

EDITORIAL

The four R's of revising and resubmitting a manuscript

It is rare for a submitted manuscript to be accepted without a request for some revisions. For a well-written manuscript, the revisions may be minor, such as correcting a reference, formatting an abstract, rewriting a confusing sentence, or verifying a bit of information. A very minimal revision is actually quite rare in my experience as an editor. More commonly, I return manuscripts to authors with requests for much more significant revisions. Despite my attempts to be supportive of authors when I write manuscript decision letters, I have heard back from a few authors that my words or those of the reviewers were cruel and they would never be submitting another article to *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners* (JAANP). I have often thought that the reason authors are so devastated by requests for revisions is not so much what is said by reviewers or the editor, but that authors are not sure what to do with a request to revise. Over the years, I have spoken about this problem at many conferences and have had many conversations with authors who are confused about how to revise a manuscript. We know that new faculty and students are pressured to publish but may not receive the support and mentoring to guarantee their success (Berg, 2015). Part of successful academic publishing is the ability to understand the peer review process (Christenbery, 2011) and to learn how to respond to critique of a manuscript. Learning how to revise a manuscript is a skill that should be taught in the process of educating and mentoring the next generation of scholars. There are four important steps to revising a manuscript; working through those steps is essential to a successful revision.

Read. Authors may interpret critique of their manuscripts as personal critiques. It is important to remember that reviewers are busy and may be writing their reviews on an unfamiliar platform. Editors combine the reviews on a single manuscript and add their own comments, but may not always edit reviewer comments. So, a more elegant critique might be constructed if everyone had more time. As you read the reviews, keep in mind that reviewers are doing a service to the profession by reading unpublished manuscripts and making suggestions for corrections or improvements. In a double-blind peer review system, which is what we run at JAANP, neither authors nor reviewers know the identities of each other; therefore, no personal animus is intended. Reading your reviews with an objective eye can show you where readers might misunderstand what you have written. Once you have read the reviews, you need to return to

the manuscript you submitted and read what you actually wrote. It can be helpful to read it out loud to yourself or another person. You might find that, although you know what you meant to say, you did not exactly say what you meant. It may take more than one reading of both your submission and the decision letter to get a clear sense of the scope of the revisions you need to make.

Reflect. The second R in the revision process is to reflect on what you read in step one. Reflection means to think deeply about what you have read, consider it from many perspectives, and contemplate the meaning of what you have read. This step may take the most time but the more carefully you reflect on what you need to do, the more successful you are likely to be. Making significant revisions takes more than a few minutes; it may take days or even weeks. Your reflection should help you understand what the reviewers and editor are requesting, what you have actually delivered in your original submission, and what you need to do to make the revisions. Sometimes this means you need to go back to the literature and expand your search. You may be faced with a request for more data analysis. A lot of editorial comments may mean you need to find an editor to help you with writing clarity. By the end of your period of reflection you should have a plan for how to go about doing the revisions. You may wonder, after reading and reflecting, if resubmission with revisions is your best option (Long, 2015). My suggestion is that, in the face of this doubt, you consult someone who can advise and support you through the revision process. If you have received a request for revisions, you have already passed a big hurdle. The editors and reviewers have concluded that your manuscript is appropriate for the journal but it just needs some additional work to make it the best it can be. You throw away that advantage when you decide not to re-submit and look for another journal. If your original submission had been completely inappropriate, it would have been rejected by the editor.

Revise/rewrite. If you have done a careful job of reading and reflecting, you have done half the work. Now you need to actually sit down at the keyboard and do the mechanical part of the process: rewrite your manuscript to put your thoughts into words. Pay attention to the specifics of the reviews and the comments of the editor. Sometimes global comments such as "please consult an editor" mean there are so many errors in the grammar, spelling, punctuation, and syntax that a complete edit is required before you resubmit. It is worth the time and expense to consult a

freelance editor at this point because unclear and ambiguous language makes understanding what you are saying more difficult. If the comments of reviewers indicated they did not understand what you were trying to say, it may be that your writing is obscuring your message. Pay close attention to organization, headings, details such as reference and citation formats, and the flow of your text. You are telling a story and it must read logically for the reader to understand your message. Check and recheck that you have addressed all the issues noted in the review before you upload your revised manuscript.

Respond. Once you have made all your revisions and rewritten your manuscript, you need to respond to the critique itself. Some journals have a specific format for response, others accept a narrative summary of the changes made. Be sure in your response that you answer everything raised in the review. This does not mean that you have to make every revision requested by every reviewer. You do, however, need to state why you did not make the requested revision. Some comments by reviewers might ask for material beyond the scope of the manuscript. It is acceptable to state in your response letter that the requested information was not included, but it is also wise to add that you clarified the intent of the project by revising the introduction or whatever section you think created the confusion for the reviewer. This demonstrates to the reviewers that you attended to the comment in an appropriate manner. For comments about formatting and editing, it is acceptable to make a global statement that the manuscript was thoroughly reviewed by an editor for style, grammar, and referencing format rather than note every change that was made to improve readability. One

more note about responding to the editor about revisions. If you are unable or unwilling to revise and resubmit, you need to communicate that to the editor as soon as possible. The editor has, through a decision letter, made a request of you to revise and resubmit, so out of courtesy, you need to respond.

It is important to consider a request for revisions as an opportunity to improve your manuscript. A thoughtful review of your work is a gift that can help you clarify your thoughts, improve your writing, and reach your intended audience (Pierson, 2015). A critique of your work is not a critique of you as an individual. Following the four steps of reading, reflecting, revising, and responding is a helpful way to change your perspective and go about the work of revising your manuscript.

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