Revising and Resubmitting

AUTHOR EMOTIONS, EDITOR ROLES,
AND THE VALUE OF DIALOGUE

J. Keith Murnighan

I was appointed associate editor of Administrative Science Quarterly (ASQ) on April 1, 1994 (I always thought that the choice of that date was particularly appropriate). This was the only administrative position I had ever desired, so when Steve Barley called to offer me the position, I said yes even before I really knew what was involved.

One of the major reasons Steve appointed me was to try to broaden the appeal of the journal. ASQ is a sociologically oriented journal; as I am an experimental social psychologist, at least by training, Steve hoped that my appointment would signal that ASQ was open to micro as well as macro papers and that we would seriously consider experiments. This shift in emphasis, however, meant that my manuscript load was less than that of the other editors; it has increased slowly.

All editors look forward to getting good manuscripts—without them, journals would be in tremendous trouble. So we are absolutely delighted when a good manuscript arrives, it gets good reviews, and we can send a positive letter back to the author. Even a good paper, however, will typically get a "revise and resubmit" decision, especially because, at ASQ, it is reviewed by three reviewers who have been chosen because they take different approaches to the same topic. Although a revise-and-resubmit decision should be seen by authors as very good news—most papers do not get such a positive decision—it is still something less (much less?) than what many authors hope for when they submit their work.

In this chapter, I describe the editorial process surrounding a good paper that was submitted to ASQ in the summer of 1995. All three reviewers were positive about the paper; each recommended either a revise and resubmit or a provisional acceptance, with one predicting that a successful revision was fairly likely, one
predicting that it was a near certainty, and one checking off both of these categories. This combination of reactions was very positive, more positive than that accorded any other paper I had handled in the year and a half I had been associate editor.

Ironically, however, the authors reacted to the reviews as if we were asking them to swallow a bitter pill: They were not very happy, at first, about the feedback the reviewers and I had provided. This chapter displays many of those reactions verbatim. Because I have had a long friendship with one of the authors, they have allowed me to share information from their reviews, my decision letter, and a series of e-mail interchanges we had right after they received the reviews and just before they began their revisions. This chapter shows how, even with the most positive of reviews, authors can feel that editors and reviewers are attacking their work, their scholarship, and their self-image. This reaction is typical: We are all pretty tender when it comes to our own work. We are even more tender when our research gets rejected. I'll touch on that in this chapter as well, from my own personal experience as an author who submitted a paper to ASQ during this same period.

The Reviews and the Decision Letter

The authors submitted their paper on August 17, 1995; it was received by the ASQ office on August 21. I received the paper and assigned it to three reviewers on August 29. I read the paper with considerable interest. It focused on a topic that I had conducted some research on years ago. More importantly, it was interesting to read, the study was competently conducted, and the paper had the potential to make researchers and practitioners rethink an established stream of research. As a result, I selected three reviewers whom I respected very much: They are all critical, constructive, accomplished scholars. One is currently active in this area of research; two are active in related areas. Of the latter two, one is particularly meticulous: I could trust that he would not let one word go unturned without questioning whether it was exactly right. The other has a tremendously broad point of view on work in our field. As a trio, I expected that the reviewers would be thorough, competent, and constructive. If the paper was as good as I thought it was, they would help make it better. At the same time, if my reading had been influenced by the fact that one of the authors was a friend, they would take my blinders off very quickly.

The first reviewer, who worked in the field and might not have appreciated the authors' different approach, was very positive. She started her one-and-a-half-page, single-spaced review by saying:

I liked this paper. I liked the clear, lively writing. I liked the short sentences. I liked the multi-method approach. I liked the solid field work. I liked the topic. In fact, just about the only thing I didn't much like were the conclusions and inferences. Let me make my case and see if I can persuade the authors to shift their pitch a bit.

She followed with three paragraphs that raised a series of questions, focused on a central issue in the paper, and made a series of recommendations. She concluded her comments to the authors by saying, "But it is a very nice piece of work!" On the ASQ reviewer form, for my eyes only, she suggested that I provisionally accept the paper subject to "minor but significant" revisions and indicated that a successful revision was a near certainty.

