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Road to PhD: how to handle the review reports

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Abstract: When you get a chance to revise your paper, you are one step closer to publication. The challenge is how to react to the criticism. It is a part of the publication process and requires experience to know how to deal with it. You should be able to manage both fair and harsh criticism, but what if the reviewers provide only generic comments, give unreasonable requests, completely fail to understand your key points, or ask to cite irrelevant references? This paper summarizes the main outcomes of the review process and gives advice on how to address some of the more challenging situations.

1. Introduction

Writing articles is a key skill for completing a PhD. It consists of three parts:

1. Doing research
2. Writing articles
3. Handling the peer review process

The first part is fun. People enjoy conducting research, inventing new things, and testing their ideas. However, even the best ideas and results are worth much if you do not publish them (unless you plan to utilize them yourself for commercialization or otherwise). Publishing your results is essential, not only for sharing the ideas but also to reward yourself mentally.

Writing requires significant effort, but you can handle it with strong determination, practice, and utilizing some inspirational [SixRules] and technical writing guidance [Ecarnot, Lebrun]. If you are lucky, you have also a good supervisor. They might not be your best friend, tend to give you a hard time and require perfection (fixes after fixes), but their advice is invaluable. The more you put effort early, the less you will suffer later during the peer review.

When your paper is ready, it is better to *submit and forget* [SixRules]. In other words, it is better to focus on the next paper rather than checking the manuscript status every day. The review result will come when it comes. The review process can be very challenging and nerve-racking, so it's better to save your energy when the time is right.

When you receive the review reports, it is time to act. After the first reading the reports, no need for panic or immediate action. Sleepover and continue digesting the reports the next day. Two pieces of advice in [Martin] are: (1) let your emotions calm down first, (2) tackle the comments one by one.

A good start is to draft a response letter. Extract the key points of every comment and write a brief note of your planned action. Every item should contain three parts:

- Reviewer comment
- Your response
- Your action *in the paper*

The reviewer's comment can be copied as such or summarized as its most relevant part. You can revise your response letter several times from the original (even furious) reaction to a more neutral, calm, and objective response. The actual revisions can be done after you have concluded how to respond.

The reviewer comments may not be as bad as you first think. Maintaining objectivity is important, regardless of how subjective the review reports may be. Seeing the comments from the reviewer's perspective helps.

There are different types of review feedback, and the best strategy must be learned for each of them. Some comments may require lots of work, but many can be handled through carefully targeted minor text revisions (or additions). There are also deconstructive comments that may take lots of your time for no benefit, mess up your graduation schedule, and, in the worst case, kill your motivation.

The peer review itself is necessary as the validity of scientific papers must be verified. There will always be low-quality papers around, even erroneous ones. The peer review is expected to clean the literature, at least from the most obvious flaws and harmful papers. Unfortunately, many reviewers believe the peer review process should eliminate **all** but the most perfect papers from the literature.

The journal's submission systems may give you a false impression of a professionally operated process with fair reviews and logical editorial decisions at the end. Instead, the system is hindered by poor editorial management, lazy editors and reviewers, and lengthy review times that often yield low-quality reports, focusing merely on secondary criteria [MDPI].

The system is like a lottery machine where the result depends more on luck than the quality of your paper. Unfortunately, there is very little you can do to influence this. However, if your paper was taken into the peer review process, and you received the review reports, it means good news and time to act.

The remainder of this paper is dedicated to guiding how to address the review reports. Section 2 outlines different editor decisions. Section 3 provides practical examples of various situations and offers guidance on how to address them. A brief conclusion is given in Section 4.

2. Editor's decision

A typical review process ends with one of the following conclusions:

- Minor revisions
- Major revisions
- Reject with encourage to resubmit
- Reject
- Desk reject

Note that many journals ask the reviewer to give recommendations, but the decision is still made solely by the editor regardless of these recommendations. The decision is the editor's subjective choice.

The decision is also not an average of the reviewer's recommendations. Some journals require at least two positive statements (Minor or Major), and some stricter journals may reject even with only one negative recommendation (reject). With such journals, the decision is more categorical.

If the editor is performing their task properly, they should make the decision based on the quality and reliability of the reviewers. He knows who the reviewers are and can estimate the trustworthiness of their review reports. A simple "*Good paper, accept*" recommendation by a PhD student (yes, students can also act as reviewers!) may carry less weight than a report from an experienced professor. Even one reject recommendation can result in a reject decision if it comes from an expert providing strong criticism. The editor may also be more knowledgeable about the topic than the reviewers and may already have their own opinions.

Unfortunately, the associate editor position is not the most wanted role nowadays, and there are many younger scientists (even with thin publication record) in such a role. Even if the editor was highly merited, not all professors are well-suited for the editorial role. The editor may also have accepted their role merely to improve their CV or to boost their ego.

In other words, the peer review lottery is not limited to the choice of the reviewers, but it also covers the choice of editor, their work ethics, fairness, and willingness to spend effort for the papers.

Regardless of the situation, if you have received the editor's decision, it is time to react. I will next give advice on how to react to different decisions with selected examples to make the advice a bit more concrete. I start with the easiest.

2.1 Minor revisions

You just won the lottery. It is rare to get decision with minor revisions for the first submission. All you need to do now is to address (all) the comments **carefully**, and you will get your paper published soon.

The revised version is usually not sent to the reviewers anymore and is checked merely by the editor. Nobody wants to read the entire paper again at this stage. Instead, the editor wants to

get it done step-by-step quickly based on your response letter. So, make the response letter brief but clear. If your comments are factual and convincing, the editor is likely to accept them fast.

After acceptance, the process is handed over to the publisher's staff. They are completely different people who know very little (if anything) about your research. They focus merely on formatting and technical issues to finalize all the small details. English checking may also occur at this stage.

2.2 Major revisions

Congratulations! Your paper has been found suitable for publication but requires some revisions. It is time to carefully read the reports and draft a response letter.

Review reports may feel harsh and cause negative emotions, including anger. No need to react immediately. Sleep overnight. The next day re-read the comments again when calmed down, with a more neutral attitude. It is time to start digesting the comments.

For example, what if the reviewer fails to see something that was clearly stated, say in Section 3.1.2? Think hard about how you could have avoided the misunderstanding. Maybe explain the key point already in the introduction? It is easy to miss important details like this in a quick review. Remember also not to educate the reviewer but revise the paper so that **other** readers will not make the same mistake.

What comments should be addressed? A simple answer is **all**. However, not all reviewers are trustworthy. Never degrade the paper quality just to please the reviewer. To draw the line is not easy. It helps if you can recognize one of the following *fake* reviews:

- Copy-paste
- AI-written
- Hostile

A lazy reviewer may cursorily check the paper and provide some excuses for rejection, but *a Copy-paste reviewer* is even lazier: they may not have even read the paper! Unbelievable or not, but such reviewers exist. Their report can be a copy-paste of some generic template that they can apply to any paper. It may include sparring comments like:

> "*Example section needs to be expanded. Emphasize contribution more, check spelling and grammar.*"

This gives the false impression that the reviewer has read and cares about the quality of your work. No, they don't. The best indicator of a copy-paste report is when there is very little (if any) concrete information taken from your paper. Such a report can end up as follows:

> "*Many academics have discussed issues like those in this paper, the methodology used in this paper is not sufficiently novel. Unfortunately, I don't believe the paper satisfies the magazine's requirements. We should disregard this paper.*"

A more modern variant of the lazy review is the *AI reviewer*, which has a higher chance of fooling the editor. In any case, they are both fake reviews and completely useless. There is no need to try to address their criticism but point it out to the editor.

