Responding to Reviewers

Reviewers are a critical component to scholarly publications, and they work on a volunteer basis. Think about it; reviewers can contribute significantly to the improvement of your article, yet gain no credit from their work. This means that you should take their time and comments seriously, and respond in a thoughtful and thorough manner. After completing this module, you will know:

1. What happens after you submit your article for review
2. How to react to a critical review
3. How to choose which reviewer comments to follow and which to dispute
4. How to write a response letter to a journal editor

1. Who Are Reviewers?

1. Reviewers are experts in the field who volunteer their time to the journal to review submissions.
2. They are faculty, industry professionals, and other researchers in the field.
3. Journal editors generally invite people to become reviewers, but sometimes people can apply to become a reviewer if they think they are qualified.
4. Peer-reviewers usually serve a term of a few years as a reviewer for a journal, and may review for more than one journal at a time.
2. Potential Responses from the Journal

After you submit your article for review, you will receive a decision letter from the editor of the journal. This could take a few weeks to a few months. Let’s review the basic possible responses that you could receive:

1. **Accepted**: This is very rare and means your article will go directly to press.
2. **Accepted with minor revisions**: Williams (2004) suggests doing these revisions quickly without much argument because they are usually simple tasks that do not affect the overall structure or meaning of your article.
3. **Major revisions needed**: These will likely take days to complete but are usually worth doing. Sometimes this may end up as a complete rewrite of your article, which could indicate that this journal is not the right one for you, or that the reviewers are putting substantial efforts into making the article the best that it can be. Sometimes a reviewer will also request that you perform further experiments or inquiries to strengthen the article. We will discuss below instances where you may want to look for another journal.
4. **Rejected**: Now look for another journal to submit to that would be more appropriate.

3. Steps to Responding

1. What to do with critical responses:
   a. Do not take the review as a personal attack or an attack on your research.
   b. Read the comments carefully and make sure that you understand what the reviewer means.
   c. If you are confused about the response that you received, discuss them with a faculty mentor.
2. If you are lucky and have a journal editor who is able to prioritize reviewers’ comments in their letter to you, it will be clear what you need to do before you submit a second draft (Brookfield, 2011).

3. If not, you will need to prioritize the comments. Not all comments you receive include *required* changes; some are just *suggestions* (Brookfield, 2011). Tackle the comments that are required first and then move onto the suggestions. Brookfield (2011) also advises to tackle the big picture comments first, such as those that deal with the organization of your article.

4. The second step is to address the comments that are slightly less big picture, like additional articles that you need to read and cite, subheadings you should change/add/remove, or arguments that need further explanation.

5. If you receive contradictory comments from two or more reviewers, you can generally use your discretion as to what steps to take. If more than one reviewer makes a comment, but it is contradicted by a third reviewer, you should probably still address that comment and make the suggested improvement (Brookfield, 2011).

6. When you re-submit your draft to the editor, you must include a new cover letter that includes statements about the changes that you have made, and if new articles have been published about your topic you can include them as well (Brookfield, 2011).

7. Cargill and O’Connor lay out four rules of thumb to remember when dealing with comments. (Find it on page 79 of their book, referenced at the end of this module.)

   a. It is rare that either you or the reviewer is 100% correct. Usually there is room for negotiation on how the final article reads.

   b. The objective for you as an author is to accommodate the reviewer because reviewers volunteer their time to review articles. Address their comments without distorting the meaning of your article.
c. You must keep track of the changes that you make according to each comment so that the reviewer can see how you addressed them. A table is a good way to demonstrate this visually.

d. If your article is rejected, consider other journals to submit it to where it may be more relevant or have a greater chance of acceptance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: How to structure a comment response table</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewers comment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. **When Not to Re-Submit**

1. Even if you do not re-submit your article, thank the editor for her/his time and consideration given to your article.

2. If the reviewers ask you to remove information that you see as essential to your argument and the quality of your research, then you should strongly consider submitting your manuscript elsewhere. However, get a second opinion from a colleague first because sometimes an author can get attached to their writing even though it is best to remove it.

3. If the comments are redirecting the original purpose of your article elsewhere consider not re-submitting and looking for another journal. Brookfield (2011) provides an example of a scenario that would occur if wrote an article critiquing poorly designed research and the reviewer wanted to you to turn it into a literature review providing all sides of the argument. In this case, your original purpose has been compromised, and you should look for another journal.

