

Understanding the Peer Review Process and How to Respond: Tips for *SPUR* Authors

Abstract

Understanding journal norms, viewing peer review feedback constructively, and responding appropriately through revisions to the manuscript text and the Response to Reviewers document are essential elements of a successful manuscript revision. This brief editorial discusses these elements.

Responding to peer reviewer feedback is a normal part of the publication process at *Scholarship & Practice of Undergraduate Research (SPUR)*. In this editorial, I offer some tips on how to do this effectively, improving your chances of being published in *SPUR* and doing this in a shorter time.

doi: 10.18833/spur/7/4/8

Understand the Norms of the Journal

In the case of *SPUR*, most submissions will go through two rounds of peer review. All are externally peer reviewed by at least two reviewers. The handling editor, either an associate editor in the case of general submissions or an issue editor in the case of themed issues, also weighs in on the manuscript's suitability for publication in *SPUR*. Most of my decisions, based on the associate or issue editor's evaluation and that of the peer reviewers, are for revision. What does this mean? For a major revision, the reviewers and editors perceived the submission as valuable and saw potential. More importantly, it means that there are substantial problems with one or more of the following standard elements: the literature, methodology, data, or analysis, and these are missing or flawed in some way. Sometimes, it is difficult to discern from the original submission if the manuscript is fatally flawed, so a manuscript may initially receive a decision of major revision and subsequently be declined. If a manuscript has not improved substantially after two review cycles and significant concerns remain, we will likely decline publication.

A minor revision is usually made when the work is technically solid, and needed changes can be completed relatively quickly (two weeks) without doing additional research or analysis. Sometimes, authors do not pay due attention to addressing all the issues raised for a minor

revision decision, which can necessitate yet another round of reviews and revision, delaying publication.

Peer Review Feedback

At *SPUR*, editors strive to provide constructive, specific, and actionable feedback from at least two reviewers. So, when you receive a decision letter, no matter the decision, I think it is essential to recognize that expert feedback comes from a good place and that the objective is to ensure that the work *SPUR* publishes is high quality and helps our authors present their work in its best form. So do not take criticisms personally. Don't react to reviews; respond to them. Assume that the feedback comes from a good place.

It is critical to revise your manuscript and address all the criticisms and concerns raised by the reviewers and editors. Although you may not agree with all the criticisms, it is up to you how you decide to respond to each concern in your revision. If you disagree, explain why you are not making the requested revision and provide clear evidence to support your decision. Sometimes you will receive conflicting feedback. One reviewer may be critical, and another reviewer may be satisfied. You may receive feedback indicating that the reviewer did not understand your work. That may be true, but remember, as the author, the responsibility to clearly and accurately communicate the study and its findings falls on you, not the reviewer (or reader). Rewriting the relevant text or section using more explicit language is the wisest response in these situations and can only increase the impact of your work.

The Response to Reviewers Document

Your response to reviewers is as important as your revised manuscript. Be respectful in your responses. Remember that editors and reviewers are volunteers with technical and publishing expertise. Indicate precisely what changes you have made in the revision and ensure your responses are thorough. Using quotations can be helpful in your response to indicate exactly what change was made. Please include line numbers so that editors and reviewers can see where these changes appear in the revision.

It is most effective if the authors create a table listing all the concerns raised verbatim (column 1) and provide a statement indicating how they have addressed these concerns in the manuscript and where the changes can be found in the revision (column 2). While this is a helpful approach in preparing the Response to Reviewers document that is part of a resubmission, it can lead to a piecemeal approach to revision that is generally ineffective in

producing a quality revision. It is essential to recognize that making local changes to the manuscript may have a ripple effect on the manuscript as a whole. For example, changes made to the data and analysis may necessitate changes to the abstract, introduction, and results at a minimum. If major revisions are requested, address the major issues first and revise the manuscript holistically. It wastes your time and effort addressing minutiae such as typos, spelling errors, etc., though it may make you feel better.

If You Need Help, Ask!

Consider us your partners. When in doubt, as they always say, ask. Don't hesitate to contact the journal if

- you are unclear about the reviewers' concerns or requests;
- you need to add a significant amount of text exceeding the word count; or
- life happens, and you may need to pause your revision.

If your manuscript is being considered for a themed issue, we may not be able to provide the needed time, but we can consider the work for publication in a future unthemed regular issue. Sometimes, it may not be possible to address the reviewers' concerns without additional work that requires further study or a different analytical approach. In this case, consider contacting the journal and withdrawing your submission; there is no penalty to an author or authorship team.

In Case of Declination

Suppose a manuscript is rejected and the authors believe they can address the concerns the editors and reviewers raised. In that case, the corresponding author can contact the Editor-in-Chief to discuss the decision. Please remember that declination decisions are not made lightly, so it is essential to critically review the manuscript in light of the concerns raised in the reviewer feedback before reaching out. If the declination was made on an original submission, it is highly likely that the study has major flaws or does not fit the journal's aims and scope. In these circumstances, it is wisest to consider revising the manuscript, if possible, and submitting your work to another journal.

