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How to Survive the Review Process

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Hi, I'm Greg Maney, Associate Professor of Sociology at Hofstra University, and Section Editor of the Social Movements Section, *Sociology Compass*.

I'd like to share my thoughts with you about the good, the bad, and the sometimes ugly aspects of having a manuscript reviewed by our peers. I'll start off by sharing a wide spectrum of experiences and emotions that can surface during a review process. I'll then offer a few suggestions on pro-active steps you can take to increase the likelihood of a positive experience.

***@#! You Reviewer C!**

Having one's research judged by others can be a validating, empowering process. We hold the reviews up to the light and bask in their glory. We reminisce about them over a celebratory dinner and go to sleep that night with a smile on our face.

Unfortunately, review processes can also be bewildering, traumatic, and disempowering experiences:

- I have sat for months waiting for decisions that never come, while others publish on the same topic and interest in the field shifts elsewhere.
- I have had one editor agree to accept my manuscript only to be replaced by another editor who (in one case) asked for more revisions and (in another case) reversed the previous editor's decision.
- When the reviews finally arrive, some are completely dismissive and, well, downright nasty. Other reviews don't get the point I've tried to

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make. So much so that I wonder whether they actually read the entire manuscript. Often the reviewers contradict themselves. Reviewer A thinks that I should remove my discussion of a particular topic while Reviewer B thinks that I should expand upon that same subject.

- During one summer, I had two manuscripts rejected. In both cases, Reviewers A and B liked my work and recommended acceptance with revisions. But in both cases also, Reviewer C made it brutally clear that they thought my research had no redeeming qualities whatsoever. My response was to write a punk song entitled Reviewer C. You can read a heavily edited version online.
- Like most things in this world, I am not alone in having such harrowing experiences. I know of colleagues who could not even look at their manuscript for months because of scathing reviews. I've known others who have ceremonially burned their rejection letters. Still others have even gone into therapy over the head of it!

I genuinely hope that you can avoid such experiences as they do little to advance research and a great deal to hinder it. In an effort to make this hope a reality, I'll devote the rest of this talk to making a few suggestions about how to avoid negative reviews and, if confronted with them, how to survive.

Preventing Traumatic Review Processes

Circulate a draft of your paper for informal feedback prior to submitting it to a journal. It's generally a good idea to get feedback not only from some specializing in your field but also from someone who doesn't. This is especially important when submitting to a journal whose audience extends beyond your field and includes students and practitioners. Getting feedback from a professional copyeditor also helps to ensure reviewers don't reject your manuscript because they can't understand what you're saying or get fixated on grammatical and stylistic flaws.

Speak with the editor before submitting your piece to find out about the typical turn-around time. Without badgering or sounding belligerent, politely inquire about the status of the manuscript a few weeks after the deadline for the typical turn-around time. Editors typically wear many hats. We're researchers, reviewers, teachers, administrators, and engaged citizens, not to mention our personal lives. So a gentle reminder can help us editors to focus on getting the reviews in. Be sympathetic towards your editor if the process drags on. Often we also are being strung along by reviewers who keep promising to deliver if we wait just a little bit longer. Sometimes, you'll want editors to wait as they'll reject you on the basis of two mixed reviews, but will

ask for a revise and resubmit if they receive a positive response from a third reviewer.

As a sociologist, I am acutely aware of interdependence. In the context of publication, we rely upon one another to enforce standards of academic rigor while providing sufficient opportunities to meet these standards. When we are reviewing manuscripts, we should remember what the process is like from the standpoint of the submitter. Reviewers contribute to academic excellence not by demoralizing submitters, but by providing constructive criticism. Note the strengths of the manuscript submitted before detailing its shortcomings. When discussing shortcomings, make suggestions for ways to rectify them. End the review by affirming the potential of the research to make a valuable contribution. Typically journals encourage this type of review in their guidelines. Accordingly, it is important for reviewers to follow these guidelines where available.

Coping with Harsh Reviews

But how to cope with harsh reviews? I remember a professor in graduate school made scathing comments on the first paper that I submitted to her. I was crestfallen because I chose that particular department in the hopes that she would be my dissertation advisor. For some reason, I decided to go to the library and look up some of her book reviews. I was relieved to find that she was equally scathing towards some of the best known scholars in the field. This was her writing style. While you don't have the benefit of knowing the identity of your reviewer, I would encourage you to assume that the reviewer has not uniquely singled you out for a harsh review. That person is likely to be many submitters' "Reviewer C." Another coping mechanism that I have found helpful is to keep repeating the following mantra: "I will take what is constructive from this review and forget about the rest." This mindset gives YOU control back. You have the power what you decide to do with the review in relationship to your own work.

Revising and Resubmitting your Manuscript

Good editors will note contradictions between reviews and instruct you to either follow the recommendations of one reviewer or to simply ignore the point in question. If confronted with a situation where the editor doesn't provide this type of instruction, it's a good idea to ask the editor for guidance. This is an important rule in general. If it's unclear what you need to do in order to make the manuscript publishable, you should ask the editor,

especially if they are giving you an opportunity to revise and resubmit your manuscript. Guessing what the editor wants is not a recipe for success.

Most of the time, top-ranked journals will not offer conditional let alone unconditional acceptances of submissions. A detailed, thoughtful, and respectful response to the suggestions of the editor and the reviewers will increase your chances of acceptance in the second round. Typically, editors have at least one of the reviewers of the first submission look over the revised version. Most reviewers are not impressed when submitters fail to carefully respond to suggestions they have carefully made.

Does this mean that you have to accept every suggestion made by the editor and reviewers to get published? The answer is no, particularly when you believe that following a suggestion will weaken the theoretical substance, the methodological rigor, or empirical contributions of the manuscript. If you choose to reject a suggestion, however, you have to provide a strong rationale for your rejection. Consider providing references from well respected scholars and, where relevant and feasible, additional data to support your position.

Pay careful attention to the language used by editors and reviewers. While you're probably OK with rejecting reviewer suggestions that the editor ignores and/or labels as "minor," it's probably not a good idea to completely reject suggestions that the editor devotes a considerable amount of text to explaining in the decision letter.

I hope these tips help you to not only to survive the review process, but to thrive as a result of it.

- Circulate drafts of your paper prior to submitting it to a journal
- Be proactive in seeking informal feedback and communicating with the editor
- Be thorough and thoughtful in your response to reviews
- Only take to heart what is constructive and useful to your scholarship, forget about the rest!

On behalf of my fellow *Compass* editors, I wish you luck. We look forward to your submissions!