

A Practical Question

The manuscript of an article that you, as principal investigator, submitted to a scientific journal for publication is returned to you with a statement that the editorial board has considered the manuscript and has recommended return of the paper for revision. The instructions are clear but terse: "Enclosed are specific criticisms. Please make the indicated changes or give your reasons for not doing so." The attached reviewer comments seem contradictory: One reviewer requests more details of methodology, and another requests that the manuscript be shortened by one third. In addition, one of the reviewers recommends publication but on condition that his own, opposing treatment approach be discussed and references to his work be included. There is no summary comment from the journal's chief editor.

Do you feel that a request for further advice is warranted before you proceed with your revision? If so, should you call or write, and should you try to reach the chief editor directly?

Solutions

The journal editor makes the final decision about the acceptance of manuscripts. Reviewers provide the editor with the advice that he or she requires to determine whether the manuscript is acceptable for publication, and although this advice is highly valued, it is not binding. It's the job of the editor to review both the manuscript and its reviews and to decide whether the manuscript is publishable. If the reviews are especially disparate and the subject of the manuscript is out of the editor's field, a third or even fourth review should be sought.

In this hypothetical case, it appears that the editor is not doing his or her job in communicating the basis of the decision and the steps that must be taken to make the manuscript acceptable. Although it appears that some information has been sent to the author by the board, there isn't sufficient synthesis of the comments to provide the author with useful information about how to proceed. The divergent comments from

reviewers have obviously not been filtered by the editor, and the author shouldn't hesitate to contact the editor for clarification and advice.

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Editor

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Conflicting reviews are not uncommon in botany, especially in ecology, where methods are often determined by philosophic approaches. The letter from the chief editor in this question is adequate because it gives the author the opening to rebut or at least justify decisions to revise or not to revise. As chief editor, I would not have provided any more guidance. However, as the editorial-board member responsible for the peer reviews, I would have indicated the items that I considered essential before recommending acceptance. Given the tone of the reviewer who wants his research to be discussed, I would probably have added a comment either that "this reviewer makes a valid point; please act" or that "the comments raised by this reviewer are really not relevant, and I do not require you to address the matter (although it may be useful to remind readers of the conflict)."

The following might be the author's response: "Thank you for the peer reviewer comments on our manuscript. We enclose the revised manuscript. We have made most of the substantive changes suggested by reviewer 1 (comments 1, 2, and 5) and by reviewer 2 (comments 3, 4, and 6) and have addressed the other minor points. We note, however, that two suggestions are contradictory. We have not met reviewer 1's request to expand the methods section because to do so would simply repeat the details given in our citations. We have shortened the paper per reviewer 2's comments by editing all points where we could be accused of linguistic excess. The result is not a reduction of one third and is closer to 15%, but we believe that we have improved clarity and given the methodologic details more concisely. Reference to reviewer 2's work would be relevant only if our study

Solution Corner

continued

extended his approach, so we decline to cite this reviewer's research extensively. We have, however, added a paragraph to the discussion section of our revised paper that addresses the issue he raised."

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I prefer the "run-it-up-the-flagpole" approach rather than checking beforehand to see whether the chief editor is inclined to salute. The author has been given a clear choice: "Make the indicated changes or give your reasons for not doing so." This is the usual procedure for journals I have dealt with in recent years. Although I would be taking the risk of spending time in vain, I would make as many of the desired changes as possible, explain in a cover letter which changes were made and which were not, and send the revised manuscript and letter to the editor who sent the terse instructions (who will probably be thrilled to have successfully avoided trying to advise me). The chief editor would need to review the criticisms and look at the whole revised manuscript and is not likely to do this effectively during a telephone conversation.

It might be possible to satisfy both reviewers by shortening the introduction and discussion and adding some methodologic details. Even if I felt the manuscript could

not be shortened by as much as one-third, I would shorten it somewhat and explain why nothing else should be removed. Twenty-five years of experience in writing and editing journal articles has shown me that editors will generally accept an author's efforts to accommodate reviewers without compromising points that the author thinks are important.

The matter of a reviewer's requesting discussion of his own work is one that came up in connection with a manuscript I edited recently. The authors opted to cite two of the articles and gave a thorough explanation of their reasons for not citing the others. The editor accepted this solution.

Compromise and courtesy are perhaps the most important defenses for this situation. Thank the reviewers for their comments, and be respectful but not obsequious.

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New Question: A Question of the Reader

The editor of an international journal wants to know more about who the readers of the journal are and what they think of its content and format. She therefore is thinking of doing a readership survey. What main advice do you have for this editor? What resources, if any, do you suggest that she consult?

Letter

RSVP

Now that copyeditors have taken their pet peeves on an airing (*CBE Views*, Sep-Oct 1999;22:149), perhaps it's time to let authors take their bêtes noires for a walk around the block.

As both an author and an editor of some years' standing, I mention only one concern: prompt correspondence regarding submitted material, or lack thereof. Some editors quickly and conscientiously acknowledge receipt of typescripts or galleys; some do not.

I've never known an author who was not anxious to know that a submission to an edi-

tor was received in good order. Any prepared piece, no matter how weighty or trivial, is precious to its author. All it takes to ease the angst is a promptly mailed postcard, or a telephone call, or, better yet, an e-mail message conveyed at nearly the speed of light.

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