

Rotten Reviews Redux

October 30, 2015



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Two truly great rejections come immediately to mind. The first was the reaction of the editor of a high-level journal to a response I made to two reviews, one of which said the current version of our paper should be rejected but proposed revisions after which the paper could make a contribution. The other review literally *made up* “quotes” from the paper, defeated them handily, and recommended rejection.

Never having seen anything quite like this before (or since), I tried to be polite and indirect in my reply, which documented line by line that nothing even remotely resembling the language attributed to us had been written in the manuscript, saying that we could deal with the requests for revision made by the first reviewer, saying that the second reviewer “had reached the right conclusion but for wrong reasons” (that is, for *made up* reasons, not even real ones), and asking if it was ok to resubmit. The editor said no, allowing as how I had myself admitted that both reviewers had reached the right conclusion — to reject the submission — and the editor was sticking to it.

This rather mind-boggling reply was hard to explain to my graduate-student first author. I mean really, what do you say to something like that? I did vow, however, never again to be too indirect or too undeservedly polite in responding to reviewers (or editors) who got things wrong! After revisions in accord with the first reviewer’s criticisms, the paper was published in another high-level journal.

The second is my all-time favorite review, of my former student Sian L. Beilock’s* first attempt to publish her now well-known and influential work on expertise and choking under pressure. This review said that our paper put forth “what could only be called an otherworldly view of attention,” that our findings and our conclusions were all wrong, and that “the best response to these data would have been to seek other methods.” This review is quoted in full in Beilock’s 2001 publication of the results in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

So my first example shows off an editor who thought that a review that made things up and then criticized them was as valuable as a review that helped the authors to get better, and my second shows a reviewer who was so certain-sure of his or her own views as to be willing to deny a methodology, not because the methodology was flawed but because it produced results the reviewer didn’t like! The two students who bore the brunt of these review processes survived and have gone on to flourish in excellent careers. But I must admit that I still hold a bit of a grudge! These might now be funny stories to tell and

they certainly carry lessons to be learned, but things were not so funny at the time for the students who got hammered!



Carol Dwyer

Pennington, New Jersey

A two-word review: “Intellectually vacuous”!



Terrie E. Moffitt

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The rejection that still smarts most for me said, “The research reported in this paper is technically adept, but boring as hell. Therefore we decline to publish it.”