Those who like to play games might equally well just fake the revisions as well. The AI reviewer won't check them later anyway but will produce another semi-automated review regardless of what you do. The advantage is that if the editor is also acting as a robot, he might count the fake review as a positive one (unless it recommends rejection). The disadvantage is that you have probably submitted to one of the mega-journals that might lose their status later due to sub-standard editorial practices. Whatever your strategy, I recommend honesty and informing the editor, hoping they will disregard this review.

Hostile reviewers can be more troublesome as they have no intention of providing constructive criticism and will never recommend acceptance, no matter how you improve. Their motivation can be simplified as:

> "*I suggest to go for something more interesting*".

Their motivation can be jealousy, or they just want you out of their turf studying the same topic. Unlike the Lazy reviewer, they also have a motivation to dig deeper to write more convincing reports. One example of such a case is reported in [MDPI] (Appendix B; Case 1), where the action seems to be driven by jealousy, but the editor failed to see:

> "*There **must** be something wrong with the paper*."

The problem with a hostile review is that it is more subtle and harder to detect. Note that most reviewers are not hostile themselves, even if their comments are harsh. To sum up, all relevant comments should be addressed in some way, but there is no need to please hostile and fake reviewers.

2.3 Reject with encourage to resubmit

You may receive a rejection decision with the following wording:

> "*We **regret** that your paper, in its present form, is **not acceptable** for publication. **However, if you care to revise** it, we will reconsider it for publication*."

It may sound negative, but essentially, it is the same result as a *Major revision*, with the difference that you need to make a new submission (a bit more paperwork). This decision is used when the reviewer feedback requires extensive revisions, and the paper should be read again by at least one new reviewer who has not seen the previous version.

In theory, such papers should never be sent to the same reviewers again. The reason is that the authors often end up educating the reviewer in the response letter but not improving the paper. You may even succeed in this education by being persistent. The reviewer will eventually learn all the aspects via your dialogue, but this dialogue is not helpful for other readers. For this reason, a paper with excessive revisions should be reviewed by at least one new reviewer who sees it for the first time.

In practice, the editor may use the original reviewers anyway. The reason is that reviewers are hard to find, and it is easier to use the same reviewers for convenience. It is, therefore, important that you include a response letter as in normal revision, but perhaps just a bit shorter and simpler. Essentially, the editor thinks that your paper is publishable but does not want to give a guarantee at this stage.

Speed is a factor. If the revised version goes fast back to the reviewer, the paper can still be fresh in their memory, allowing for a quick check using the response letter rather than re-reading the entire paper. If getting the paper back months later with excessive changes, a re-read is likely to happen, but nobody wants to do that. Remember also that speed is not the primary criterion; carefulness is still the main criterion.

If you educate the reviewer in the response letter, make sure to incorporate the key points into the paper as well. Other readers should not struggle with the same questions later. Editors should especially pay attention to this factor.

The key to success is:

- Make revisions carefully
- Included clear point-by-point response letter
- Send the revised version relatively soon

2.4 Reject

Papers can be rejected several times before eventually being accepted. This is unavoidable and happens for most papers. You just need to revise the paper according to the review feedback and resubmit it elsewhere.

You may have spent months writing your paper and know it inside and out, but the content is new to the reviewer. They might have spent 30-60 minutes casual reading and missed the key points. The reviewer is rarely an expert in your niche research area, either.

A typical publication strategy is to start with a relatively important journal and, after rejection, move down the ladder to the less important journals until you find the journal accepting your paper. However, do not do it as in Figure 1. Two things are likely to happen:

- The journal will use the same reviewer
- Other reviewers are likely to present the same criticism

There are not many experts in your research area, and only a few (if any) are willing to volunteer for review work. It is, therefore, possible that the next journal will find some of the same reviewers. Another reason is that there are a few very active reviewers who volunteer to review for multiple journals and are likely to appear frequently as reviewers on your topic. The reviewer will be very annoyed if he receives the same paper without any modifications. They also have no sympathy about the journal having a lower rank. When this happens to me, I simply copy and paste my previous review and recommend rejection without hesitation.

People also tend to think the same way. If the first reviewer did not understand your point, in all probability, the next reviewer will not understand it either. It is, therefore, essential that you detect the root cause of your writing and revise it accordingly.

Improve your paper and make the necessary changes before resubmitting anywhere, as demonstrated in Figure 2. This will increase your chances of getting the paper accepted.

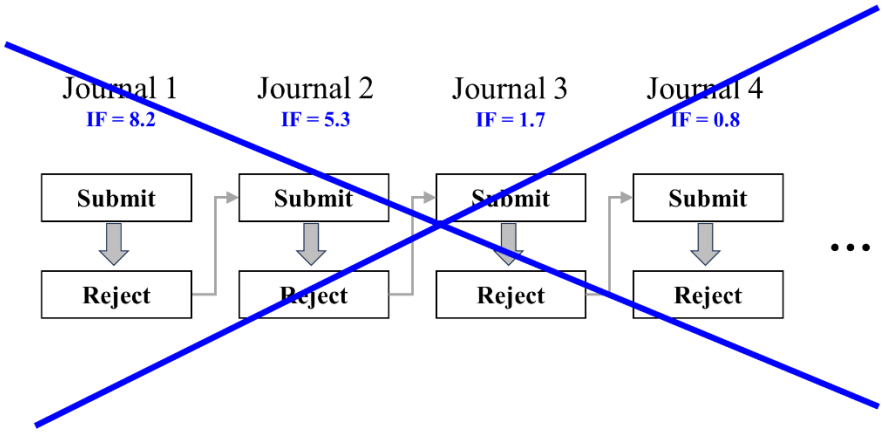


Figure 1: This is **not** the way to react to rejections.

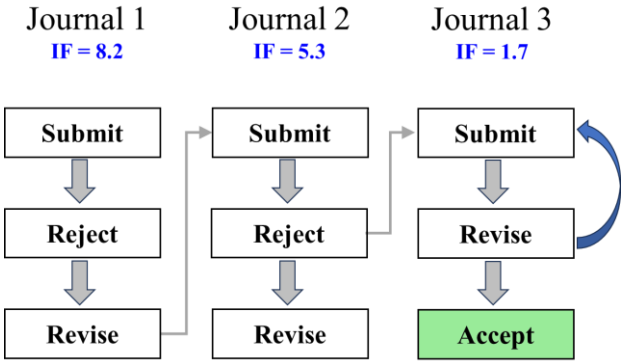


Figure 2: This is the way to react to rejections.

The rejection might be based on two fake reviews and a third real review, suggesting only very minor issues that could have been easily addressed. Bad luck. The only solution is to make those small fixes and submit them to the next journal.

It is possible to write a rebuttal to the editor-in-chief (EiC) to explain one's position, but in most cases, the editors do not care and prefer not to deal with a potentially complex rebuttal matter. EiC might also not want to embarrass their associate editor (AE) due to their mistake, as they depend on the AE's services. The associate editor is also likely a colleague of EiC anyway.

I have managed to overrule the decision of our paper at least once, but usually, rebuttal is just a waste of time; see [MDPI] (Appendix A; Case 3). It is better to adopt those little fixes of valid reports and move on by submitting them to the next journal.

2.5 Reject with transfer proposal

In the case of large publishers, you may receive a transfer proposal to another journal of the same publisher after the rejection. The advantage is that you can avoid excessive reformatting of your paper and sometimes do not even need to make a new submission, which makes your life a bit easier.

