

Thrivecast Episode 39: Paper Submissions: How to Respond to Reviews

Trish Kritek: [00:00:00] Welcome to another episode of the University of Washington's Thrivecast, the podcast designed to help School of Medicine faculty thrive. I'm Trish Kritek, and today we're joined by Professor Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert. Dr. Sakiyama-Elbert is a professor in the Department of Bioengineering and the Vice Dean for Research and Graduate Education in the School of Medicine.

I get to work with her a lot. She's also an accomplished scientist with more than 100 publications. And I thought she was the perfect guest to have today to talk about what you do when you submit a paper and you get a response back from the journal where you submit it. And we're going to talk a lot about how you respond to reviews, because I think that's really interesting to folks, but Shelly, I thought I'd start out with a relatively simple first question. You are a very, as I said, accomplished investigator [00:01:00] with lots of publications. I'm curious if you've ever submitted a paper for publication and had it rejected?

Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert: Yes, I've definitely had plenty of rejected papers and, you know, that's a very common thing. And so I think one of the things we have to do as we're learning to become scientists is really learn to deal with rejection.

And also to learn to process the feedback that you get when you're publishing papers in general, and how to move forward with that. So, I think, first of all, I want to normalize it. I think everyone has papers that get rejected. That's part of the process. So understanding what those rejections mean and what you should do with your paper going forward.

Trish Kritek: I think that's important. I really appreciate that because I also have had papers rejected and I think you're probably not submitting things to be published if you don't get things that are rejected and it is a part of the process for sure. I'm going to come back to when you get a rejection. I'm going to [00:02:00] start with you submit a paper and you get a bunch of reviews, which at least, when I was first trying to get things published, I found incredibly overwhelming when I first opened up that email. So I'm kind of curious, like, let's just start with what's your approach when you first get that response from the journal about your submission?

Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert: Well, first of all, I'm usually excited to get the response back.

Cause you're usually like waiting around for weeks, you know, to get it back, but then you open it and sometimes it says, you know, major revisions or reject and resubmit. And so the first thing is really just to go through and see what all the comments are and understand, are they asking you to do more experiments or get more data?

Or are there parts of your paper that just weren't clear to some of the reviewers and maybe you just need to explain more clearly. So, understanding sort of what are the issues and then can you address those. I think that's a big thing. [00:03:00] Sometimes you can just rewrite sections and make them more clear.

That's relatively easy to do. Sometimes people are like, I disagree with the whole premise of this paper. That's harder to address. So I think really dissecting out what's addressable and what isn't that's really critical and sometimes also you get those really frustrating comments where you're like, that was in there, why didn't you see it?

Or why don't you appreciate what we're doing here? So it's good to sometimes realize oh, I'm feeling really frustrated by this review and to step back and take a little break from it, you know, process that and then come back when you're feeling a little bit less emotional. And then you can kind of, again, divide it into sort of what can you address with rewriting and what do you maybe need to do more experiments or get more data for. And then for those pieces, is [00:04:00] it reasonable? Can you do that in some reasonable period of time? Or are they proposing, like, an entire another manuscript worth of work? In which case it might not be reasonable.

Trish Kritek: I'm going to come back to that part. I'm going to go back to this earlier part where you normalize for me, having a dialogue with the reviewers as you read them, like, what do you mean about that? And are you kidding me? Kind of things. And I think that happens to me for sure when I get my reviews and it sounds like it happens to you.

And I really appreciate the advice of like, take a pause. It's almost always easier to read it the second time. The first time I personally find it particularly challenging. So I really appreciate that advice for folks. And then, what a

helpful structure of kind of what are the things that I just have to change how I wrote about it versus what's more work.

And so let's talk a little bit more about that. Like what's more work because it is not uncommon for people to propose additional experiments or another look at a set of data [00:05:00] or wondering if you have more data that you may or may not have. How do you think that through in terms of what's reasonable and what's not?

And then I'm going to talk later about how do you say that back to the reviewers, but how do you make those decisions?

Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert: It's always a little challenging. I think sometimes someone proposes, you know, another experiment to verify your hypothesis and you think, gosh, why didn't I think of that? That's a great idea.