Conclusion

As editor-in-chief, I have repeatedly seen peer review markedly improve the quality of *SPUR* submissions. Responding to peer review is a normal part of the review process. Most manuscripts undergo at least two rounds of revision. We, as editors, reviewers, and authors, are in this together and we want the same thing—to publish the best version of your work. So, work with us, take peer review feedback to heart, critically revise your manuscript, and address all concerns in a point-by-point response to reviewers.

Are you interested in reviewing for *SPUR*? Email spur@cur.org and provide your contact information and areas of technical expertise.

Introducing our new Editorial Advisory Board Member

Joanne D. Altman



Director of Undergraduate
Research and Creative Works
Professor of Psychology
High Point University

Joanne D. Altman is the founding director of Undergraduate Research and Creative Works and a professor of psychology at High Point University. She earned her B.A. in psychology from Franklin and Marshall College and her M.A. and Ph.D. in experimental psychology from Temple University. She completed a postdoctoral fellowship at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Dr. Altman taught psychology at Washburn University, rising to full professor before joining High Point University. At Washburn, she founded the Creative and Scholarly Innovations Undergraduate Grants program and coordinated faculty development initiatives. She held several leadership roles, including Commencement Grand Marshal, coordinator for faculty development, Phi Kappa Phi Chapter President, and Advisor for Phi Kappa Phi and Psi Chi. She supervised over 130 undergraduate and graduate students through independent research projects. At High Point University, Dr. Altman has advanced undergraduate research, developing programs that amplify undergraduate scholarship and foster innovation. She was the founding Editor-in-Chief of *Innovation: Journal of Creative and Scholarly Works*. Dr. Altman has also been actively involved with the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR), serving as an elected councilor (now representative) in the Psychology Division for over two decades and serving on the Executive Board for six years. She led several CUR Task Forces, significantly contributing to the strategic planning and assessment of undergraduate research. Dr. Altman's work has been published in the areas of animal behavior and student learning, often co-authored with undergraduates. She has presented at numerous national and international conferences and served as a dedicated reviewer for over a dozen journals. With a career dedicated to fostering interdisciplinary collaborations and promoting undergraduate research, Dr. Altman continues to make significant contributions to academia and the broader scholarly community.

Charles (Billy) Gunnels



Chair and Professor,
Department of Biological
Sciences
Florida Gulf Coast University

Charles (Billy) Gunnels earned a Ph.D. in Zoology from the University of Florida and a B.A. in Biology from Skidmore College. Currently, he serves as a Professor and Chair of the Department of Biological Sciences at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU). His primary teaching responsibilities include Animal Behavior, Biological Statistics, and study abroad courses to Caribbean and South America countries, where students explore the relationship between human- and natural-histories. Dr. Gunnels is dedicated to advancing undergraduate research. For example, he has developed and taught multiple CUREs and supported over 100 undergraduate researchers in faculty-mentored research. In addition, he founded and oversaw the Office of Undergraduate Scholarship at FGCU between 2014 – 2021. Initiatives coming out of this office (such as the WiSER Eagles, Eagle X, and the FGCU Research Roadshow) enhanced the research, creative, and scholarly pursuits of undergraduate students and their faculty mentors, which fostered a vibrant research culture on campus. Dr. Gunnels also chaired the Division of Undergraduate Research Programs within the CUR between 2018 to 2021. During this time, he worked with other councilors to create professional development opportunities for new undergraduate research directors. Similar to other members of CUR and SPUR, facilitating and celebrating undergraduate research experiences are Billy's bread and butter.

Introducing our new Editorial Advisory Board Member

Linda Blockus



Director of the Office of
Undergraduate Research
University of Missouri

Linda Blockus has worked at the University of Missouri for more than 30 years and serves as the Director of the Office of Undergraduate Research. She earned degrees at Dartmouth College (A.B., biology), Boston University (Ed.M., educational leadership) and Missouri (Ph.D., higher education with support areas in black studies and educational & counseling psychology). During 2008-2009, she took a leave of absence from MU to serve as a fellow for the Center for Advancing Science and Engineering Capacity at AAAS in Washington, D.C. Dr. Blockus has more than two decades of leadership in CUR, serving as a division councilor/representative since 2002, serving on the Executive Board (2009-2011), and being elected to the Board of Directors (2021-2024). With CUR colleagues Susan Larson and Roger Rowlett, she co-authored the first edition of *Characteristics of Excellence in Undergraduate Research*, which serves as a blueprint for institutions to create an environment supportive of the practice of undergraduate research. With Joyce Kinkead she co-edited *Undergraduate Research Offices and Programs: Models and Practices* (2012). At Missouri she has been a co-PI and consultant for programs funded by HHMI, NSF, and NIH. Dr. Blockus teaches Communicating your Research and Scholarship for juniors and seniors and is an adjunct faculty member in the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis.