The disadvantage is that the suggested journals are rarely as relevant to your research as the original journal, which rejected the paper. It is, therefore, a compromise. The suggested journals are also very likely to be open-access journals with publication fees. The transfer strategy is a component of their business model for generating revenue [Butler, 2023]. The publisher's own *mega journal* is likely included in the list of proposed journals.

It is up to you and your institution to decide if you are willing to pay the fee. Note also that the mega journals do not guarantee the process is any smoother. On the contrary, you are even more likely to face lazy and fake review reports. Still, mega journals are more likely to find reviewers with positive attitudes, albeit at the cost of less expertise in the review process, compared to niche journals. Money talks.

2.6 Desk reject

Desk rejection is both a curse and a blessing. Curse because you had probably chosen the most relevant journal for your paper, and now you need to find a new, less relevant journal. Blessing in the sense that the desk rejections are likely to arrive within a few days or a week, not months.

Unfortunately, the operation of some journals is so unprofessional that even the desk rejection can take as much time as a quick review process. I have had desk rejection of papers due to both being overlength and underlength [MDPI]. Both took **two months** to receive. The latter was actually within the target range but used different line spacing (1.5 lines instead of double spacing), making it appear too short. It took two months to get the rejection and 30 seconds to fix it. This was a tier 1 level journal.

The EiC defended (by email) that the journal receives 3000 submissions per year. They had nine associate editors-in-chief and 234 associate editors at that time, but the EiC said many of them respond very slowly, if at all. This shows how bad the operation of a journal of a large publisher can be and how low priority the editors give to their duty.

The editor-in-chief can make desk rejections after pre-screening for several reasons:

- Out of scope
- Low quality
- Low significance
- Not finding an associate editor / reviewers

Being told that your paper is out of scope can be annoying, especially if you had selected the best matching journal for your topic. The real scope of the journal, however, can be much narrower than the journal title implies. It is often limited to the preferences of the editors. Some

journals may also accept only papers that use the same research methodology. For example, qualitative research is rarely tolerated by editors doing quantitative research themselves.

Rejection due to insufficient quality can also be unmotivating, especially if you have given the paper your best effort and received no concrete feedback on how to improve. But why would the editor consider that the quality of your paper is not worth the time of reviewers? A fair reason is when the expected revisions are so excessive that they would become a burden to the editor and reviewers. Nobody is motivated to read poorly prepared papers. The elementary issues need to be fixed first.

If this happens to you, ask your supervisor for advice. If you do not have one, or they do not provide sufficient guidance, you may have missed advice on starting PhD studies, especially the part on how to select a supervisor [Road1]. The editors and reviewers are not supposed to act as replacements for your supervisor.

Many journals also apply pre-selection by taking only the most promising papers for peer review. This is elitism. The only comment you may get is something like below [MDPI]:

> *"I regret to inform you that your paper cannot be accepted. The journal is very competitive, and we only accept approximately 10% of the submitted papers. We regret that we do not have space for some quite good papers."*

The journals aim at boosting their impact factor by being highly selective. The editors also want to save their own time (at the cost of authors): fewer papers to review, less work for them. This is, of course, useless to authors as there is no feedback on how to improve. One cannot influence the significance. The readers decide after it has been published.

3. Review feedback

Congratulations if you got this far! The next step is to analyze the reviewer reports. Positive and encouraging reports are not self-evident. Negative, discouraging, and even harsh reports are more common. Your skin will definitely become thicker during the process.

Take your time to digest the report. It is good to keep in mind that researchers are critical by nature, and their reports are usually not personal. The best attitude is to disregard all bashing comments by setting aside negative feelings and focus on the facts. Analyze the comments and try to think why the reviewer said this way.

Fake and hostile reviews must be dealt with differently. You can train yourself to detect them by analyzing the comments in Figure 3.

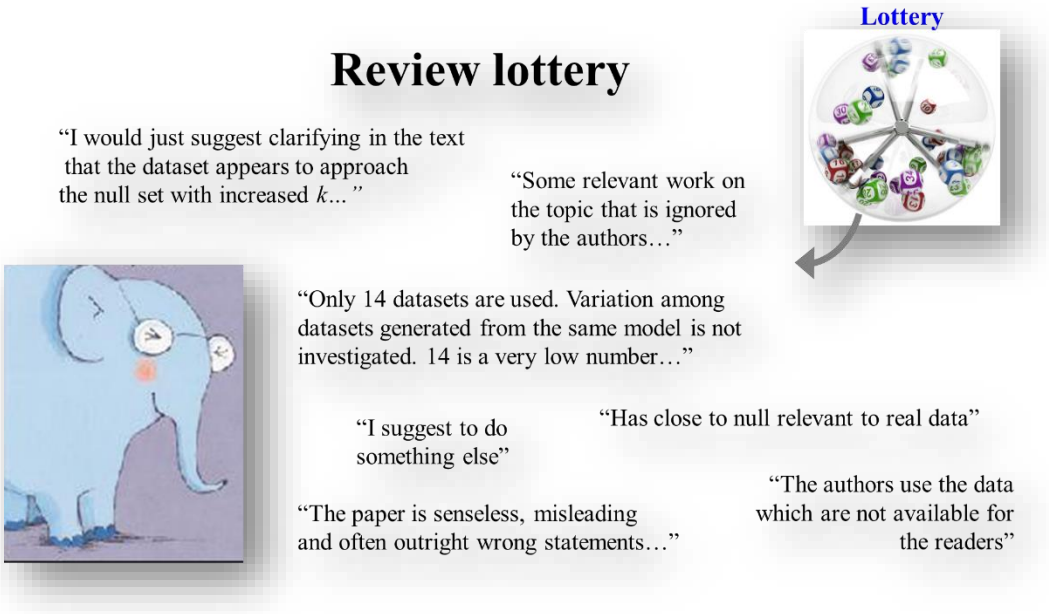


Figure 3: Review lottery. Can you spot the positive comments from the useless ones, and how would you respond to them?

3.1 Good news is no news

Next, we focus on those fair reports, no matter positive or negative. For a company executive, good news is no news. Customers keep buying our products. Fine. This is what we expect, but it does not have much information, see Figure 4.

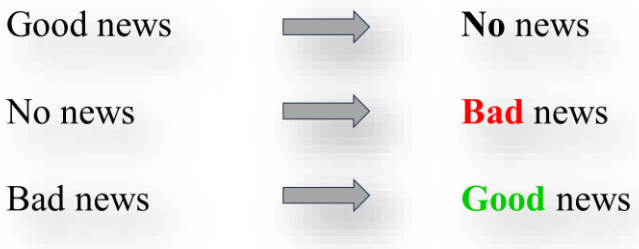


Figure 4: Bad comments may not be so bad after all.

In science, you might consider acceptance as good news. However, we are now dealing with the comments of the reviewer who recommends major revisions (or reject), and your task is to improve the paper accordingly. In this regard, stating that something is good, does not contain much information. For example:

> *"Overall, **well written interesting paper that I enjoy reading**. However, the fundamental flaws pointed out might change the results and conclusions of the paper so major revisions would be needed before publication."*

Nice words, but the real news is somewhere else in the report. Positive words signal the reviewer has a positive attitude toward the paper, and you can probably handle his comments without further help. Go back to work.

No news is bad news. Customers are unhappy with your product, but instead of complaining, they stop using it and silently purchase a competitor's product without you even realizing it. In science, it may refer to desk rejection or a fake review that contains no information. If the paper is rejected without any feedback to improve, it is useless. No news.