Or that would be, you know, that would be really helpful. And if it's not, you know, two more years worth of work, you probably do want to do that experiment. Sometimes, somebody proposes, a whole nother round of animal studies or something very elaborate that's just not within the scope of what you're going to do.

And that kind of makes more sense to push back on and just say, yeah, that would be interesting. But we're not going to spend two more years on this before we publish this paper. I'm giving you kind of the extremes, but [00:06:00] somewhere in the middle, you kind of have to decide where to draw the line.

A lot of times when you're submitting a paper, sometimes after you submit it, while you're waiting for those reviews, you're thinking about it more and you think, gosh, we should really do this one extra experiment. And in a perfect world, that extra experiment that you're doing while it's in review is what the reviewer asked for.

Or sometimes you think, gee, maybe we should do this one more experiment, but you don't do it. And so you're kind of seeing the reviewer up with a softball criticism. I don't necessarily advocate that strategy, but sometimes it does work out that way, so I think it's really a matter of balancing sort of what you feel like is reasonable to do within the scope of that particular paper versus what really doesn't fit in and sometimes unfortunately, it comes down to

money or time, particularly if the person who did the bulk of the work on that project has graduated or has finished their post doc and [00:07:00] has moved on. You know, sometimes it's harder to get those extra experiments and that factors in as well.

Trish Kritek: Yeah, I think those are really important things. And I think maybe the first principle that I heard was like, you don't have to do everything they ask you to do. Is that right?

Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert: That's right. I'm nodding my head. But of course, of course, you can't see that on the podcast. Yes. Yes, exactly. You don't have to do everything they ask you to do.

You do have to rationalize what you're doing and what you're not doing. And I think one thing that's important to remember is you also as you're revising, when you resubmit, you're going to submit a response to the reviewers. And that's a really important document to explain the changes you made in response to the feedback and the experiments you added and also the things you're not doing. It's good to know that if the paper goes back out for review, and frequently editors send it back to those reviewers, they will get that response to reviewers. So [00:08:00] anything you say in there, you should be saying it in a way such that the reviewers are not going to be angry after they read your response, right?

You want to persuade them and you want to persuade the editor with your reasoning and sometimes it's tempting to have sort of a more like, I can't believe this person's an idiot attitude, but that is, you need to rewrite that. Don't put that in your response to reviewers.

Trish Kritek: I want to talk about this a little bit more because I think it's a really important part.

So I think for people who haven't done this much, you'll get a bunch of very sometimes major comments and then minor comments, or sometimes people walk through the different sections of your paper, different reviewers do it differently, but your obligation is to respond to all of those things that are sent to you.

And so one of the things I heard you say is your reviewers are often going to read your response to their reviews. So have that lens as you write it. I don't

think you [00:09:00] have to be gratuitous, but you should be polite and answer or respond to the issues that they raise. And then I think what you said was sometimes you're going to say, I appreciate this piece of criticism or insight. And here's what we did. We did another experiment. Or sometimes you're going to say, and the reason we didn't do another experiment is X, Y, and Z.

Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert: Exactly. Right. So, you might say, thank you for the feedback in response to that, we got this other data and here's what we saw.

We've added it to this section. Great. And obviously that's really easy for a reviewer and editor to say, check, they responded to that. When you respond and you say, you know, appreciate that feedback, but you know, that this other experiment really isn't in the scope of this project, or we're not able to do that, or we don't have the resources to do that.

I think it's good to provide a polite explanation for why you're not going to do [00:10:00] that work and, you know, the reviewer may still respectfully disagree or not so respectfully disagree, but they will give their feedback back to the editor. And ultimately, the editor will decide, did you do enough to respond or do they want you to continue to do that thing, and maybe that means they send you another revision, or they say we're rejecting the paper.

Trish Kritek: Yeah, I think I've always found that the easy ones where I'm going to do whatever they said, it's easy to say thank you so much for this insightful comment, we have made this change and give them the acknowledgement that they are making your paper better because I think reviews, at least in my experience, have always made my papers better in some way.

And so you want to acknowledge that, but you don't have to say I've done everything, you just have to explain why. A couple tangents on that. The vast majority, I'm going to say everybody, has co-authors. So where and how do you involve [00:11:00] your co-authors in this process?

Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert: It depends on who the co-authors are. So a lot of times I'm working on papers with students or postdocs in the lab, and so they're usually helping to rewrite the paper and also helping to draft the response to reviewers.

And so they're really intimately involved with that process. And other times we might have co-authors who are from another lab or another PI and there we might kind of take our first pass, try to get everything in good shape and then, share the revised draft and the response to reviewers with those collaborators, obviously, we'd be sharing the response when we get the reviews back with them, you know, so they'll have a little time to think about it too. And we might have a discussion at the beginning before we go in, if we're going to be doing extra experiments or something. So, I think I think it's good to engage them both in that early part of the process where you're deciding what [00:12:00] you are aren't going to do and then also make sure that they're comfortable with the updated product.

Maybe they come in and make some edits up to get everything polished before you get it back in.

Trish Kritek: When you were early in your career or now as a PI and a mentor to many people is it reasonable for the kind of early career person, whether they're a grad student or postdoc or early faculty career faculty member, to sit down and go over those reviews with their PI? is that a reasonable expectation?

Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert: Definitely. I think it's really important when you get those reviews back, you know, to go over them with someone more senior if you're kind of early on in the process and I always go through them with the trainees pretty quickly. Once we get them back a lot of times when you get those first reviews back, it can be really overwhelming because it feels like it's a lot of criticism.

So I always try to share to like, as I'm sharing them with the trainee, oh, this looks like it would be pretty easy to address or, oh, you know, [00:13:00] it's mainly rewriting, but there's a couple more experiments, we might want to talk about whether or not we're going to do those. So, just kind of normalizing that this is not a really negative review because a lot of times when you get really detailed reviews, people feel like they're really negative, even if they actually aren't bad or aren't particularly negative.

So, yeah, trying to build that mindset of, yeah, these comments are going to make the paper better and, you know, help make things more clear for readers. I try to always take that attitude when I can of that, if someone didn't

understand it when they were reading the manuscript for review, it's really on us as authors to make it more clear.

Because if it's unclear for this one person, it could be unclear for other people. And so that's the point we want to clarify or emphasize again.

Trish Kritek: Yeah, I think that that perspective is really helpful and I hope people can hear that because we started off it's overwhelming [00:14:00] and often it's like this passion project that you finally put out there for the world and you're like, oh my gosh, all this feedback is a little overwhelming.

We talked early on about sometimes people get rejections. Normal thing. I'm curious if you have guidance on like, when do you contest a rejection? Or when do you say, well, maybe this isn't the right journal? How do you approach that?

Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert: I think that's really important to think about. Sometimes the rejection says, oh, it was out of scope for this journal, or they give you a specific reason why.

And that's helpful. So you understand, and if you're going to contest it, you know what to bring up as your counter argument. Then, especially some of the more highly selected journals, their standard is reject, but allow resubmissions. And so that's really like a revise and resubmit from another journal.

So, I think that's good to have that perspective and know sort of, which journals fit into that [00:15:00] category.

Trish Kritek: Which are the ones that you think of that are more likely to say reject, but can resubmit?

Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert: I mean, you can see it from a variety of journals and sometimes they say that very specifically, like it's a different response letter versus just rejecting no opportunity to resubmit.

But especially Science, Nature, Cell, like those top tier journals, that's like their standard, you know, reject and then possibility to resubmit. So I didn't get in. It's good to know that going in. If it's in that space, you're going to say, oh, this is kind of the MO for what another journal might call a major revision.

Okay. But if it's a real rejection, have you ever contested that? Or have you just said, we probably need to look for a different place to submit this. I have

Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert: sometimes if it was specific, like one time I submitted one and they said, oh, well, we've already published a paper on this topic this year. And I looked at the paper and I was like, yes, they [00:16:00] were studying the same drug, but it was a totally different approach - my lab works on drug delivery - totally different approach to drug delivery. And our focus is really on the delivery method. So I did contest it. They still said no, but in fairness, I did contest it and I have also had collaborators who sometimes have contested things sometimes with more success.

It's really one of those sort of, what's the worst they're going to say? They're going to say no again, and they're probably going to give you an answer pretty quickly. So it's not like you're losing a lot of time.

