially encourage the submission of articles that provide context for trials of drug interventions in order to motivate improvements in disease management by HCPs in the front line of the practice of medicine.

## About Drugs in Context's peer review process

Our peer review process is very rigorous yet constructive, supportive and respectful of authors' efforts. As a member of the Committee of Publication Ethics (COPE), we follow COPE's Ethical Guidelines for Peer Reviewers. The peer review process will help authors improve the standard and clarity of their articles and provide credibility. Click here for further information.

## Any questions?

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*Thank you for all your help Julia. It has been a pleasure to work with you; I hope we can work together again in the future.*

Dr Pilar Barnestein-Fonseca





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