Bad news is good news. If the customer complains about flaws in the product, consider it as a free quality check of your product. It may be essential to identify critical issues and improve your product so that other customers do not silently walk away.

Rejection itself is still bad news, but here, we focus on the actual, detailed criticism. If the reviewer pinpoints the problem, it is much easier to fix than a comment merely stating that the "*experiments are unconvincing*," which still provides no information. If it continues by stating, "*they are limited to 2 and 3 dimensional data sets, behavior in higher dimensional spaces remains unknown*," the fix becomes obvious: add data with higher dimensions.

3.2 Reviewer does not like the paper

The paper is important for you. As the contributing author, you know how much effort and care you have put into it. But do not expect the reviewer to like the paper. They rarely do.

One reason is that the reviewer is often a non-expert working on a topic far away from yours. If they happen to work on the same research question, their views on how to address it are likely to be very different. The review report is usually completely different from what you might have expected; see Table 1. This is where the thickening of your skin starts.

Table 1: Expected review feedback versus reality.

Expectation:	**Reality:**
- Read with interest	- Found it boring
- Read thoroughly	- A quick look (at abstract)
- Appreciates topic	- Recommends change topic
- Likes your writing	- Did not understand
- Impressed by results	- Did not even look at the results
- Spends entire day	- Quick read, 30-60 mins at most
- Recommends accept	- Recommends reject

Why does this happen? New PhD students often have the illusion that reviewers are carefully selected. On the contrary, the topic of the reviewer can be only remotely related (if at all). The reason is that reviewers are very hard to find. The editor may need to send 10 invitations to guarantee 2-3 reviews. My record as editor so far is about 25.

The best reviewer is a person who is interested in your research. There are always such individuals, but they are hard to identify during the review process. On the contrary, they will find your paper via some recommendation service, but only after it has been published. The

editors do not have access to the same magnitude of potential readers as large social media platforms do and have a hard time pinpointing the interested readers, see Figure 5. As a result, the reviewers end up being semi-random choices.

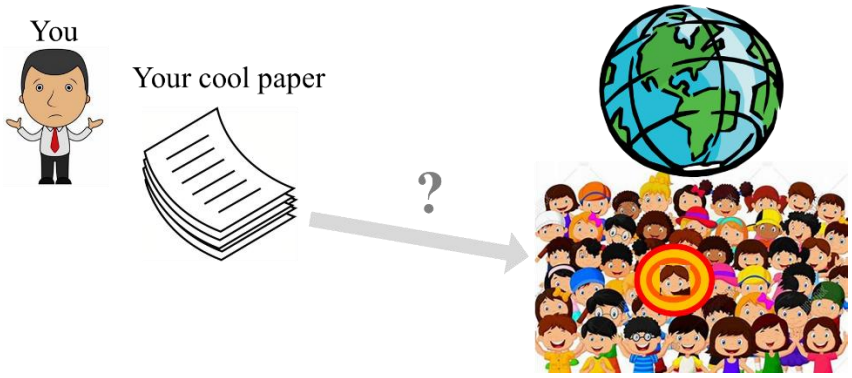


Figure 5: There are interested readers for your paper out there somewhere but it is hard to find them during the review process.

3.3 Which comments are worth addressing?

The simple answer is that **all** relevant points should be addressed. And do it in the paper, not only in the response letter.

What should be addressed:

- Everything. All relevant points should be addressed.

Did the reviewer even read it?

- You did not write it clearly enough.
- Misunderstandings you can explain in response letter…
- but revise the paper to prevent misunderstandings by others.
- Most fixes require just simple text revisions.
- Do not let the comments make the paper worse.
- Do not fix what is not broken!

Some students tend to overdo. The goal of revisions is not to conduct new research but rather to improve the reporting of existing research. In general, no need to fix what is not broken. If you spot minor errors on your own, fine, fix them. However, there is no need to improve the paper in other parts at this stage unless you have missed something obvious, such as the state-of-the-art.

3.4 Make it clear

Many comments seem stupid at first, but become more sensible after you manage to see them from the reviewer's point of view. Remember that you have spent weeks or months working on the paper, whereas the reviewer sees it for the first time and has spent only about 30 minutes

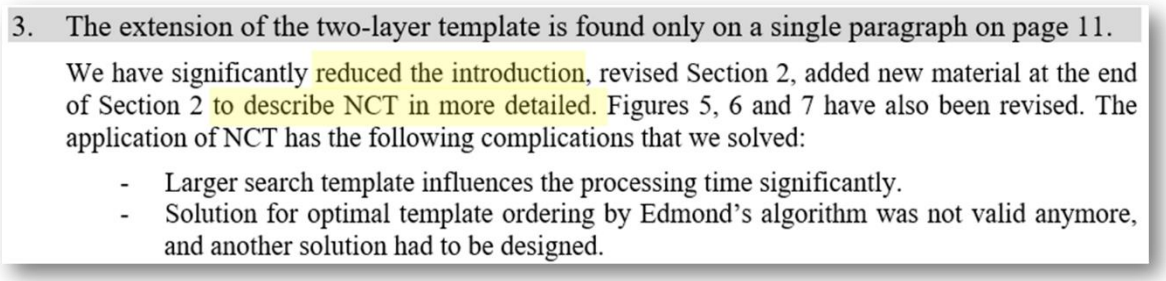
casually reviewing it. The paper is not important to them, and they would rather spend time on their own paper.

Even if the facts are in the paper (Section 3.1.2), the reviewer might not have read that far. If the fact is important for the paper, why not tell it already in the introduction? Simple revisions in the introduction can easily overcome many reviewer comments. Some things are better told on, even by adding redundancy.

The biggest problem with submitting papers to me as an editor and reviewer is that it is hard to understand the key points. Things are obvious to the authors but not to the reviewer.

It would be highly useful if you could see it from the reviewer's point of view. Why did the reviewer ask such a silly question? Do not assume the reviewer is stupid or that he should have read everything. People are searching for the key points and want to find them fast. Nobody is going to read the entire paper anyway, so don't hide it. Instead, think carefully how to prevent the reviewer *not* seeing it. Otherwise, the next reader will fall into the same trap and miss your key points. Better prepare in advance.

In brief, the problem is usually in the paper, not in the reader's mind. The solution can be a simple clarification in the introduction. Sometimes, the contribution becomes clearer after reducing other parts hiding it, see Figure 6.



3. The extension of the two-layer template is found only on a single paragraph on page 11.

We have significantly reduced the introduction, revised Section 2, added new material at the end of Section 2 to describe NCT in more detailed. Figures 5, 6 and 7 have also been revised. The application of NCT has the following complications that we solved:

- Larger search template influences the processing time significantly.
- Solution for optimal template ordering by Edmond's algorithm was not valid anymore, and another solution had to be designed.

Figure 6: The key contribution was originally hidden somewhere in the technical part but becomes obvious after revisions. Here, the response also includes changes caused by other comments. Overall, the idea is also to demonstrate the effect of the new extension.

Another example is shown in Figure 7, where the reviewer's comments are technical and, this time, relatively easy to address. In this case, the changes are fully explained in the response letter so that the reviewer does not even need to read the revised paper. Being polite helps, but give thanks only occasionally, and never when you did not follow the reviewer's suggestion.

