

[Working With Your Editor: Crafting a Letter of Response to Peer Reviews](#)

Discussion published by Dawn Durante on Wednesday, May 4, 2022

A guest post from [Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications](#).

Guest post by Sian M. Hunter, senior acquisitions editor, University Press of Florida

Along the road of scholarly book publication, every author will hit a few stretches that test patience and nerves, but drafting the response letter to reader reports may be the juncture that feels most like driving unknown roads at night without GPS. Below, I offer some perspectives on and strategies for the response letter that I hope will shed light on that part of the publishing journey.

The Role of the Response Letter

Peer review is the beating heart of scholarly publication. During this process, external readers evaluate a manuscript and submit written reports with feedback to help authors and editors polish the manuscript. By receiving critiques from multiple perspectives and/or different specialties, authors have an opportunity to strengthen soft spots in their drafts, whether in argument, sources, contexts, framing, or narrative. When sending the reports to authors, editors will gloss the reader recommendations, invite authors to share initial reactions, and then often follow with some informal back and forth on revision ideas; but eventually, the editor will ask the author to submit a formal, written response to the reports.

Much like book proposals, response letters play a bigger procedural role than their ephemerality might suggest. While you may be addressing the letter to your editor, the response is often shared with other press staff when deciding next steps. It is also typically included in the final manuscript docket sent to press editorial board members for discussion and vote on final publication approval. Because the ultimate audience is the press board, — the letter needs a certain level of formality. Effective response letters convey your engagement with the peer-review process; you have a space to express your intent to make a good manuscript the best book you can by communicating your openness to feedback, noting your agreements with reader recommendations, explaining any disagreements, clarifying your vision for the book, and outlining your plan of revisions.

Processing and Drafting

After you receive the reader reports, allow yourself several read-throughs over the course of a few days to process the suggestions. It can be a good idea to sort the suggestions into categories, such as “fully agree/will do,” “need to think about/may do slightly differently,” and “disagree/refine.” You aren’t expected to implement every single reader suggestion, but you are expected to weigh them carefully and try to use the comments—even any you disagree with—to strengthen your manuscript. This sorting exercise also helps pinpoint elements to discuss in more detail with your editor, either as

part of the response and revisions planning or later when you are in the midst of revising.

While there's no one set way to structure a response, two approaches are most common. Some authors prefer to respond to each report separately, and this approach can be effective when readers have diverging opinions and recommendations. But collation works equally well and has the added benefit of more easily outlining your revisions plan. Perhaps you start by glossing items you're attending to right away (e.g., reframing the introduction, combining two chapters, reducing block quotes, addressing factual queries, etc.). You're then able to devote more space to discussing more complex issues.

It's common to have one or several reader suggestions that, for a variety of reasons, you cannot yet describe exactly how you will address the concern. Perhaps you have some new or additional secondary sources to read, but you can't predict the extent to which you might revise in accordance with the information or interpretations within. Or, if you're a volume editor for an edited collection, perhaps one chapter has been flagged for substantive concerns and the contributor needs to work through a draft or two before you know whether it's reached the level of other chapters or needs to be cut. You don't have to pledge in advance to follow a course you need more information to discern; it's okay if you are not 100% certain about several issues! Your letter can lay out these candid questions and the steps you'll pursue in response to the reader's suggestion. When you have finished your revisions, you can include a "here's what I did" cover letter with the new draft, which the editor may place in the Board docket verbatim or may summarize in their editorial comments about the peer-review process.

You don't have to pledge in advance to follow a course you need more information to discern; it's okay if you are not 100% certain about several issues!

If you disagree with some suggestions in the reports, prepare to outline the nature of and rationale for your disagreement. Dismissing the reader or ignoring their opinions in your response will not benefit your work and can lead your editor or the editorial board members to question whether you've engaged sufficiently with the reports. Instead, treat the points of divergence as a signal something is not clear in your manuscript, anticipate that other readers could have similar reactions, and find ways to turn them into improvements. For instance, if a reader objects to the periodization of a study, discuss your rationale for that boundary to your study in your response, and then work that rationale into the book's introduction. Sometimes a reader can have a genuinely great idea, but really it's for another book; acknowledge that distinction in your response. Or sometimes you and the reader may simply interpret certain findings differently; acknowledge the difference, summarize the bases leading to your interpretation, respectfully disagree in your response, and bolster your argument in the text.

Similarly, a few words about words in a response: it's human nature to think "the reader just doesn't understand," but instead, try to flip it and take responsibility for clarity, noting "I will revisit this section to better communicate my ideas." You can defend your boundary or interpretation without slipping into defensive language; focusing on ways you can strengthen your own work in the response speaks volumes about your deep engagement with the process.

In the uncommon situation that reader comments seem personal or unfair, discuss the situation with your editor; they can help you find a way to note the ungenerous nature of these suggestions and to still keep your formal response neutral.

Remember, if you have concerns about the reports or questions about how to structure your letter, that's okay! Editors have read hundreds of author responses and even more reader reports, and also understand that receiving criticism, even in its most constructive forms, can be difficult. Ask to send a draft to your editor, or share a draft with a trusted colleague. You can also check out the sections on author responses in William Germano's [Getting It Published](#) and [Laura Portwood-Stacer's The Book Proposal Book](#). Kudos to you for investing in the peer-review process and polishing your book the very best you can!

Sian M. Hunter is a senior acquisitions editor at University Press of Florida. Sian acquires and develops new books in American history and African American studies as well as general interest titles on Florida culture, cooking, and space exploration. You can follow Sian on Twitter [@sianmhunter](#)

Have something to say on this topic? Reply to this post! Or [email the Elephant](#) about writing for us. We welcome submissions from stakeholders on all sides of scholarly publishing. Find us on Twitter [@HNetBookChannel](#) and use the hashtag [#FeedingTheElephant](#).