



Description

As a young researcher, every article you publish means a big deal. It takes a lot of time and effort to prepare an article for publication. If one of your [papers reaches the peer review](#) stage, you would wait anxiously for the outcome. After reading through all the comments very carefully, you would do your best to address all the concerns pointed out by the reviewers.

Most of the reviewer comments are often helpful and constructive. Some are less helpful, but still positive. However, there are a few [peer review](#) comments that are simply rude. These comments [do the most damage to a researcher's career](#) and can deeply affect their confidence and motivation.

How Common are Rude Comments?

Recently, I came across a study where several researchers had faced this issue with peer reviewers. A new study in *PeerJ* [surveyed 1106 scientists from 46 countries](#). The researchers covered 14 disciplines while keeping the participants anonymous.

More than half of the scientists in the study said they had received at least one “unprofessional” peer review comment. Most others had received more than one rude comment. This issue is so common that there is even a Facebook group with 25,000 members that discuss these problems!

Unprofessional comments include ones that are not constructive, make personal attacks, or are just too harsh. For example, a Spanish researcher received a comment stating that the reviewer had not even bothered to read the article as they had assumed the English would be bad.

Do Journal Editors Have a Role to Play?

Fiona Fidler, a metaresearcher at the University of Melbourne, was outraged when she discovered that her appraisal of a submitted paper [had been drastically changed before being sent to the author](#). The words “very sympathetic” became “generally sympathetic.” “This one is a good example” ended up as “this one still needs work.” Worst of all, she felt that her peer review report to the journal recommended accepting the paper with minor revisions. On the other hand, the decision communicated was the editor’s rejection letter to the author.

She demanded explanations from the journal editor. Later, she got in touch with the author of the paper, Rink Hoekstra. Rink was a psychologist at the University of Groningen. Together, they decided to find out how widespread this practice was.

What Did the Survey Say?

Till date, they've now surveyed 322 editors at high-impact journals across ecology, economics, medicine, physics, and psychology. The study focused on when they think altering peer review reports is justified. The survey was published as a preprint earlier this year at the Open Science Framework and is now under review at *eLife*. According to the survey, 91% of the respondents identified at least one situation in which they would edit a report. More than 80% said they would do so if a reviewer used offensive language or made inappropriate personal comments about the authors. But 8% said they would change the reviewer's overall recommendation—even without their permission. This was a shocking revelation to Fiona as well as the whole research community.

Should Journal Editors Be Allowed to Make Such Changes?

Few journals offer explicit guidance on when editing peer review reports is and isn't permissible. Researchers think they ought to, and should allow reviewers to opt out from being edited. No matter how well-intentioned the editors may be, clear policies will ensure a transparent and unbiased process. Many journals have a safeguard in place: They [share all reviews and the editorial decision with reviewers](#), allowing them to see how their comments were communicated to the authors. However, about 20% editors in the survey reported that their journals do not send out any communication (neither the reports nor the decision letters) to the reviewers.

Sometimes, if the reports are drastically different, the editor might invite one or two more peer reviewers to see if a "majority view" can be reached. Alternatively, the editor might give more weightage to the experienced or well-published reviewer, or the one that they have had a longer working relationship with.

Editors, too, are experts in their fields and will be experienced in using their own judgement in responding to mixed reviews. It is important to remember that it is the editor, not the reviewer, who makes the final decision on whether to accept or reject a paper. This decision will depend on many factors.

Have you experienced rude comments for your research papers? Were they different from what was shared originally by the reviewers? Please share your thoughts and suggestions with us in the comments below!

Category

1. Publishing Research
2. Understanding Ethics

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