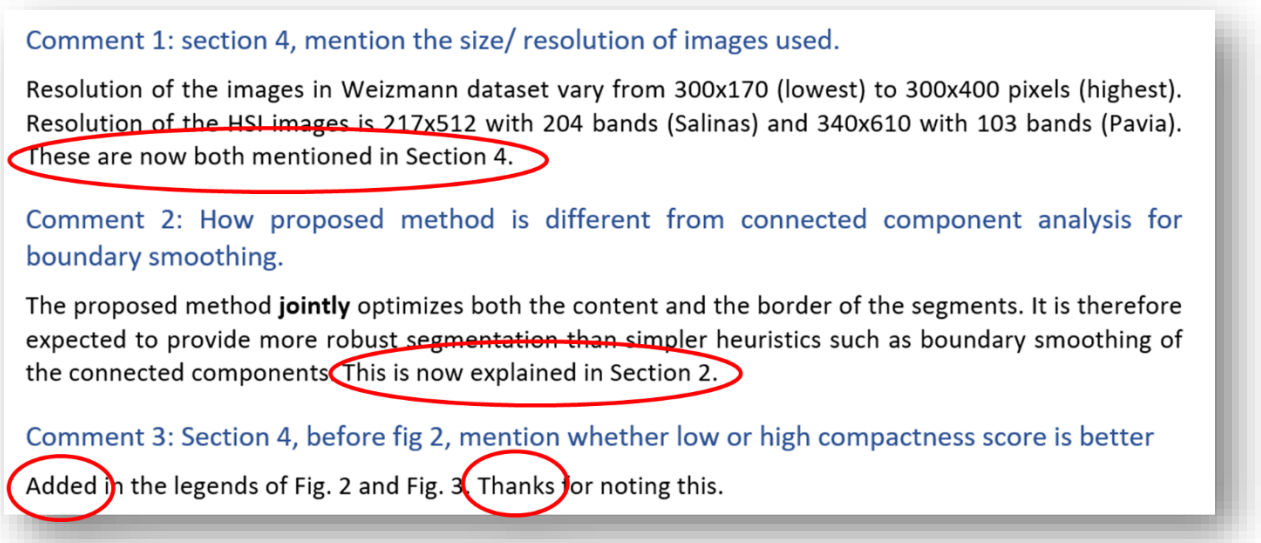


Figure 7: Self-contained (but brief) response comments that allow the reviewer to check your revisions even without opening the article file. Very convenient.

3.5 Novelty

Probably the most common criticism is about novelty. Computer scientists continuously invent new methods based on already-known components. Novelty is there but rarely impressive to the reviewer. There is no easy way around such criticism.

One way is to emphasize that the paper makes a systematic search for the best combination. It is also important to give credit (by citing) the papers where these components were **used** for the first time for the same research problem. Otherwise, the reviewer's attitude is likely to remain one of "*reinventing the wheel*" if you ignore existing solutions that use the same components.

An example of how to structure the response is shown in Figure 8. The reviewer comments can be copied as such, or just as an extract of the relevant part. Use emphasis to separate it from your response. In the paper, show also the modifications by coloring; see Figure 9.

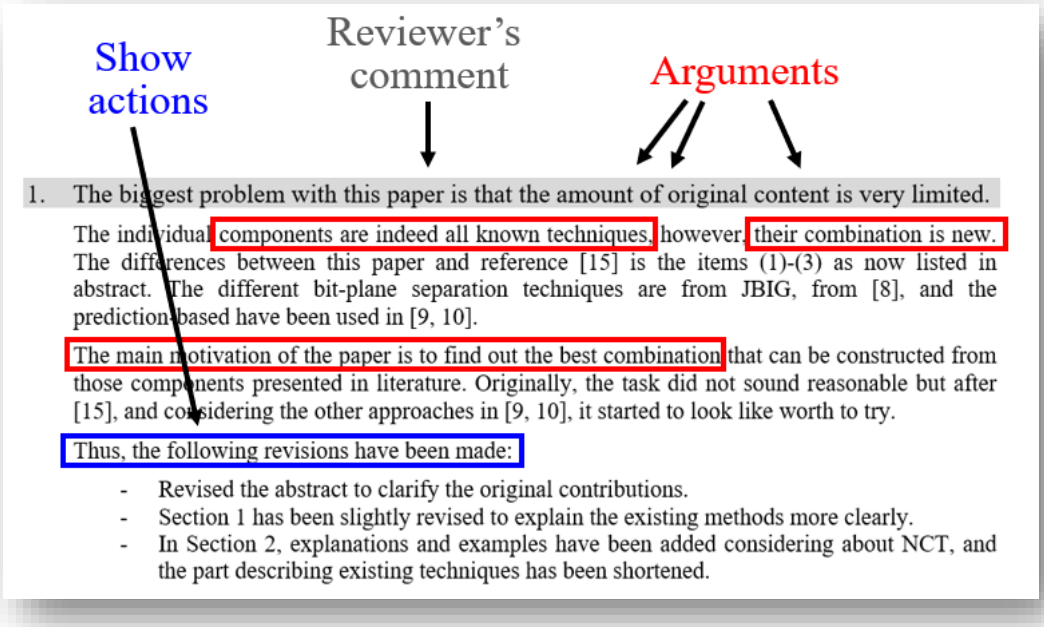


Figure 8: A structured response item must include three components: (1) the reviewer's comment, (2) your response, and (3) actions taken in the paper.

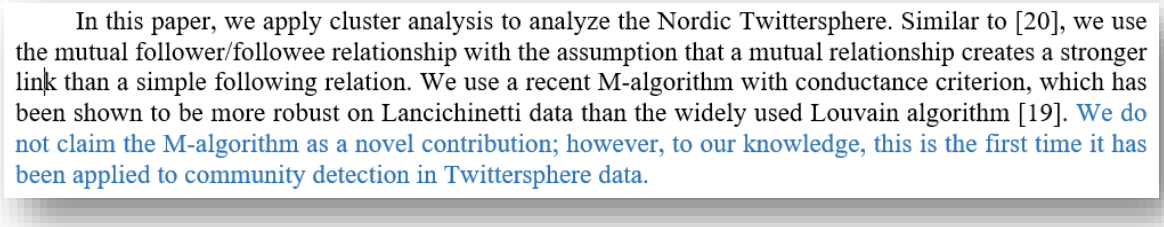


Figure 9: Mark the most significant revisions in the text by coloring.

3.5 Seemingly tough comments

Reviewer comments can be very generic, like "*novelty is limited*," or seemingly tough, like "*theoretical analysis fully missing*." If the Lazy reviewer provided these, the good news is that they rarely take their task too seriously. You may escape even from tough comments as the reviewer may not check the responses carefully. In the responses in Figure 10, we focused only on the relevant comment (efficiency) and completely ignored the comment about innovation (novelty). We also made it very easy for the reviewer by simplifying our responses.

In the example in Figure 11, our contribution was to adopt the Mumford-Shah model within the k-means algorithm for low-level image segmentation [MumfordShah]. The reviewer complained that the theoretical analysis was "*fully missing*" and encouraged us to do a "*thorough check on the theoretical side of the work*." There was no chance we could have developed a new theory for this paper. Instead, we decided to point out theories from existing papers.