Trish Kritek: Okay, a little bit tangential, but the other thing that we think about it when we're submitting a paper to a journal is they not all but many ask if you have reviewers that you would suggest.

And I'm curious what your guidance is on that because sometimes it's really attractive to suggest people because you're anticipating these reviews and you're like, oh, this person might understand the science or, you know, be familiar with this [00:17:00] type of work. I'm curious how you approach that.

Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert: So, I would say, always suggest reviewers. I'm going to see an editor and I'm always grateful when people suggest relevant potential reviewers, because that makes my job easier than I don't have to ask as many people from my list. I can ask them and the people from the office list. Generally, I think it's good to think about sort of why would those people be good reviewers? Why do they work in a similar space? Some journals even let you provide a sentence or so about that. So that can be really helpful. I also, because I do a lot of interdisciplinary work, I always try to think about, okay, what's the audience for this journal?

And then who sort of fits into the framework of reviewers that would make sense for this journal. I do a lot of work in nerve injury, so if I'm publishing more in a neuroscience journal, I try to think, would these reviewers make sense to [00:18:00] a neuroscience editor versus if I'm working in the drug delivery space, I would pick people that make more sense to a controlled

release drug delivery editor. So, I think it's important to think about, you know, who would they maybe recognize and be as a good fit for your paper.

The other thing, too, is, I think you don't want to pick maybe, like the national academy member in your field all the time, they are probably really busy.

You can pick them occasionally, but I would say, pick people that you think might actually say yes to the reviews because, as an editor, I can tell you, I sometimes get a lot of really famous people on the list, and I'm like, they'd be great, but I'm pretty sure they're going to say no. So maybe pick sort of a range of people there.

I think it's more important that someone can do a good job with the review. And also they have to say yes. If they say no, it doesn't matter how good of a fit they [00:19:00] are.

Trish Kritek: Yeah, so submit some suggested reviewers. I think that's a really good take home and then be thoughtful and somewhat realistic and the people that you put in, you're trying to make the editor's life easier to get you the feedback that you need for your paper to move forward through peer review.

So I appreciate all that. I think we've talked about a lot and I feel like we've covered a lot of territory. Hopefully, normalize the fact that it can be hard and you're going to get a lot of input and there's a strategy to all of this. Are there any other pearls you want to give folks as they kind of wade into these waters?

And, I think this is kind of a rite of passage of being a part of academic medicine is submitting your first paper and getting your first set of reviews. Any other thoughts that you want to share?

Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert: The other thing that I think is really important is picking the right journal. So, thinking about who do you want to read this paper, where do you want it to have the most impact?

And when you think of papers that are similar to this paper, where would you go to find them? [00:20:00] Because I think sometimes people really focus on wanting to publish in really high impact journals, which is, you know, wonderful and a great accomplishment. But sometimes it's more important

that the people in your field, the people who are really going to implement or use the work, see your paper.

And that might be equally as important as a really high impact publication in terms of your impact on the field. So thinking about, where would I go to look for a paper that's similar to this? And where would my readers that I really want to target go? Sometimes you'll get, you know, a better peer review experience and a better outcome from publishing if you're really thinking about the right audience for your work.

And so I think sometimes people get hung up and wanting to publish in specific journals, and then they're not really the right match. So that can make the peer review process harder.

Trish Kritek: I really appreciate that because I'm also a deputy editor for a journal, [00:21:00] and it's an education focused journal, and so we publish lots of things about health sciences education, and I think the reviews people get when they submit their education scholarship to an education journal are very different than the reviews they get when they submit it to something that might have a higher impact factor, but it's not designed for or read by educators.

So I do think that that's really important and I appreciate that very much. And like we said before, if the goal of peer review is to make your paper better, then you want it to be the people who can understand and appreciate the work that you're doing the most. I think we've covered a lot of territory.

I feel like people have learned a lot and I'm really appreciative for all the wisdom that you've shared with me and with everyone listening. So thank you very much for joining Thrivecast today.

Shelly Sakiyama-Elbert: Sure, Trish. Thanks for having me.

Trish Kritek: It's my pleasure. And I'll say to everyone, if they want to listen to more episodes of Thrivecast, you can find them at Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you [00:22:00] listen to your podcasts.

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