**RESPONSES TO REVIEWERS OR EXAMINERS**

by Simon Moss

|  |
| --- |
| **Introduction** |

In academia, you often need to write responses to the recommendations or criticisms of individuals who evaluate your work. For example, if you attempt to publish a paper, you will often receive a series of concerns and suggestions from reviewers. Likewise, after you submit your thesis, the examiners might instruct you to address a set of problems or criticisms.

Sometimes, the concerns that reviewers and examiners raise are helpful, unambiguous, and resolvable. On other occasions, you might not agree, not understand, or not be able to address the criticisms of reviewers and examiners. This document offers some guidelines on how to respond in these circumstances.

|  |
| --- |
| **Responding to comments with which you disagree** |

Often, you will not agree with a criticism a reviewer or examiner writes. You are certainly permitted to argue their criticism or concern is misguided. That is, you can mount arguments that logically and systematically counter the suggestions or criticisms the reviewer or examiner write.

However, if you counter too many of these criticisms, the reviewer or examiner may become defensive, They might strive harder to demonstrate the shortcomings of your work. They may want to demonstrate their expertise and insight. Consequently, their reaction to your response might be hostile and critical. The following table presents an array of strategies you can apply to prevent these problems.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Strategy | Example of what you could write |
| Rather than counter the reviewer or examiner explicitly, indicate you feel their concern shows you had not explained your position effectively—and include a more comprehensive explanation instead | Reviewer 1 suggested we should have undertaken a t-test instead of a multi-level model. This suggestion indicates we had not justified our decision to utilize a multi-level model effectively. Thus, we have now included a more comprehensive justification of this choice. Specifically, we write  *An independent t-test is not applicable in this circumstance because the two schools were chosen randomly and thus designated as a random variable. Consequently, in contrast to a multi-level model, a t-test would overlook this source of variance and, potentially, increase the likelihood of Type I or Type II errors.* |
| Rather than reject the suggestions of reviewers or examiners—even if these suggestions are probably implausible—you can propose future research that is similar to their suggestions. | Reviewer 1 suggested we should have undertaken a t-test instead of a multi-level model. To explore the issue of which test might be suitable, during the discussion, we now suggest  *Future researchers might want to administer and compare a range of statistical analyses, such as independent t-tests, MANOVAs, neural networks, and multi-level models. This research could determine which technique is most conservative, powerful, and senstivie.* |
| Rather than indicate the reviewer or examiner is misguided, imply you considered a similar perspective but then identified some limitations of this perspective. | Reviewer 1 suggested we should have undertaken a t-test instead of a multi-level model. Initially, we had considered a t-test. However, because the schools were selected randomly, we concluded the t-test may dismiss this source of variability. Thus, we chose a multi-level model instead |
| You can sometimes refer to the observation that some of the other reviewers or examiners seemed to contradict this concern. | Reviewer 1 suggested we should have undertaken a t-test instead of a multi-level model. Nevertheless, Reviewer 2 indicated the multi-level model was informative. Therefore, we would prefer to refrain from conducting a t-test because this approach would diverge from the method that Reviewer 2 approved. |

In short

* your responses should be polite, but not so polite the reviewer or examiner feels patronized or suspicious
* you should usually apply two or more strategies in respones to each criticism or concern
* most responses should include some change to your manuscript—even if you merely extend one of your arguments or pose suggestions for future reserarch.

|  |
| --- |
| **Responding to comments you do not understand** |

Occasionally, neither you nor your supervisors can decipher the comments of reviewers or examiners. That is, you might not understand these comments adequately enough to address.

