

# Optical Engineering

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## Take the High Road

Michael T. Eismann



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One of the difficult responsibilities of a journal editor is to mediate strong differences of opinion amongst manuscript reviewers and, in particular, between reviewers and authors. Over the past month, I have been confronted with multiple sensitive cases of this nature, so I decided to share my perspective on this topic and provide some suggestions for how authors might deal with these situations when they arise.

While it would be inappropriate to divulge any details of the cases that have motivated this editorial, most of us have probably experienced these prototypical situations at some point. An author submits a paper that he or she feels is a solid contribution to the field of study, but receives reviews that are either negative or contradictory, perhaps with a reviewer making statements that seem unnecessarily harsh. The author's inclination may be to react negatively to the review, perhaps even questioning the legitimacy and professionalism of the reviewer and the fairness of the peer review process. Constructive criticism can be hard to accept; it becomes even more difficult when it appears to be unfair, especially from an anonymous source. The editor is placed in a challenging and sensitive position, particularly when the reviewer is a credible professional who, despite his or her directness, may actually raise valid criticisms.

Navigating through these thorny cases has made me think a bit about our peer review system. It is admittedly an imperfect one. We rely almost entirely on volunteers who are not subject to the same accountability as paid staff. Some reviewers and even editors may exhibit biases for a variety of reasons, and such bias can be difficult to detect and control, especially given the scientific complexity of the subject matter and subjectivity of the manuscript acceptance criteria. While we employ blind reviews, the process is not double blind, and this sometimes leads to suspicions of intentional unfair treatment of authors. For some authors, the stakes for getting

papers published can be high, and many manuscript submissions represent work that is marginally significant as a result of the pressure to publish. Editors, therefore, frequently need to make subjective decisions on borderline cases based on recommendations that may exhibit biases and large variances.

Despite these potential shortfalls in our peer review process, my experience is that it works surprisingly well. The key ingredient that holds everything together is the professionalism and sense of duty and fairness prevalent within our community. For every individual who might add significant bias into the process, intentional or not, there appear to be numerous fair-minded professionals who strive for objectivity and are willing to entertain legitimate perspectives different than their own. In the far majority of cases, the voices of reason ultimately seem to prevail.

When you are an author confronted with a harsh review, I can appreciate that the natural human instinct is to become convinced that your case is not part of that majority. I encourage you to resist and overcome that instinct. Look past the tone of the reviews and ancillary comments you might consider petty or personally offensive. Consider each comment as an opportunity to gain insight into something you can do to enhance your manuscript. Even when poorly stated, most reviewer comments have some legitimate basis behind them. Whether you agree with a reviewer's comment or not, provide a professional response to it, illustrating that you have carefully considered it and made a reasonable attempt to address the concern. Back that up by making substantive changes to the manuscript where needed. Generally, if you need to explain something in your response to the reviewer, that clarification should also be stated in your paper as well.

Ultimately, we have several mechanisms for appropriately handling disputes between reviewers and authors, and each is given due diligence. When I am asked to intervene in these cases or advise one of our associate editors dealing with a difficult case, a very important consideration is the credibility of the dissenting voices. Through examination of the reviews, the response to reviewer comments, and the manuscript itself, we attempt to ferret out which perspective carries more weight. Well-reasoned, objective explanations backed by concrete evidence far outweigh idle opinions, irrespective of the reputation of the individuals involved. Please keep that in mind the next time you receive a review that seems unfair. Take the high road; it has a better chance of leading to your desired destination.

**Michael T. Eismann**  
Editor-in-Chief