4. According to Brookfield (2011), another instance where you should move on to a different journal is when you and the reviewer have a clear ideological divide.
Ideological disagreements tend to get at the heart of what legitimate knowledge is and what evidence supports a sound argument. These are much more difficult to reconcile than a methodological divide, for instance.

5. You might also want to move on to a different journal if the reviewer called for extreme structural changes that would essentially turn your article into an entirely new article. This could take more time than it’s worth. If the journal is very prestigious and widely read, it might be worth the time. Use your discretion and seek advice from colleagues.

6. If the feedback that you received is belittling, personal, and/or condescending, then you should certainly choose a different journal. This is not professional behavior.

5. Writing the Response Letter

1. Begin each response by quoting the reviewers comment. Responding in a positive and grateful way to reviews, no matter how critical they are, will go a long way toward the likelihood of getting published (American Journal Experts).

2. Respond completely, politely, and include evidence (Williams, 2004).

3. A respectful discourse on both sides shows commitment to improving the article and getting it published (American Journal Experts). This is a sign that you are committed to strong scholarship.

4. Respond to every comment—even positive ones—with a polite “Thank you.”

5. As mentioned earlier, you do not need to agree with every comment or even address every suggestion, but politely explain why you disagree. you can even cite other sources to support your case (Williams, 2004).

6. If you believe that your article has been unfairly rejected, you can send an appeal to the editor and ask for new reviewers, but appeals are rarely successful. It is best to accept the rejection and look to submit to another
journal. Take into account any comments offered to you by the reviewers, and thank the editor for his or her time.

7. The following examples of polite responses were excerpted from Williams, 2004, p. 81.

Example 2: Polite responses to comments

“We agree with the referee that ___, but. . .

The referee is right to point out ___, yet. . .

In accordance with the referees' wishes, we have now changed this sentence to___.

Although we agree with the referees' wishes. . .

It is true that___, but. . .

We acknowledge that our manuscript might have been ___, but. . .

We, too, were disappointed by the low response rate. We agree that this is an important area that requires further research.

We support the referee's assertion that ___, although. . . With all due respect to the reviewer, we believe that this point is not correct.”

6. Example Response Letters

Example 3: Response letter retrieved from the University of Minnesota, Duluth.

IBS Students,

The overall summary should discuss what you perceive to be the biggest problems with
your paper. For example, any points that more than one of the reviewers brought up are probably important. Any points that required a major change in the paper are probably important. Minor points can just be listed out in a bulleted form.

Dear Editor:

I am pleased to resubmit for publication the revised version of MS#03-375 “Evolutionary potential of Chamaecrista fasciculata in relation to climate change: II. Genetic architecture of three populations reciprocally planted along an environmental gradient in the Great Plains.” I appreciated the constructive criticisms of the Associate Editor and the reviewers. I have addressed each of their concerns as outlined below.

The most substantial revision concerns the length of the manuscript. Following the reviewer’s advice, I have pared down the length 25% from 65 pages to 49 pages. This was accomplished primarily by: (1) eliminating two redundant traits (leaf area and total leaf area) which shortens Tables 2 and 4 and eliminates Figures 8 and 9, (2) presenting the information in Figures 5-7 in table format, (3) cutting Table 1 and referring the reader to the companion manuscript, (4) cutting Table 4 and including the heritabilities in Table 2, and (5) moving the information of Table 5 into the text. In addition, I have rewritten parts of the paper to provide more clarity (see specifics outlined below).

Associate Editor comments:

Most of the reviewers’ concerns focused on instances where the writing lacked clarity or brevity, or both. Reviewer 2 also made specific suggestions regarding revising the tables.
and figures. On the whole I agree with the reviewers comments, and I would encourage the author to follow their specific recommendations as closely as possible.

For both papers, you need to (early on) spell out how that particular paper relates to the other companion paper and the Etterson and Shaw Science paper. Since the same data set was used in all three, you need to clearly state the purpose/scope of each paper in relation to the others.

Differences between the papers are now explicitly stated in the last paragraph of the introduction.

You need to lay out why you’re now doing classic Lande-Arnold, whereas you previously did COVa.

This is briefly alluded to in the last paragraph of the introduction and discussed in more depth in the discussion of the companion paper.