The second reviewer started by saying:

Overall: I think this is a terrific paper. It was interesting, fresh, fun to read, and relevant to real world issues. It reflects a tremendous amount of work and a rich understanding of an intriguing company. This paper does a great job of shaking up the stodge of traditional literature on [this topic], and that alone makes a valuable contribution to the field.

In the second paragraph, this reviewer went on:

That said, the paper needs some conceptual work, and the writing needs some clarifying. The methods section needs fleshing out. Some of the constructs and terms need to be sharpened.

She added six single-spaced pages of specific comments on sentences, paragraphs, ideas, and
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claims, and raised questions she couldn’t answer from this version of the manuscript. On our reviewer form, she suggested that I offer the authors the chance to revise and resubmit the paper and that a revision was either fairly likely or nearly certain to be successful.

The third reviewer started with a summary of the paper’s topic and approach. He then wrote: “The manuscript has the potential to stimulate a variety of new streams of research on [the general topic]. However, as currently written, it is weakened by three critical flaws.” After outlining these issues, he concluded this section of his review by saying, “Fortunately, none of these three weaknesses is fatal. All they require is revision, although what I am requesting is a major rewrite.” He ended his four-page, single-spaced review with 23 separate points. He recommended a revise-and-resubmit decision and judged that a successful revision would be fairly likely.

These reviews came in very quickly, arriving on September 13, 18, and 25. I received the last review on September 28 and wrote my decision letter that day and the next. The ASQ office mailed our feedback to the authors on October 2; they received it on October 9. The total time elapsed since the author’s original mailing was 53 days, 19 of which were taken up by transit within the U.S. and Canadian postal systems.

Despite a tone that was not uniformly positive, these constituted a very favorable set of reviews. They rivaled the most positive reviews I have ever received on papers I have handled at ASQ or on my own work. This illustrates that even the most positive of reviews is bound to have something negative in it; possibly this is the nature of the beast.

The reviews were also remarkably thorough, which made my editorial decision very easy: I offered the authors the opportunity to revise and resubmit their paper. In writing my decision letter, I wanted to be as clear as I could be about what we wanted the authors to do. As a result, my letter was six pages long. I told the authors that I would reiterate some of the reviewers’ comments, but that I hoped this was a small price to pay for increased clarity.

After acknowledging that we had received three reviews of their paper, I started the letter by saying:

The reviewers and I were all intrigued by your paper: The topic, and your treatment of it, is both interesting and important. Your new twist on what many might think is a dead issue is particularly noteworthy. While we all had concerns about various aspects of your paper, we also felt that you could handle them in a serious, substantive revision. As a result, I am happy to offer you the opportunity to revise and resubmit your paper.

I could be wrong, but I thought this was a very positive first paragraph.

After a paragraph in which I expressed my appreciation for the unusually fine reviews, I outlined four general issues that I hoped the authors would address: the paper’s theoretical contributions, the authors’ methods and approaches to their research project, how they characterized the related literature in the area, and the limitations of their study. Then, because this was a revise-and-resubmit decision, I included 24 minor comments to help the authors polish their revision.

I started the last page of the letter by saying:

As you can see, the reviewers and I enjoyed your work and recognized its considerable promise. We would all like to see you deal with the issues that we have raised in a revision. I am happy to work with you as you revise your manuscript, to clarify any of my comments or expand on them, and to help in any way I can.

I asked the authors to notify the ASQ office if they planned to write a revision and when we might expect to receive it. I told them that they did not have to respond to every reviewer comment, but that a summary of the major changes would be helpful, and that if they did not respond to a reviewer suggestion, they should tell us why.

I started the final paragraph by saying that if they had any questions they should call me at my office, and provided my phone number. Finally, I wrote:

Thank you for submitting this interesting manuscript to ASQ. You have clearly invested a lot in this work. I truly hope that you will go the extra mile to make this paper all that it can be. I look forward to seeing it in the near future.

