

Revisions as a Complex Intellectual Journey

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Abstract

Revisions can be characterized as a return journey into our research. They can be initiated by our sense of dissatisfaction with the existing text or be a response to reviewers' requests for changes and modifications. In any event, they are a complex task that needs to be handled with the right cognitive and mental frame.

Keywords: Revisions; editors; reviewers; learning.

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1 A Story and an Insight

Revisions are always hard and many times painful...

Let me start with a real story: I was freshmen student at the department of philosophy and took a course in the philosophy of science. The professor was well known for his scholarly work in philosophy of science, yet notorious for his intolerance of students and for being very idiosyncratic. After seeing how he offended and teased the students, I decided to stay in the class as a free listening student and enjoyed the topics the class discussed on science and ethics. There were a few students who chose to formally enroll. Some students realized that the semester was moving on, yet the professor did not discuss the final assignments in class. Some students approached him at the end the class, as he was walking out of the classroom, and we all could overhear the conversation. (The professor did not ask them to come to his office hours, and this was before the Internet period, so everything was in the classroom where all students were around listening):

Student: Can I ask about the final assignment?

Professor: What do you mean?

Student: You know — what I need to do in order to get a grade in class.

Professor: How should I know? What do you think you need to do?

Student: Well, I guess I need to write a paper?

Professor: Okay. What do you want to write about?

Student: Well, I thought, maybe, on XXXX.

Professor: Okay — then go write the paper.

The students went on to write a final paper on a topic they chose, and after a couple of weeks, at the end of the class, they handed the papers to the professor, again at the end of the class...

Student: Professor X — here is the paper I wrote.

Professor: What do you want me to do with it?

Student: Hmm... Read it, give me comments...

Professor: No, I do not need to read it. Take it back and correct it — rewrite it.

Student: Why??? How do you know I need to rewrite it?

Professor: I do not need to read the assignment in order to know it is not good enough and needs to be rewritten.

And these interactions went on a few times.

Despite the professor's idiosyncratic behavior, I realized that there was an important lesson in his (albeit rude) response to the students. Any work is never good enough after the first round. One needs to write and rewrite a paper many times before it can be considered good. It is also common, in our intense and demanding careers where publications are key elements in the promotion process, that we send our papers out before they are good enough (Espeland, 2019), knowing that there is need for further revisions.

2 Revising Our Own Work

So, back to the issue of revisions of a paper or a book manuscript. My first claim is that no work submitted for review after a first round is good enough. However, the process of getting back to the same paper again and again and to revise it can generate a love-hate relationship with the paper. This is when I start to make up excuses for not getting back to the paper, giving it a low level of priority in my mind. Yet, this should be a wake-up call for me that it is time to move on to the next stage of rewriting and revision.

In general, when first writing a paper, I have an *imagined reader* in my mind, someone who I hope will appreciate and learn from the paper. At this stage, I need to replace the imagined reader with two kinds of *concrete readers*. First, I try to send it out to a close colleague. There are two advantages to this stage of revision: one is that I can rely on my close and trusted colleague to be critical on all levels — on the language used, the flow of the text, the logic of arguments, the literature reviewed, the research question, the hypotheses, the data used, the description of the data, the findings (including the title of the tables or graphs), the conclusion and the discussion. These rough criticisms can be painful, but they are highly important and valuable.

The second advantage is that the review from my close colleague allows me to distance myself from the paper. This step gives me time to see the paper afresh, place myself in the role of a second *concrete reader* and to read it as if I were an external reviewer. While I wait for my colleague's review, I usually shift my attention to another project or on revising another paper. I've found that there can be unexpected new learning and synergism between different papers I am working on. Therefore, having a pipeline of papers, even on different topics, can allow for vicarious ideas that can be fruitful for more than one paper.

3 Revisions as a Part of the Formal Review Process

Reacting to external reviewers after a journal submission creates its own dynamics. Obviously, an external critical review is highly important, with the potential to improve any paper. However, we also know that the review process does not always operate ideally and there are some built-in deficiencies. First, the review process can be political and arbitrary (Gove, 1979), suffering from judgment biases (Teplitskiy et al., 2018). Studies have found that the coefficients measuring inter-rater reliability among reviewers fall in the range of 0.2 to 0.4 (Bornmann, 2008), and this lack of consensus shows that luck can be an important factor in the review process.

In my experience, editors can vary greatly in how they will assign reviewers or integrate the different reviews in order to provide helpful guidelines for revisions. Some editors take on the responsibility of summarizing the reviews and clarifying where important revisions are needed. Highly ranked journals with high rejection rates generally assure this level of feedback. Even a very detailed and demanding request for revision from such a journal may lead to more requests for revisions and may even end up with rejection after a few revision rounds. At the other end of the spectrum are those editors who are less helpful, simply writing a boiler-plate paragraph and referring the author to the comments of the reviewers to sort out with little guidance.

