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Hello again. Now you know a lot more about choosing a general and about making sure you avoid those predatory publishers. Now we’ve come to the point when we think about the peer review process itself and how to make the most of it. Hopefully you’ve had a chance to look at the example from F1000 research that I suggested on the web page and make your own notes about things that the author did well in responding to the reviews. If not, take a bit of time now and go through it.

Navigating the peer review process
Right. So we are going to be talking about the process of peer review from a very practical perspective, I have put together a short list of tips that look at it really from an applied point of view. I’ve not gone theoretical at all. I’ve taken these partly for my own practice, but also from talking to editors and reviewers, so I hope you’ll find them useful.

Writing a good cover letter
The first thing you’ll often have to do when writing for an editor is to write a cover letter. This is a bit like the cover letter when you apply for a job. It’s your chance to make a case for your paper and to make sure it’s presented in the best possible light. Don’t just repeat the abstract, don’t just state what’s in the paper. You really need to persuade the editor that it would be a really good choice for them to publish your paper.

So for instance, situate it within your field and explain why it might be interesting. Does it contribute to a particular debate? Can you propose a new hypothesis or perhaps support an existing hypothesis or support it and make a case for why other researchers would be interested to read and cite your article? Also, make sure you’ve done your research and link to the journal scope and explain why the readership of that particular journal will be interested.

Desk rejections
The first hurdle is what’s called a desk rejection. That is when the editor rejects it without even sending it to peer review. With a bit of research and preparation, you should be able to avoid these. Sometimes rejections of this kind occur because the language is so difficult to understand that actually, a proper review process can’t happen. In which case you might need editing services. Or perhaps they detected plagiarism in the article. It might be that you haven’t done your research and actually your article is not within the scope of that journal or the format is wrong, for instance the word count is too long. Finally, you might have missed some crucial information that the reviewers would need in order to assess your work. For example, you might not have given enough data on the methodology. But as you prepare the article properly and chosen the journal correctly, you should be able to get through this stage, be allocated to reviewers and in a certain frame receive their comments back by the editor.

Responding: what to write
At this point, you think about your response. Let’s start with what right the structure of it.
Usually you're going to start with a general paragraph where you thank reviewers and the editor for their time. Sometimes you might not feel like thanking them! Sometimes they have been really critical of your work. Don't forget these are experts in the field who have taken the time to help you make your work as best as it can possibly be, so it is totally appropriate to thank them. You might also want to outline, in very general terms, some of the big changes that you've made.

Then it comes to the real meat of the response. Every single comment that the reviewers made needs to be addressed, even the minor ones. A good way of doing this is to interleaf: copy a reviewer comment, and then underneath in different font or colour write your own response which might go something like: 'We have changed the wording of that sentence to reflect the fact that...' It's often helpful to add a page and line number so that the editor can check the manuscripts. Make sure you tell them whether you're referring to the new manuscript of the old manuscript when quoting numbers.

In some cases, you might not agree with the reviewer. You might feel that they've misunderstood your point. This fine, though bear in mind that they misunderstood it's likely your readers will, too. In this case cases, it's often right to change your wording to clarify that point. Sometimes you might really think the reviewer has got the wrong end of the stick and they're incorrect. That's okay, as long as you're not doing that for every single comment. There will be cases where it's appropriate to explain thoroughly and reasonably why you feel the reviewer's comment is not correct or why you don't feel it's appropriate, and it will be up to the editors to decide.

Make sure you spend some time when you're responding and improving the paper. It could require considerable rewriting, but you're doing so at the advice of experts and it will help make it much better. Don't forget, the editor can still reject your article if they feel you haven't taken on board the reviewer's comments.

Responding: how to write

Now let's look at style. In terms of the overall response, it's always paramount to be polite. Unfortunately, there are still some reviewers who are not quite as polite as they might be. Editors are all stressing that constructive criticism is best, but some people still haven't taken that message on board. Whatever the review has aid, your professional responsibility is to be polite and constructive in this.

Write clearly and concisely. Remember, editors have hundreds of manuscripts to get through, lots and lots of them in a day. So try and make their life as easy as possible by writing clearly, concisely.

Ask somebody else to take a look at what you've written, certainly the other authors of the paper, the senior author, they may all have a lot more experience than you in this area and should be able to give you good feedback.

Finally, it's usually a good idea to pause and redraft. I know there have been times when I have read the reviews and I felt really downhearted or angry about them. I've set them aside for a day or two and then
come back to them when I was calmer. And certainly once you've drafted your response, it's often helpful, just like with any piece of writing, you set it aside for a day or two, go back to the final edit before you send it in.

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Please feel free to let me know if you have any other tips that I can include in future sessions, and I hope you enjoy the rest of this module and that you can join us again next week for the next module. Thanks very much. See you soon. Bye.