I ended the letter with “Sincerely” and my signature.
The Authors’ Reactions

I think that these were tremendous reviews: They were positive and very constructive. I also tried to be very encouraging in my decision letter. How successful were we in stimulating the authors to undertake a substantial revision in line with our suggestions? A series of electronic mail interchanges between me and the lead author reveal how their emotions rose and fell over time and how they planned to proceed with the paper.

On October 11, two days after receiving the reviews, the senior author wrote:

I got the reviews and am moving to the point where I can almost think about them. Most of it looks doable, but I’ll almost certainly have a question or two. I am tempted to ask some now, but I’d better process a bit more deeply. I am, to be frank, discouraged about some of the comments, but I’ll get over it. My coauthor is shocked.

Here we see the kind of pain that Susan Ashford describes in her outstanding essay on publishing in this volume (Chapter 12). It is also clear that the author is experienced enough to know that he needs to contain his reactions so that he can respond not only to his emotions but also to the substance of the reviews.

I replied that I agreed that everything suggested by the reviewers was doable, and that I was sorry that his coauthor was shocked. I asked whether this was due to the extensiveness of the comments or to the possibility that they were nasty (which I didn’t see). I also expressed the hope that we had not discouraged him. The senior author replied that his coauthor “was shocked because he had never seen ASQ reviews; this is his first submission. It is a good lesson. I keep telling him, ‘This is as good as it gets.’” The junior author undoubtedly benefited tremendously from the senior author’s experience. The senior author could make sure that they did not make the same mistake Susan Ashford and her colleagues made—which she also describes in her chapter—that is, getting a revise-and-resubmit decision with long reviews and thinking that they couldn’t satisfy the editors and the reviewers. I also think that, in this case, the senior author’s responsibilities as a mentor helped him temper his own emotional reactions. But there is much more information on this in his later messages.

That same day, October 12, I received another message:

I am recovering quickly. I read the comments again this morning and I agree that they are doable and quite reasonable for the most part. I think the shock was partly the volume and partly the inevitable “You are ruining my perfect baby,” Well, I agree my baby ain’t so perfect . . . Also, now that I am getting beyond the volume, I realize that I’ve never had three reviewers and an editor who are all on my side, all trying to make the paper better.

The image of a paper being one’s child, and a perfect one at that, is a metaphor that I expect many authors use. The author also noted that the accommodation process had begun: He was beginning to see the value of the reviews, even though he, too, was affected by the volume of our comments.

I wrote the author on October 16, on another topic, and asked if he would “give me some feedback as an editor. I get it all too rarely, and I always finish my letters thinking that they still leave something to be desired.” He replied the next day:

My problem is that my initial reaction to reviews—any reviews—is so strong that it isn’t fair to use them as an indicator of the quality of your letter. Now, every time I read your letter, it seems more reasonable. I’ll read it again and give you another reaction, but at this point, my hunch is that your letter is fine, but my coping skills are not.

Frankly, I disagree: His coping skills are excellent, especially given the strength of his (normal) emotional reactions. Although it took time for his angry emotions to subside, he knew from the start that they would, and he was willing to wait for them to go away before he reacted rashly.

Editors as Authors

Ironically, on October 27, a coauthor and I received a letter from ASQ rejecting one of our
papers, a revision of our initial submission. Now the shoe was on the other foot, and, shortsighted as I am, I took the decision personally and was quite upset about the reviews. (Note: This was a rejection of a revise and resubmit, rather than an invitation to revise. As such, it was doubly painful.) I wrote to my friend, the author of the paper we are discussing in this chapter, to vent a few frustrations. My message included such phrases as "disgusting," "picked nits," "more than casually misinterpreted our measures and our data," and "stupid." I was not displeased by the editor's decision letter—only by the reviews. As I write this chapter, a month has gone by and my emotional reactions have not subsided.

My friend wrote back that day, saying, "I am sorry about the rejection. They suck. I am glad that you got upset at the associate editor and reviewers—signs of continuing fire in the belly." He also came back to his own ASQ submission, which I have been describing in detail:

I'll soon get to the revision. I may need to check out one part of my revision strategy with you before I go forward. Most of it is pretty straightforward; as I read it more closely, I realize how good your letter is, muting some of the unreasonable and inconsistent suggestions and emphasizing the reasonable and consistent ones.

