Surviving a Bad Peer Review

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So the reviewers' comments have come in and they aren't good. Not terrible, but negative enough that the editor has requested a response before making a decision on publication.

How to Respond?

First of all put aside your ego. Read the reviewers' comments dispassionately, like a true professional, and after your blood has stopped boiling, begin to consider exactly what prompted their comments. Did the reviewer misunderstand the content of the paper? Technical points concerning data are generally easy to counter. Maybe a few more details are needed. Was he unaware of literature results which support the conclusions? Referring to citations will usually mollify him. Does the reviewer object that the subject is not novel? Clarify exactly what is new. Is the reviewer a rival researcher who wants to crush a potential challenger in his field? (This is uncommon but not unheard of.) If so, his comments will probably be dismissive but vague. The work is "**old hat**," "**Johnny come Lately**," "**nothing new**."

But whatever his comments, tactfully point out evidence to the contrary, focusing on the data. Never impugn a reviewer's motives or attack back. The reviewer may be a respected and influential name in the field. Fanning the flames of a controversy creates heat but no light and may prompt a career long feud. Finally, take the reviewers' comments seriously. Consider whether they might be right on some points. Perhaps the paper needs revision.

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This process happened to me in one of my early submissions as a graduate student. Three reviews of a communication came back, two of them negative, though for opposite reasons. One stated that the mechanisms proposed were unprecedented. The other considered the mechanisms virtually the same as that of a paper that had been published recently. The first reviewer was simply not aware of the paper cited by the second reviewer; had he known of it, he would have been more supportive. The second reviewer's comments had a kernel of truth, however. The paper did propose a rather complicated mechanism with many alternative routes, some of which were similar to the cited paper.

A communication is supposed to be direct and concise. Perhaps we were trying to cram a full paper into a communication format. So, my adviser and I revised the paper, cutting out much of the mechanistic speculation and retaining only that which was the most novel and the most plausible.

In our response to the editor we emphasized the novelty of the proposed mechanisms and it was published without any further difficulties.

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