That said, while having a thoughtful set of requested detailed revisions is better than the other extreme, it is never pleasant to receive a request for heavy revisions. It is obviously better than a rejection letter, but it often feels like an insult or a sense of frustration about a lack of understanding of what we were trying to say. When I receive such feedback, I usually quickly scan the editor's letter and the reviewers' comments, just to get a sense of the general direction

of the feedback. Then, I wait for a few days before going back and carefully rereading the letter in order to react in a non-emotional, instrumental and technical way.

4 How I Deal with Revisions

The first moment when an e-mail from the editor arrives, I can feel my heartbeat... I hope for an R&R rather than a rejection. We all get rejections — this is a secret that every newcomer to the field of publishing should know. When I started my tenure-track position, I heard from a colleague that, “Everyone gets rejections — even the advanced and well known scholars get rejections.” This was very helpful to hear as a socializing practice to the ‘publish or perish’ world.

When I am fortunate to get an R&R, I start by creating a response file that has two columns. The first column contains the suggestions/requests of the editor and the reviewers, and the second column contains my responses. I begin by tackling technical and minor issues, such as requests for additional description of the findings, changes in the sequence of the arguments, or adding references. This gives me a sense of progress and starts the process with the easy part.

Next, I deal with what I classify as “main issues” in revisions, such as changes in the statistical analysis, or in case of a qualitative paper, changes in the presentation of the data, the themes, the model, or the findings. In addition, there may be requests for changes in discussion and implications.

Finally, there may be requests for more complex revisions, such as changes of theory and major changes in the focus of the literature review. That is, in some cases, a reviewer might suggest that I reconstruct the whole paper around a new theoretical framing or that I develop a different approach to the literature review. This calls for me to bring a creative and open mind to rewriting and can require substantial reworking within the sections of the findings and the discussion. This remapping of the paper is neither a simple matter, nor is it clear at first reading. It requires re-reading of the paper several times, in a distant manner that will enable the detection of weak parts that need reframing. Fortunately, I have not needed to undertake such a fundamental restructuring and revision in most of my papers, but it can be a highly rewarding process, encouraging me to let go of older theoretical framings and bringing innovative framing with fresh insights to my work.

5 What Was My Best Experience with an External Review?

My best experience with reviews began with a high level of anxiety over one of my first papers. It took me the longest time to write the first draft, worrying that it would never be good enough. After finally deciding to send it out, I received an R&R based on five reviewers. I initially felt paralyzed when one of the reviewers suggested that I replace the theoretical framing I had used (based on a very central and popular theory at that time) with something different. “Use another theory, something fresh and innovative...” she suggested. To my surprise, this reviewer shared her identity with me and suggested that I should feel free to consult with her directly.

This was then, and is now, a very unusual gesture, especially coming from a well-known scholar. It was a huge learning experience for me. This expressed challenge and simultaneous support spurred me to enter a new intellectually daring phase. Although it was a scary and complex journey for me, I felt empowered and energized by this gesture. I ended up enjoying the creative process that enabled an exploratory scholarly revision of the paper and freed me

from my anxieties. Despite the opportunity to consult with the generous reviewer, I decided to explore the options by myself. However, I have adopted this approach, and whenever possible when reviewing dissertations or manuscripts, I disclose my identity, with the offer to consult with the authors should they wish to.

There are, however, many bad stories about editors and reviewers that provide less than professional work. There are reviewers that offer unclear suggestions, or insulting comments. There are also editors that do not offer constructive feedback, do not add their comments in their summary letter or conduct an unjust review processes where new reviewers are invited after one or two rounds, and based on their critical comments, decide on rejection. It is important that new scholars be aware that they may encounter editors and reviewers who do not take their responsibilities seriously enough. We rely on editors to conduct a fair and transparent review process. We expect them to monitor their reviewers carefully and to dismiss those who do not deliver comprehensive reviews, and we rely on reviewers to offer serious and thoughtful reviews for our papers. When we encounter a less-than-professional reviewing experience, we must not let these intimidate us; instead, we need to take a deep breath and to move on to another journal, with the hope for a more professional and supportive review process.

Obviously, this responsibility for fair and helpful reviews extends to ourselves as well, when we are asked to serve as reviewers or editors. We should always remember to think about how the author/s will feel upon receiving our review and to make sure to offer supportive comments, even if we are critical. Such supportive culture will improve the quality of our scholarly contributions and do good to all our scholarly community.

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