

Response Letter Guidelines

Imagine you're a professional researcher in your field. You have written a draft of a project and have submitted it for consideration at a journal. What is the next step? Normally you would receive a letter from the editor explaining the fate or disposition of your paper, along with copies of at least two peer reviews of the work. You would not typically receive marked copies of the paper itself; these are retained by the reviewer. At this point, you have to decide whether you should pursue the paper further (which you would if it were provisionally accepted), revise the paper and resubmit it, rework the paper and submit it somewhere else, or abandon the project altogether.

Our situation models that of academic peer review, but with a few important differences. For one thing, you can't abandon the paper without failing the class! For another, your paper is likely to be "draftier" than a typical journal submission, in the sense that it truly represents a work in progress rather than something the author imagines to be finished. Finally, unlike in journal reviews, you know the identities of your reviewers.

Nevertheless, you face in many respects the same rhetorical situation as the academic professional who decides to pursue her paper further. When a paper is revised, it is never submitted alone; it is always accompanied by a cover letter, which goes out to the reviewers of this version (who may or may not be the same as the original reviewers). Typically, such letters have the following features:

- They are addressed to the editor rather than the reviewers. For the purposes of this class, this means they are addressed to the instructor. Remember, the reviews are not written to you, but to the editor/instructor for your use. This is one reason why they are not written in the second person.
- They contain some measure of thanks for the reviews and some acknowledgement that the reviews helped guide the revision of the paper.
- If the reviews converge on some essential points, you can respond to those points in the same paragraph in which you thank the reviewers. For example: *I wish to thank the reviewers for their helpful comments, which aided me in revising this paper. Both reviewers agreed the paper should contain a fuller discussion of the history of filibuster in judicial appointments. I agree with this critique, and in this revised version have included a much more detailed narrative in the background section covering the origins of the filibuster tradition as well as important examples of its use in the Senate 'advise and consent' process.*
- Generally, however, response letters deal with one review at a time. Because reviews in academic publication are anonymous, they are given to the author as "review #1" and "review #2," and are so designated in the letter. In your case, of course, you can refer to the reviewers by name. Remember, however, to maintain a tone of respect and thoughtful engagement.
- They *summarize the critiques* rather than simply respond to them. Why? First, as a practical matter, you want to let Reviewer #1 know what Reviewer #2 said so as to explain the totality of your revision. Second, as a matter of courtesy, you want to remind both reviewers of what *they* said so they can reorient themselves easily. And third, you may well get a brand-new reviewers who needs to be brought up to speed and quickly.
- When the authors disagree with reviewers' comments, authors typically explain their differences respectfully. Example: *Reviewer #1 thought it would be a good idea to include a reference to the filibuster scene*

in the movie Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. While I understand the need to connect emotionally with the issue, I think that a reference to a fiction character would serve mainly as a distraction. Instead, I have chosen to include specific examples from recent Senate history, including instances of filibuster by Senator Robert Byrd and former Senator Jesse Helms.

A final word on how you should respond to my review. I would like to be treated as another reviewer, another voice in the conversation, rather than someone whose word trumps all other responses. Feel free to take issue with, or follow, my comments just as you would the comments of your peer reviewers.

Response Letters should be submitted with the final draft.