

Nurse Author & Editor

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The 4 R's of Revising Your Manuscript: Reading, Reflecting, Rewriting and Responding

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The good news is you've completed and submitted a manuscript, thus accomplishing one of your goals. The bad news is the peer-reviewers have requested revisions before you will see it in print. If you can think of reviewers' and editors' comments as an opportunity to improve your work, you'll be several steps closer to reading your article in print or online. The 4 Rs, reading, reflecting, rewriting, and responding can help authors turn reviewer comments into a polished manuscript.

Reading is important to see what you actually wrote as opposed to what you think you wrote. Once you have put aside any feelings of hurt or rejection, read your entire manuscript again. Read your words aloud; read them to a peer or a mentor; read them to your cat. Read all the comments from the reviewers and the editor, no matter how difficult it is to hear a critique of your work. The more often you read your paper and the reviewers' comments, the less menacing the critique sounds, and the more likely you are to recognize any awkwardness in sentences or word choices, and errors in grammar.

Reflecting on your work and your thoughts about the reviews will help you gain valuable perspective on this process and deal with any remaining feelings of hurt or rejection. Reflect on what the reviewers said. Did they understand your main points? Did they suggest reorganizing? Were there a lot of errors in citations? Were there gaps in the information as you presented it? Was there a request for a reanalysis or reinterpretation of the data?

Now summarize the major problems for yourself. If you don't understand what's being asked of you, you won't be able to revise your manuscript appropriately. Once you have read and reflected, you can decide how to proceed with your revisions. You have several choices in the revision process:

- You could elect to submit elsewhere. Sometimes requests for revisions, (they will probably be major revisions) reflect the possibility that your choice of journal was inappropriate.
- You could decline to revise and toss your manuscript in a drawer somewhere. Not recommended! You put a lot of work into writing it, and reviewers and editors spent a lot time and effort trying to help you polish your work for possible publication.
- You could procrastinate until the editor cancels your submission and you have to start all over again (also not recommended for the same reasons as above).
- You could ask for help, either from a colleague or a professional editor. Professional help will cost money; colleagues may be willing to assist you for a thank you and the price of a dinner. You'll get the most out of such assistance if you have spent some time on the first two steps of reading and reflecting and you have some idea of what you need to do.
- And finally, you could sit down at your desk and get on with the next step - rewriting.

By this time you should have an idea of what you need to do and if you plan to do it. You should now advise the editor of your plans. Even if you do not plan to revise and resubmit, contact the editor

with a brief thank you and state your reasons for not wanting to pursue publication at this time (e.g., unable to devote the time to making revisions because of personal or work demands). If you've decided to revise, you should provide an estimate of how long it will take you to accomplish your work. Editors are constantly receiving new manuscripts and must plan months ahead for each journal issue. It's important for them to know which manuscripts are being revised and when they might expect the revision, and which will not be returned.

Rewriting, as many successful authors have stated, is the essence of good writing. Clear writing reflects clear thinking; a clear sentence, clear paragraph, and a well-written manuscript are not an accident. It may take several revisions to make sentences, paragraphs, and sections as clear as possible. You should ask yourself a few critical questions: Did I start at the beginning? Did I provide the readers with the essential information to understand everything that follows? Have I anticipated the readers' questions and concerns? Does one paragraph logically follow the preceding paragraph and lead to the next? Have I created smooth linkages and transitions to direct readers along the clearest path through my work? Is there any extraneous information that, although interesting, only serves to distract from my message?

On your final check through the manuscript, remember to update your contact information, check your references for completeness, check the information in and formatting of any tables, verify all artwork is in the required form for printing, and include any permits that may be necessary for reprinting figures or tables. Go back to the reviewers' comments and confirm that you have addressed all of the concerns mentioned. You're now ready for the final step – returning your manuscript along with your response.

Responding in a precise and thoughtful manner to the reviewers' and editors' comments is a critical step that is often overlooked. Some journals will have a specified response format; that format should be followed carefully. If there are no guidelines for responding, here are a few suggestions:

- Thank the reviewers and the editor for their thoughtful and helpful comments. Reviewing and editing are time-consuming tasks and the comments are meant to be a guide to authors for improving their work.
- Summarize the revisions you made on grammar, spelling, format, and references (e.g., All references were rechecked for accuracy and placed in the proper format for the journal).
- Make more detailed comments about specific requests, such as adding or deleting tables or figures, clarifying methodology or analysis, and providing specific details about any reorganization of content or corrections of omissions or errors.
- Respond specifically to any queries made by the editor (e.g., Permission to reprint table 2 is included).
- Explain your reason for not making a suggested change (e.g., One reviewer requested a review of the physiology of the heart – we think that would make the manuscript too long and detract from our message, so we added instead a reference to an easily accessed and comprehensive review for the interested reader).

Now that you're ready to resubmit your manuscript, don't neglect good communication etiquette. Don't argue with editors about their decisions. Don't whine about reviewers. Don't threaten any action against the journal, the association, the publisher, or the editorial staff. Threats will never serve any useful purpose and you will undoubtedly gain a bad reputation.

Resubmit in the manner detailed in the author guidelines or in prior communication from the editorial office. Many journals are now using electronic manuscript tracking systems, so attention to such details as file-naming and manuscript numbering conventions should not be taken lightly. It is possible that a resubmission could be seen as a new manuscript by editorial assistants if the file is not submitted correctly.

Finally, maintain contact with the editor, but do not phone or write every week asking about the status of your manuscript. Most journal guidelines will provide some estimate of how long the review process should take or the length of time from submission to publication. If you will be unavailable for reviewing page proofs or responding to email queries, (e.g., traveling or moving to another location) let the editor know how long you expect to be out of contact. Above all, if you change your email address or other vital contact information, notify the editorial office. Editors cannot contact you if they do not have your current contact information.

The original process of writing and submitting a manuscript takes courage and patience. Often a professional manuscript is the first time authors have publicly revealed their thoughts in writing. It can be difficult for authors to move beyond the critique of their work to a well-crafted revision. By following a framework such as the 4 Rs – **Reading, Reflecting, Rewriting, and Responding** – authors can succeed in the sometimes daunting task of revising a manuscript.

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