Reviewer comments:

Specific Concerns

The Introduction contains numerous sentences that while true, give the sense of reading a lot of truisms of evolutionary genetics about additive genetic variance, heritability, genetic correlations, etc. While I agree that a fair amount of this material needs to be reviewed and defined, especially for readers that are not evolutionary geneticists, I think it would be possible to slightly reword many of the topic sentences of these paragraphs to make them more interesting and novel for people that are already familiar with these concepts.
I have tried to make the topic sentences more engaging.

Towards this end, after the Introduction or first time these concepts are introduced, I would suggest eliminating or dramatically shortening any sentences that remind the reader of what a heritability, cross-environment genetic correlation, within-environment genetic correlation, etc. are used for, what they indicate, etc.

Done.

2. Some key references are missing from parts of the Introduction. Some of Mayr’s work from the 1950’s belongs in the sections about gene flow preventing local adaptation. Likewise, Kathleen Donohue’s work on genetic architecture is relevant for the paragraph about estimating genetic variances under multiple field environments. Lande 1979 is also something that should be cited for the paragraph on within environment genetic correlations constraining the evolutionary response. Finally, there are numerous additional references that can be given about the constancy of the G matrix.

Mayr 1963 and Donohue et al. 2000 have been added. Lande 1979 is cited again in the introduction. Several references regarding the constancy of G-matrix across environments have been added.

3. On page 6, the discussion of across-environment genetic correlation is written as if the trait under consideration is fitness, which should be pointed out.

The topic sentence of this paragraph now specifically states that I am referring to the across-environment genetic correlation for fitness.
4. On page 14, it is noted that the maternal and dominance variance could not be estimated individually because of the crossing design. Yet the rest of the manuscript refers to maternal variance components, which gives a confusing impression. This should be clarified.

The manuscript now consistently discusses dominance variance and maternal effects as a single confounded variance component referred to as VDM.

5. On page 15, the likelihoods need to be better described. Likelihood of what? i.e., the likelihood that the parameter is equal to some value versus the likelihood that the parameter is equal to zero? Clarify this for non quantitative geneticists. In addition, the note that the additive variance components directly determine the rate of selection response only applies to outcrossing organisms which should be pointed out.

The structure of the log likelihood ratio tests has been clarified. The wording has been changed to reflect the fact that VAdetermines the rate of evolution in outcrossing organisms.

6. On page 16, some description should be given about how the across environment additive genetic covariance is calculated. This is often the most difficult part of calculating a cross-environment genetic correlation.

I now explicitly state that all of the components for calculating the cross-environment genetic correlation, including the additive genetic covariance, are standard output from the Quercus program.
7. The Discussion section contains several phrases that are repetitive with the Introduction that should either be eliminated or altered to include conclusions based on the current work (e.g., statements about climate change, migration, gene flow/local In addition, the introductory paragraph of the Discussion does not give any of the conclusions of the work or set up a preview of the remaining sections of the discussion.

I have eliminated phrases that are repeated from the introduction and reorganized paragraphs to highlight results presented in this paper. The first paragraph of the discussion has been rewritten to address the criticisms outlined above.

8a. I also found that the lengthy description of the differences between the author’s findings and the findings of Kelly 1993 to be too long. The basic conclusions of this paragraph are general and non-specific enough (e.g., it could be breeding design, statistical power, real biological differences, etc) that this entire section could be shortened or possibly eliminated.

This detailed paragraph was requested to be added by the previous reviewers. It has now been shortened by more than 1/2.

8b. Likewise, the description of the artificialities of the experimental design could be dramatically shortened or eliminated—many of these are inherent to the approach of doing quantitative genetic field experiments or will immediately occur to readers anyway. If absolutely necessary, perhaps these could be folded into the Methods sections as caveats or asides, so as to not break up the conceptual focus of the Discussion section.
The paragraph of caveats in the discussion has been eliminated.

Example 4: Response letter retrieved from Chapman University.

February 25, 2012

Leanne Knobloch, Associate Editor

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships

Dear Leanne, It is with excitement that I re-submit to you a revised version of manuscript JSPR-11-308, Dyadic Perceptions of Goals, Conflict Strategies, and Perceived Resolvability in Serial Arguments for the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to revise and resubmit this manuscript. In keeping with my last communication with you, I am re-submitting this revision before the agreed upon deadline, March 16, 2012. I appreciate the time and detail provided by each reviewer and by you and have incorporated the suggested changes into the manuscript to the best of my ability. The manuscript has certainly benefited from these insightful revision suggestions. I look forward to working with you and the reviewers to move this manuscript closer to publication in the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships.