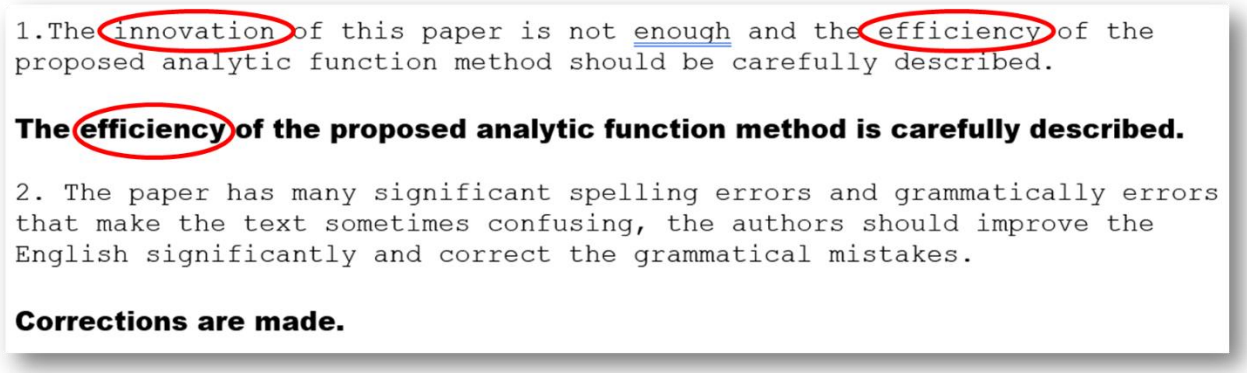


Figure 10: When revising the paper [Analytical], we ignored the useless comment about the novelty (innovation) and gave full focus only on the relevant comment (efficiency). The reviewer suggested acceptance in the next round.

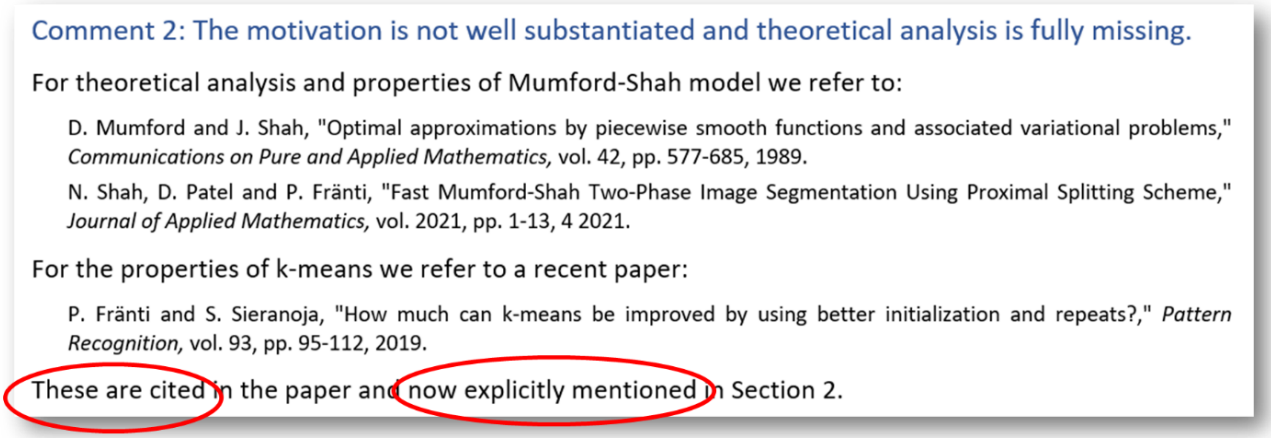


Figure 11: Theory is missing. After our response, we did not hear from this reviewer.

The comment in Figure 12 also appears challenging, as it asks for "*a very deep analysis*." However, the comment is not detailed at all, and the reviewer has a positive attitude. In the response letter, we extracted the key points from the comments and responded to them in a structured manner. The solution was to clarify the results in a simplified manner (reduction from 0.24 to 0.18), put them into the context of existing work (Reg-KM), and present them also in conclusion accordingly: "*25% better accuracy than Reg-KM, 10 times faster than MS-DR*"; see [MumfordShah].

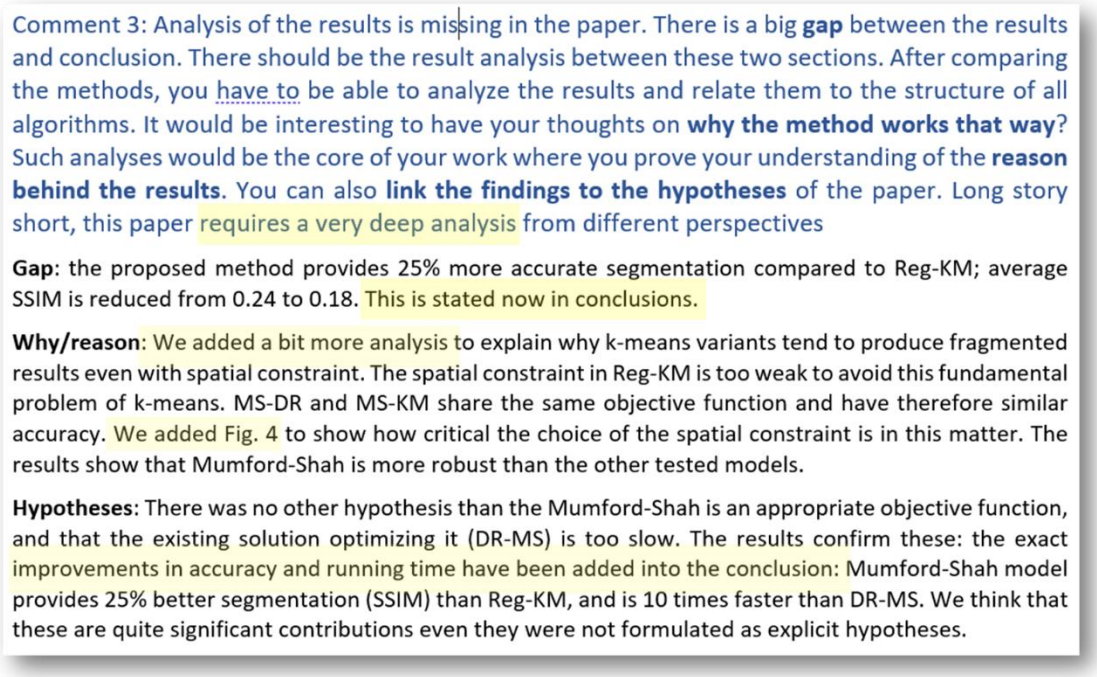


Figure 12: Very deep analysis was needed in [MumfordShah].

3.6 No action

Ideally, you should never explain only to the reviewer without adding anything to the paper. However, if further revisions would not improve the paper, it is better not to make them. The challenge is how to respond to the reviewer in this case.

First, think carefully about how to re-emphasize your key points, even by adding redundant text somewhere. Every reviewer comment you ignore adds to the reviewer's frustration and increases the likelihood of a negative outcome. If you are still certain about not changing anything, the following examples are provided on how to do *'nothing*' successfully.

In Figure 13, the reviewer was wondering about something that was already well covered in the paper and thoroughly dealt with an earlier paper [Benchmark]. Thus, we simply *agreed* with the reviewer and pointed out a few places in the paper where the issue was discussed. The reviewer will probably move on or may not even notice that nothing was revised.

Another exception is a reviewer with relevance bias [MDPI] who questioned the relevance of the paper to the journal. In this case, the best solution we could think of was just to explain and cross your fingers as there is nothing you can do about it in the paper, see Figure 14. It may even go as far as the reviewer asking you to change your research focus, which is meaningless for the research already completed.

The authors state repeatedly that k-means performs poorly when clusters are well separated. My assumption is that the authors mean that the impact of initialization is more severe for well-separated clusters. If properly initialized, K-means should not have any issues with finding well separated groups. Again, how do the authors define good separation?