Two observations are in order here. First, any negativity in a review will lead to its being perceived as unreasonable; if this is the nature of the review beast, it's no wonder we are always angry at reviewers. Second, it was nice to hear that my decision letter was constructive.

On November 6, I received a long message:

We are starting to work on the revision. Enough time has passed that I can read the reviews and respond in a more or less rational fashion. I think we can address the major concerns in an acceptable fashion, but I want to make clear what we plan to do.

Note the importance of time in the author's conceptualization of the process.

Proposals on how the authors would respond to the four main issues in the paper followed. The first, on the paper's theoretical contribution, was longest. The first two sentences indicated that they agreed that there was room for improvement. Their fourth sentence started with the words "Please note" and began to make their side of the case. The authors took a strong but perfectly appropriate stand to emphasize what their paper is and what it isn't. From my perspective, this is extremely important: It shows that they have a clear idea about what they want to do with their paper and it makes it easy for me to suggest that they describe their paper in just these terms, succinctly and forcefully.

The authors continued to make their case. Three subsequent sentences started with "We believe," and four with either "Please note" or "Note." At the same time, they peppered their plans with a series of "We will" and "We promise" sentences, especially when they addressed issues concerning their methods, how they had characterized the literature, and the limitations of their study. They expressed a serious concern that they wouldn't be able to satisfy one of the reviewers, who "didn't get (or didn't accept) our main point." Ironically, this was the reviewer who was most positive about the paper and had suggested a provisional acceptance of the initial submission.

They closed their five-page letter by again noting what their paper does and doesn't do. They used the word "purpose" three times, highlighting their paper's intent. They indicated what they couldn't do in the paper. The senior author closed with the following:

Finally, in reading the reviews, I'm a bit worried that we are being pressed to make this paper one that will be all things to all people. I suspect that you understand these pressures; many of your suggestions appear to be intended to help us manage them. But I want to make clear that if we try to do everything the reviewers ask, we will have an impossible task before us.

I responded on November 8 (I had been out of town November 4-7), "I appreciate your letter about your paper. In almost every way, I agree with your plans and your approach to the revision. But let me outline my reactions a bit more specifically." In the rest of my two-page letter, I asked them to "be explicit about what you can and can't say about" the phenomenon, told them that "I don't think you will have trouble convincing reviewer no. 1," reinforced
their plan to show how their approach differed from previous approaches in the area, reiterated a request to present some propositions at the end of their paper (which they suggested they might not be able to fulfill), and tried to clarify the central thrust of the paper and how I thought it could make the most impact. Also, I told them:

I agree that the reviewers and I were implicitly asking you to make this paper all things to all people. I think we are all idealists, especially when we see how much impact a paper might have. . . . I don't think we have asked you to do an impossible task, although it might feel that way. Instead, we have asked you to consider a series of suggestions, some of which may be inconsistent, but all of which were presented with the idea that, together, they might make the paper almost everything to almost everyone. There will still be some limitations to the paper when you finish it—this is true of all papers. But by walking several tightropes simultaneously, you can come close to accomplishing a multitude of big objectives. You can't completely take away readers' "but they didn't do this" reactions. What you can do is push them to appreciate a new approach and some neat new ideas even after they've raised any of the "buts" they might be able to find in the corners of your paper.

Finally, no matter how much you tone down the paper, you will get some people to react. Absolutely. Hopefully. That is just what you want. But you want them to react to your ideas and your suggestions rather than to your labels of their work. . . .

I hope all this is clear. You are on the right track in your plans for revising the paper. I know there will be some agonizing during the rewriting process, but I also hope it will be fun. I sure look forward to seeing it.