I have responded specifically to each suggestion below, beginning with your own. To make the changes easier to identify where necessary, I have numbered them.
Editor’s suggestions:

Most notably, your revised manuscript should: (a) Acknowledge the importance of multiple goals and incorporate that literature where relevant (Reviewer 1 and Reviewer 3)

I have added a paragraph in the literature review that acknowledges that multiple goals are typically pursued, but that this study, as an exploration of dyadic serial argument processes, considers them individually; see pp. 3-4.

(b) Clarify your explication and operationalization of perceived resolvability (Reviewer 2) and avoidance (Reviewer 3)

I have clarified that only both partners' self-reports of their perceived resolvability was measured throughout the Method, Results, and Discussion sections. I also clarified the avoidance measure in the Method (p. 13) and Discussion (p. 23) sections.

(c) Elaborate more fully on the implications of your dyadic data (Reviewer 2) (d) Add depth to your discussion section (Reviewer 2)

For both c and d, I attempted to frame the findings that I highlighted in the discussion in terms of the unique dyadic nature of this study at the end of the following paragraphs: the 3rd and 4th paragraphs in the “Dyadic Perception Effects of Serial Argument Goal Importance on Conflict Strategy Usage” subsection, the beginning of the 1st paragraph of the “Effects of Dyadic Perceptions of Conflict Strategy Usage on Perceived Resolvability”
subsection, and the beginning of the last paragraph of the manuscript. I have also
strengthened the section on avoidance on p. 23, per Reviewer 3.

(e) Acknowledge that your data do not lend insight into the over-time process of serial
arguing (Reviewer 1)

Research that captures the process of serial arguments across multiple episodes is indeed
important. I have included this as a suggestion for future research at the top of p. 25.

More minor points include: (a) Providing a figure to depict your model (Reviewer 1)

A figure has been added; see p. 41.

(b) Eliminating your reliance on acronyms in the discussion section (Reviewer 2).

I removed the abbreviations throughout the manuscript. I did retain the abbreviations in
Table 3 and Figure 1 (with a guide as to what the abbreviations mean in the tables and
figures notes) to conserve space. If you prefer, I can remove those as well.

For my part, I recommend that you: (a) Frame your paper with more theoretical heft and
downplay the variable-analytic tone of your analyses

I have framed the hypotheses more in terms of the model on pp. 7-8, the second paragraph
on p. 9, and the first paragraph on p. 10.

(b) Refrain from using causal language to describe your cross-sectional findings (e.g.,
avoid verbs such as “impact,” “influence,” “mutually influence,” and “are the product of”)

I have attempted to change those verbs throughout the manuscript.

Reviewer: 1 Comments to the Author

The authors present an interesting study modeling serial arguments using both members of a dyad. This is a nice extension of the serial arguing literature as extant studies have only examined one member of the dyad. Also, the study reinforces an existing model of serial arguing (Bevan et al., 2008). I enjoyed this manuscript very much and look forward to seeing it in print.

1. While integrative communication is seen as constructive and distributive research is seen as destructive (page 4 of the manuscript), serial arguing research (Bevan et al 2008; Reznik, Roloff, & Miller, 2010) seems to indicate that integrative communication is not necessarily beneficial for individuals. (Integrative communication was found to be related to rumination and stress and health problems, respectively). These findings may have implications for the current research given that the mutual understanding/resolution goal is related to using integrative communication.

This is an important point. I integrated Reznik et al.’s finding of the positive relationship between integrative communication and stress on the bottom of p. 4 when making the case for studying dyadic perceptions of serial arguments.
2. Does the other literature on multiple goals in interactions apply to this research? The author(s) acknowledge that individuals can pursue multiple goals during serial arguments. It seems to me that one can pursue a primary or instrumental goal and secondary or identity or relational goals throughout serial argument episodes. It may also be helpful to illustrate some specific examples of goals by giving scenarios in the literature review portion of the manuscript. The authors do a nice job of giving examples in the discussion section.

I have added a paragraph in the literature review that acknowledges that multiple goals are typically pursued, but that this study, as an exploration of dyadic serial argument processes, considers them individually; see pp. 3-4.

Sources and Additional Resources:

4. American Journal Experts: Responding to Reviewers
5. American Journal Experts: Writing a Response Letter
6. Tips for Responding to Reviewer and Editor Comments
7. Elsevier- What is Peer-Review?