Correct. K-means performs poorly when clusters are well separated, and the consequence is that the impact of initialization is more severe for well-separated clusters. This info can be found in the paper in several places:

- Section 2.3: "*Generally the clustering problem is the easier the more the clusters are separated. However, in [39] it was found that for k-means it is just the opposite;*"
- Section 4.7: "*Cluster overlap is the biggest factor. If there is high overlap, k-means iterations work well regardless of the initialization. If there is no overlap, then the success depends completely on the initialization technique: if it fails, k-means will also fail.*"

Figure 13: No revisions were made here. All the answers are already there in the paper and merely re-emphasized in the text (by coloring) and in the response letter.

3. *Not strongly related to multimedia. Many part are talking about location stratgy, considering about weight graph, for content about image and other multimedia is too few. Experiments focus more on human reaction and interface (like last question in Table IV and whole table III).*

There are several similar papers cited on location-based games and they have been published in wide variety of forums including computer entertainment, computer-supported work companion, communications, HCI, HCI in game play, digital games, operational research, health, interaction design, computer-assisted learning and even SIGGRAPH and SIGSPATIAL.

There is no single ACM transaction focusing merely on games. *ACM Trans. on Multimedia Computing Communications and Applications* have been selected as the closest match to our topic. The paper does involve three types of media: images (targets and maps), sound (user guidance), and GPS (for positioning), and ACM-TOMM has three key topics: multimedia computing, multimedia communications, multimedia applications. Connection is lose but it is there.

Besides multimedia, the paper has minor aspects on education, human-computer interaction and even algorithmic (TSP) but the gaming is the main topic. We study playability, how to use and verify location, exergames, educational, safety issues, motivation, result analysis and content creation. The paper focuses more on analytical study based on literature rather than experimental.

Figure 14: Sometimes, the only solution is just to explain, as there is nothing you can change in the paper without degrading it. It would be useless for other readers to explain why it is in this journal. Most interested readers will find it via various recommendation systems, not because of it is in this journal. The example is from the paper [O-Mopsi].

The lazy reviewer may also not deserve any action. Our simple tactic in Figure 15 was to turn the potentially negative comment into a positive one by simply agreeing with the reviewer. The paper [KM-init] received a total of 62 comments from the three reviewers (22, 34, and 6), of which the first two were serious, and the third was from the Lazy reviewer. In the second round, reviewer #1 suggested acceptance, reviewer #2 provided two minor comments, and reviewer #3 (the lazy one) was absent.

Fake review rarely warrants any action. We received the copy-paste report in Figure 16 to our paper titled "*Neighborhood averaging for improving outlier detectors*." The only information related to the paper is the paper title copied in the report. Otherwise, the report could be provided to almost any paper as such. Trying to please such a reviewer would be a waste of time and only degrade the paper's quality.

The authors propose a series of experiments without methodology proposed.

Correct. The paper is more like review/survey type of a paper with strong experimental contribution in comparison of the existing methods.

Figure 15: Lazy reviewer noting the obvious. A survey-type paper rarely proposes a new methodology. Better just agree with the reviewer without even trying to revise anything.

1. The motivation behind the study should be emphasized more, especially the key benefits of the findings when compared to others, which should be amply illustrated.
2. Since the paper contains a few spelling and grammar mistakes, English needs to be further improved. The paper also has some editing issues.
3. The example section needs to be expanded more and should include some comments that demonstrate how effective and efficient the suggested method is in comparison to others.
4. The authors should consider current references, and the following recently released papers on this general topic may be useful for the authors to make some comparisons and comments.

In this paper, the issue of **neighborhood averaging for improving outlier detectors** was discussed. Though many academics have discussed issues like those in this paper, the methodology used in this paper is not sufficiently novel. Unfortunately, I don't believe the paper satisfies the magazine's requirements. We should disregard this paper.

Figure 16: A Copy-paste (or *Template*) reviewer using a fixed template. The only addition in this report received from *Information* Science was the copy-paste of the paper title. The paper was later published with a different title in [Yang, 2024].

3.7 Asking for new references

It is common for reviewers to request new references of one of these types:

- Relevant reference
- Only slightly relevant
- Completely irrelevant
- No reference given!

In the first case, thank the reviewer. He did you a favor. It is not that the reviewer wants to dismiss your contribution, but they either know these references (possibly being an author) or simply Googled them to see what references you might have missed. Check the recommended papers and find a way to cite them. If possible, compare your results against them; see Figure 17.

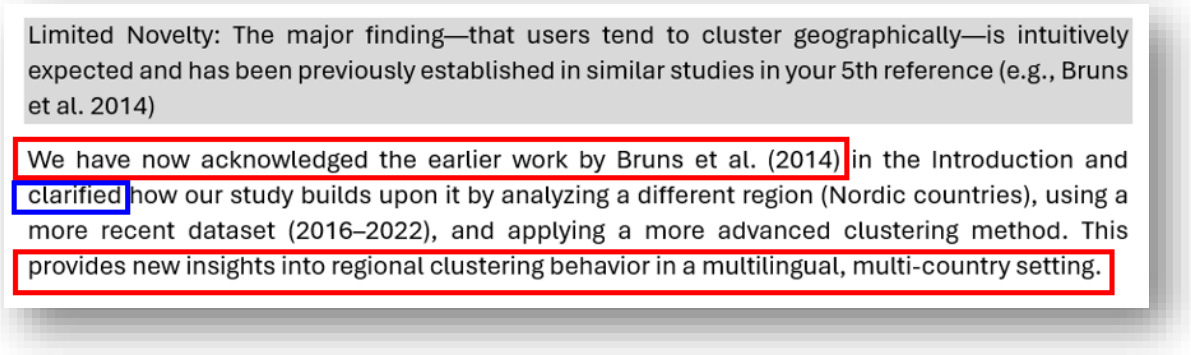


Figure 17: Emphasizing novelty by relating it to existing literature.

If the reference is only slightly relevant, try to find a meaningful way to cite (see Figure 18) rather than giving a shallow thanks like "*We thank your insightful comment and consider it as future research*." This would give the impression that you are going to ignore it in the future as well, which annoys the reviewer even more, even if you had a valid argument for excluding it.

If the pointed references are co-authored by the reviewer, consider it as a small *tax* for the review duty. No harm is done if the references are even slightly relevant. Journal-level taxation also happens; see Figure 19. We were asked to show the relevance of our paper to the journal. The paper [KM-init] itself is obviously relevant to the journal, and it has been the most cited in the journal ever since its publication in 2019. Requests for self-citations like this are a common practice among many journals to boost their impact factor.

1. Literature pointed out

Reviewer pointed out three papers:

[1] Zhong, S. (2005, July). Efficient online spherical k-means clustering. In Proceedings. 2005 IEEE International Joint Conference on Neural Networks, 2005. (Vol. 5, pp. 3180-3185). IEEE.

[2] Nielsen, F., Nock, R., & Amari, S. I. (2014). On clustering histograms with k-means by using mixed α-divergences. Entropy, 16(6), 3273-3301.

[3] Hosseini, S., & Varzaneh, Z. A. (2022). Deep text clustering using stacked AutoEncoder. Multimedia Tools and Applications, 81(8), 10861-10881.

We understand they were shown just as examples of other research on clustering text documents, not necessarily something directly relevant to our paper. Just in case, we analyse them below.

1. This paper includes some interesting theoretical observations such as, in case of TF-IDF, cosine distance has shown superior performance to Euclidean distance. However, after normalizing they become equal. We cite this paper.

2. This paper presents heavy theoretical analysis of various distance measures for FT-IDF (or bag-of-X as called in the paper). A general class of α-divergence is proposed. Kullback-Leibler belongs to this class. Since the paper has no experiments, we have no clue if it has any practical implications. It is also worth to note that none of these are metric. We cite this paper.

