

## Making your point-by-point

Your paper went out to review, and after anxious waiting, you receive the letter asking for a revised paper. However, those ever-demanding editors and reviewers want more. One of the most important elements of a revision is the point-by-point response. Here are some tips for making it more effective.

Of course, logic and a sound scientific argument are fundamental to a good point-by-point response, but this is meant to be a positive scientific discussion aimed at a simple outcome—buttressing the science—and that can require some give and take from all parties involved. So here is some advice on what to do (and not to do) to get your point-by-point across.

**Keep to the point.** We internally call this a point-by-point rather than a rebuttal, implying that it makes a series of points in response to each point raised by the reviewers. We will, and indeed have, read through 17-page point-by-points. But the longer the document gets, the more likely it is that the essence of your arguments will be lost in the mix. If this happens, we will ask you for a rewrite, as we want to be sure the reviewers will not be put off; so you'll save time by keeping it succinct and directly addressing the points raised by the reviewers to start with.

**Keep it objective.** We have received comments from bewildered reviewers who do not understand why the tone of the point-by-point is so aggressive. Therefore, we will sometimes ask you to rewrite your response if it is overly pugnacious and we feel that this could affect the outcome of the review. This is supposed to be a productive discussion, not fisticuffs, so your best bet is to keep the emotion out of it, even if the reviewer's wording might have seemed overly strong. Actually, there are two opportunities for you to respond to the review. One is in the cover letter to yours truly, and when making your point to us editors, you can be forthright. But in the section the reviewers see, be diplomatic, without watering down the point at hand or being obsequious.

**Keep things under control.** There are definitely times for making a logical argument rather than adding new data and experimentation. That said, when fundamental technical concerns are raised or missing controls are being requested, the point-by-point is not the place for trying to dazzle your reviewers with argument and debate skills. Know when to go to the bench and when to argue. Carefully read the decision letter (and if you have questions let us know) to see whether there are additional suggested experiments that are required for resubmission.

**The scope of things.** Some requests might genuinely be beyond the scope of the manuscript or might simply be unfeasible. Make your response here as objective as possible. Say clearly and succinctly if something

is unfeasible or if you think the results of such an experiment would be uninterpretable, and in both cases explain clearly why (pointing to the literature if needed) and how long the experiment will take to help make the case. But try not to salami-slice. Saving data for another publication when it fits into the scope of the current submission and would considerably strengthen the paper seems like a lost opportunity for rapid publication.

**Some final points.** There are some don'ts that should be obvious; but just in case, here are a few, in no particular order:

1. Telling us about your reputation, your pedigree, number of citations of your previous papers, your h-index, other *Nature* journals you have recently published in, etc. All interesting information but not pertinent to deciding the fate of the paper at hand.
2. Celebrity endorsements. Letting us know that a Nobel laureate enjoyed your talk at a recent meeting. Good to know but relatively meaningless. In fact, you never know—they could be moonlighting as your most critical anonymous reviewer.
3. Trying to guess who the reviewers are and then launching into a diatribe about their qualifications (or lack thereof).
4. And finally, one of my personal favorites: "You recently published an even worse paper."

All of these can be amusing to varying degrees but will do little to further your case.

Overall, it can be helpful to put yourself in the reviewer's shoes and compose a response s/he would find appropriate, where the concerns raised are considered and fully addressed. In its ideal state, the review process is a positive and constructive back and forth, an intellectual discussion in which the manuscript is the ultimate beneficiary. Although it can be frustrating to be told at this stage that further revisions and experiments are a condition for publication of work that you felt was complete enough to submit, a common refrain after publication is for authors to express that, with the benefit of hindsight, the review process strengthened the paper. And a strengthened paper submitted at revision is the strongest rebuttal of all. ■