The senior author replied the next day: "We are on the same wavelength. We will get to the painful business of revising text as soon as we can." He went on to describe how they agreed with my characterization of the overall thrust of the paper, in some detail. He ended by saying:

Well, I'm starting to have some fun thinking about how this paper will be improved as a result of the revisions. This means that I've moved from believing that, in order to get the paper published, I must have to "mutilate" my masterpiece to believing that the paper will get stronger as a result of the review process. It always takes me time to make that transition. We will be in touch if we have any questions, but I think that we know what to do and feel confident that we are on the same wavelength with you.

As often happens, especially with holidays intervening, it took the authors some time finally to knock down to the actual task of doing their revision. On January 2, I received another e-mail—a fitting end to a real emotional upheaval (but an end, I think, only because the paper's prospects are so good).

Well, I am finally moving on this thing. I did the introduction today. It went pretty quickly once I started, but I am writing to make sure that you won't be surprised by a longer paper. . . . The reviews now seem so civilized—are you sure they haven't changed since I first read them?

Papers, Reviewers, and Editors

The extended interchange depicted above was incredibly important—for the paper, for the authors, and for me as an editor. It is just the kind of dialogue that the other editors at ASQ and I would like to have with all authors who are working on revisions. We don't want any misunderstandings about what we are looking for; we want to share a vision for the paper with the authors. If we can agree on how a paper can be improved, then it is likely to become a much better paper, which is something we all are hoping for.

These messages also show how authors' reactions to reviews of their work move from angry, negative emotions to a mix of emotions and reason and even the possibility that the work of revision might be fun. It took these authors about a month to make this transition, and it was another couple of months before all of the negative emotions had finally dissipated. Their messages suggest that they might have had a much harder time revising if they had tried to push things any faster.
Paper Metaphors

The senior author’s metaphors for their paper—a perfect baby and a masterpiece—are probably common ways of describing the products of one’s labors. For an academic, the desire to write a paper means that you must pour yourself into the task, taking an idea or two and pushing it as far as you can to see what you can make of it. It is a personal, emotional endeavor that, one hopes, includes both logic and creativity. When we finish a paper, we often share it with friends, hoping that they will say good things about it, even if we tell them to be brutal in their comments. I think everyone dreams of writing papers that will cause readers to think we are absolutely brilliant. Thinking of our papers as personal tours de force is a natural element in this process.

With my own papers, I try to use a different metaphor, one that makes reviews a little easier to take. As I enjoy cooking, I try to think of my papers as recipes: They are my best attempt to concoct something absolutely delicious. I tinker with them, revise them, add something here or there to perk them up. Then I try them on friends, hoping that they’ll be appreciative. To extend the metaphor, the ultimate test is to submit a recipe to a cooking contest. If the recipe wins a prize, that’s great. If it comes back with a suggestion that will make the dish taste better, that’s not as good, but it still improves future eating experiences. Also, if the suggestion doesn’t make the dish taste better—at least to me—then I don’t have to change it. It still might win next year’s contest.

The review process for papers is similar: If the reviews are helpful and constructive and they contribute to making the paper better, it’s great—not as good as an immediate acceptance, but still a very positive result. In the end, it means that the reviewers are helping me make my paper better. In fact, it is probably the only way my papers and I have been pushed so far; nonanonymouse comments are almost necessarily less critical. In the end, tough reviewers improve papers, and better papers make authors look like better scholars. I know this has been true for me many times.

I have always felt that a long, constructive review is priceless: It may seem negative when it first arrives, but it forces me to reconsider many if not all of the issues in the paper. Although long reviews mean more work, they also mean that a thoughtful reader has read my paper with great care. This is something we should all hope for. Long reviews should be seen as reasons for rejoicing, especially if they come with opportunities to resubmit.

Another example amplifies this point. A colleague and I once had a paper accepted as is—with no requirements to change anything. Although the acceptance was good news, the lack of substantive commentary led us to work incredibly hard to make sure that we didn’t publish something we would regret later. Because we both had or would soon have tenure, we realized that we were facing the “publish and perish” rather than the “publish or perish” problem, which Kevin Murphy also describes in his chapter in this volume: We might have published something that we could never change and never live down. This was a terrifying thought, one that has made me even more appreciative of thorough reviews.