3. This paper uses pre-trained BERT model and autoencoder for feature extraction in case or Persian text. The actual clustering is standard k-means. While potentially interesting paper in text clustering, we do not see direct connection to our paper.

Figure 18: Citing slightly relevant references can add useful theoretical background even if their approach would not be directly applicable to the paper.

Response to editor request:

As written the paper is of limited relevance to our readership, and is more directed at the readership of PRL. Please better ground it in RECENT literature appearing in PRJ and cognate

Thank you for your comment.

Clustering literature is distributed in a wide variety of journals, of which *Patter Recognition* (PRJ) and *Patter Recognition Letters* (PRL) are the most representative. Papers proposing new k-means initialization methods are usually short papers, and therefore, PRL is more representative. However, our paper is more review/survey type of a paper and therefore better fit for PRJ. We do not think the readership of these journals is much different.

Nevertheless, we have added more citations to recent PRJ papers. Namely to explore what kind of k-means initialization is used and how many repetitions are used in case of repeated (restart) k-means variant.

How it shows in the paper:

We made a brief survey about how recent research papers apply k-means. Random centroids [5,34,35] seems to be the most popular initialization method, along with k-means++ [6,33,36]. Some papers do not specify how they initialize [37], or it had to be concluded indirectly. For example, Boutsidis [5] used the default method available in MATLAB, which was random centroids in the 2014a version and k-means++ starting from the 2014b version. The method in [38] initializes both the centroids and the partition labels at random. However, as they apply the centroid step first, the random partition is effectively applied.

Papers [33, 34, 35, 37, 38] are from the journal. They are all relevant in the context of the brief survey.

Figure 19: Example of how to add references without direct relevance [KM-init]. Our solution was to cite references from the journal as an example of how k-means have been initialized.

Luckily, k-means is widely used, and it was rather easy to find and cite new references in this case. This brief survey itself even adds some value to the paper.

If the requested citations are completely irrelevant, do not cite them. Inform the editor. There are unethical reviewers (also editors) who are not ashamed to request citations to their own papers without any relevance. It would be somewhat understandable if the papers were even slightly related, but unethical citation requests should not be tolerated. The danger is that if a member of the editorial board provided the review, then you might have trouble.

We faced this situation with our paper [Accuracy] when it was submitted to a Springer Nature journal. We received one report with minor comments and two non-sensible copy-paste reviews. The most blatant example in Figure 20 asks to cite completely irrelevant references from the same publisher.

We revised the paper based on a few minor fixes and reported on the unethical citation request of Reviewer #2. The paper was conditionally accepted, with some remaining technical fixes. However, something happened on the editorial side, as we suddenly received a reject decision with three completely new review reports (two totally fake), see Figure 21. We made a rebuttal to which the editor replied merely with an excuse: "*The journal has the right to invite new reviewers*." My speculation is that either the editor or the publisher got upset by our request to take action against Reviewer #2.

The lesson is that it is not too difficult to detect if a request is inappropriate, but if it comes from a journal (or publisher), there is very little you can do about it (other than avoiding the editor, journal, and possibly the publisher). We could have remained silent, but it is not easy to ignore unethical behavior. Some authors have managed to cope with the situation through humor and got their paper accepted, see Figure 22, although it was retracted later [Humor].

Reviewer #2:

(1)What are the major issues in the cluster technique? Author must explain.
(2)What are the main parameters which are tried to improve by the author.
(3)Improve the resolution of the figures.
(4)Add limitations of the proposed techniques.
(5)More explanation on presented results is expected.
(6)The sequence of the paper should be- (i) introduction, (ii) Related works, (iii) materials and methods, (iv) results, (v) discussion, (vi) conclusion, and (vii) future work
(7)Author should add contributions in the last of the introduction or in the last of materials and methods section.
(8)All tables and figures should be explained clearly.
(9)As paper lacks to inlude the latest papers, these papers must be added-

... followed by a list of 14 irrelevant papers all from Springer Nature

Figure 20: Copy-paste review also asking to cite 14 completely irrelevant references. The only thing that links the comments to our paper is the word "*cluster*." Otherwise, it is a copy-paste review using a generic template that fits almost any paper in our field.

```
SUMMARY OF THE NEW "REVIEWS":
-----------------------------------------------------------------------
Reviewer #5: It looks like a report which lacks of core methods. I shall
reject it quickly.

Reviewer #7: After carefully reviewing the manuscript, I regret to inform
the authors that I cannot recommend it for publication in its current
form. The manuscript does not meet the standards expected for publication
in our journal.
-----------------------------------------------------------------------
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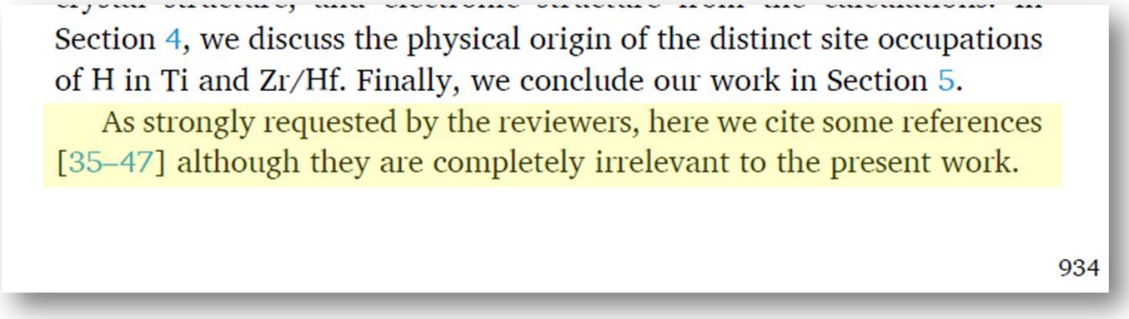
Figure 21: Three new reviews were provided by the journal.
The two obviously fake ones are shown.


Section 4, we discuss the physical origin of the distinct site occupations of H in Ti and Zr/Hf. Finally, we conclude our work in Section 5.

As strongly requested by the reviewers, here we cite some references [35–47] although they are completely irrelevant to the present work.

934

Figure 22: One way to cope with irrelevant citations [Humor].
It was originally successfully accepted and published but was retracted later.

4. Conclusion

Responding to reviewer criticism is a critical phase in the publication process. You are on the way to an acceptance of your paper if you react properly. The way you respond to the reviewer's comments has a significant influence on the outcome, so you should prepare accordingly. My rules to address the criticism are:

1. Address everything
2. Structure the review to (1) comment, (2) response, (3) action.
3. Make the response letter very easy for the reviewer (and editor).
4. Try to act reasonably fast so that reviewers still remember it.
5. Do not downgrade your paper.

Most important is that you provide convincing responses in an easy-to-check format so that the reviewer can check them quickly. They just want to read your response letter and check the revisions one by one to see if all comments have been addressed. At this stage, you have a common goal with the editor: get the paper accepted. Do not disappoint the editor by excuses or ignoring critical comments.

Structuring the comments (comments, response, action) is important for transparency so that the editor and reviewers can easily see what changes were made in the paper (not only in the response letter). Explicit structure is recommended even if I nowadays often integrate them for the sake of conciseness. Be honest. Vague responses will be noted and negatively reacted to.

In the revised paper, emphasize the sentences and paragraphs of the most important changes by using color. Do not color minor revisions and grammar fixes.

I hope you find the advice helpful. Good luck with your paper.

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