If these comments were written by reviewers of papers, express your uncertainty to the Editor as soon as possible. If these comments were written by examiners, express your uncertainty to the Dean of Graduate Studies. You might write something like

|  |
| --- |
| Dear Professor Smith  On 5 June 2019, we received the comments from reviewers about our submission “Fidget spinners and insanity”. We could not decipher one of these comments, however, and would like some clarification.  In particular, Reviewer 1 wrote “A continuous method should be utilized instead”. However, we were not entirely certain of which method Reviewer 1 intended. Thus, if possible, we would like some clarification to help us address this concern.    Yours sincerely  John Johns |

|  |
| --- |
| **Responding to comments that are unresolvable** |

Sometimes, the reviewers or examiners might propose suggestions that are valid but unrealistic or impractical for you. For example, they might suggest you apply some technique to collect or extract data. However, because you utlized another technique, you cannot fulfill their suggestion unless you conduct the study again—an option you may not be willing to consider. The following table presents a couple of strategies you can apply in this circumstance.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Strategy | Example of what you could write |
| Indicate you will apply their suggesed technique or approach in the future—as well as suggest that other researchers should apply this technique or approach in the future | Reviewer 1 suggested that we should have utilized an implicit measure rather than explicit scale to collect data. We agree this approach could have been valuable. Therefore, in the future, whenever we explore this characteristic, we will administer this implicit measure instead. Furthermore, in the discussion, we now write  *Future research should utilize implicit measures rather than explicit scales to assess these characteristics. This approach offers several benefit. First…* |
| Concede this suggested technique or approach would have been helpful, but you could not afford the funds or time that would have been necessary | Reviewer 1 suggested that we should have utilized an implicit measure rather than explicit scale to collect data. We would have preferred to utilize an implicit measure to preclude biases. However, because our budget was limited, we could not afford to purchase these measures. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Response of examiners to comments about papers you have published** |

Many theses comprise papers the candidate has already published, sometimes called thesis by publication. Sometimes, examiners will request changes to these publications. For example, the examiner might indicate

* the candidate had used an unsuitable method to collect or analyse the data
* the study could have been written more concisely, precisely, or professionally, and so forth.

Of course, you are not able to correct work that has already been published. You cannot illegally enter all the libraries around the world to change these publications. The following table outlines some responses you might consider. In addition to these responses, you could merely counter the concerns this examiner raised.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Concern raised by examiner | Possible responses |
| The examiner criticised the methodology or method | * In the response to examiners and general discussion, acknowledge this concern * In the general discussion, when presenting recommendations to other researchers, indicate how future research could address this concern—as specifically as possible |
| The examiner criticised some feature of the analysis | * In the response to examiners and general discussion, acknowledge this concern * You might be able to conduct the analyses the examiner recommended. * If appropriate, in the general discussion, indicate whether the alternative analyses would have generated the same pattern as the original analyses |
| The examiner adviced the candidate to improve the wording or expression | * In the response to examiners, acknowledge this concern * Indicate you could not change the original publication, but have now introduced analogous changes to other chapters in your thesis, if applicable. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Format of responses** |

When responding to reviewers or examiners, researchers can utilize a variety of formats or approaches. The following example presents one format you can utilize.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dear Professor Smith  We would like to thank you and the Reviewers for the insightful and helpful comments to our manuscript. We believe we have utilized the suggestions proposed and addressed the concerns raised. In the following tables, we delineate and justify each of our changes to the original manuscript.   |  |  | | --- | --- | | **Comments from Reviewer 1** | **Our response** | | Reviewer 1 suggested we should have undertaken a t-test instead of a multi-level model | This suggestion indicates we had not justified our decision to utilize a multi-level model effectively. Thus, we have now included a more comprehensive justificsation of this choice. Specifically, we write  *An independent t-test is not applicable in this circumstance because the two schoold were chosen randomly and thus designated as a random variable. Consequently, in contrast to a multi-level model, a t-test would overlook this source of variance and, potentially, increase the likelihood of Type I or Type II errors.* | | Reviewer 1 suggested that we should have utilized an implicit measure rather than explicit scale to collect data. | We agree this approach could have been valuable. Therefore, in the future, whenever we explore this characteristic, we will administer this implicit measure instead. Furthermore, in the discussion, we now write  *Future research should utilize implicit measures rather than explicit scales to assess these characteristics* |   **References**  Smith, A. B. (2015). Concocted titles. Journal of Fantasy, 3, 14-20.  Yours sincerely  John Johns |