Although they are a necessary evil, reviews can be tremendously constructive: They can open your eyes to things that you hadn’t even considered in your work. Applying metaphors to their work that allow them to see feedback as constructive, or having review-reading rituals such as the one Susan Ashford describes in Chapter 12, can also give authors opportunities to make real progress with their papers.

From an editor’s perspective, a reviewer’s major role is to screen papers so that poor research and/or poor theory do not find their way into our journals. In contrast, most people think of editors as gatekeepers. This role, however, is truly overrated. Most of the time, multiple reviews are consistent. When three reviewers make similar recommendations, the editor doesn’t need to make a decision; it’s already been made. Only in rare instances do editors actually have to exert decision control; thus reviewers themselves are actually the primary gatekeepers.

The more typical role of the editor is to act as the author’s friend. Steve Barley has made this explicit at ASQ. In deliberations over the past year, he formulated a series of guidelines for our editors. He wrote:

Editors play a unique role vis-à-vis the author, a role quite distinct from that of a reviewer. Whereas the reviewer’s job is to be critical in
order to protect the field from shoddy scholarship, the editor’s job is to ensure that feedback can be heard. Whereas reviewers can traffic in the details of the paper, editors must articulate larger gestalts, especially broad strategies for revision. Whereas reviewers have the luxury of aligning themselves with the field, editors must orient themselves simultaneously to the journal and the author. The last alignment is critical: The editor is the only person in the review process who can afford to function as the author’s friend. Although other journals may not perceive this as an aspect of the editor’s persona, at ASQ it is.

In addition, because top journals accept only 10%-20% of the papers they receive, most of an editor’s decision letters do not encourage resubmission. Although it is self-serving to say this, I also think we really do act as our authors’ true friends, friends authors need when we decline to accept their papers. If we accepted papers that shouldn’t be accepted, we would not be protecting authors from publishing works that, in the end, they don’t really want to have in academia’s archives. In other words, we can help save authors from the “publish and perish” problem. We can also try, as best we can, to help them toward revising their work so that it will eventually be published in other journals (and thus assist them in avoiding the “publish or perish” problem).

When we get good papers that generate good reviews and revise-and-resubmit decisions, we bend over backward to give authors as much help as we can with their revisions. We want to be able to accept these papers. We hate having to say no to authors who have gone through the enormous trouble to make major changes to their work. As is clear from this chapter, starting a dialogue with authors as they work on their revisions is something we are very happy to do—and that should lead to more positive outcomes for everyone. All editors may not want to get involved in these dialogues, but we certainly do at ASQ; this is something authors should consider trying whenever they get revise-and-resubmit decisions.

In sum, the road from submitting a paper to having it finally published is one that is littered with emotion. It feels great to complete the first draft. It feels just as good to have a paper that’s finally ready to be submitted to a journal. Then, regardless of the nature of the reviews, receiving them is a real downer. It takes time to get over this negative hump, but then it’s possible to see how the reviews might actually help improve your work. When you get a revise-and-resubmit decision, you have started a continuing relationship with the editor, one that you can work on together. At ASQ and probably at other journals as well, it is both appropriate and important to make sure that you and the editor see the revision process and its goal in the same way. Scholarship in the social sciences only infrequently depends on isolated, individual action. Instead, it is and should be based on a series of constructive interactions, from the beginning to the end of the process. Putting a positive spin on the process, even on tough, anonymous reviews, will help you persevere and achieve as much as you possibly can with your work. It will make you a much happier and more productive author. It also makes for happier editors.

Notes

1. I flipped a coin to determine whether I would use male or female pronouns for each of the reviewers. In fact, one is female and two are male.

2. It goes almost without saying that it would be impossible for editors to engage in such dialogues with authors of papers that have not received invitations to resubmit.

3. Rejections, as noted earlier, are never easy to take.

4. As editors, we do choose the reviewers, so, in an indirect sense, we are still gatekeepers.
Peter J. Frost
M. Susan Taylor
Editors

Rhythms of Academic Life
Personal Accounts of Careers in Academia

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