EDITOR'S COMMENTS

The First Revision

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I recollect early in my career when a senior colleague walked into my office with a smile. Waving the piece of paper in his hand, the decision letter for our submission to a leading journal that had just arrived by snail-mail, he exclaimed: "Great news, major-risky revision, we are in the game!" This moment has stayed vivid in my memory, one that I have replayed in doctoral and junior faculty consortia and to students and colleagues, as I was perplexed as to why a risky revision that was going to require extensive rework was great news.

The first revision of a paper is crucial in determining whether it is likely to move forward to publication at a journal. Often times, editors and reviewers may like some aspects of the initial submission, but, individually and collectively, they are likely to raise issues that span the formulation and motivation of the research question, theorization, research design, and contribution. They can also raise concerns about organization and flow, writing quality, and tone. Editors, in taking stock of the reviewers' assessments, typically signal the need for a substantial, diligent first revision by using terms such as "major revision" and "substantial rework" in their decision letters. As there is likely to be uncertainty on whether and how certain issues can be addressed and what the revised article will look like and its value, the term "risky revision" is common in editorial reports for first round submissions that are not rejected.

Why is the first revision particularly important? Given the focus on cycle times and reducing the number of rounds of review, many journals, including *MISQ*, are striving to arrive at an editorial disposition toward a manuscript after reviewing the first revision. As a result, the survival rate of papers that make it through the first revision increases dramatically. By producing an effective first revision, authors are also likely to reduce the number of trials at different journals, a process that is costly for authors and for the scarce reviewing resources of the community.

It is in the first revision that authors indicate to the review panel how effectively they have responded to the typically incisive feedback on the initial submission. Extensive reworking of the manuscript, as is common for a first revision, is also likely to change the gestalt of a manuscript (Daft 1985). Solving a problem can call attention to another. The first revision may raise or amplify issues that were obscured in the initial submission, or may surface new issues.

If the review panel finds the authors have not made strong progress in addressing the key issues, they are likely to lean out of the paper. If they find the authors to have made excellent progress in addressing key issues—without introducing critical issues—such that the contribution and the pathway to publication are clear, they are likely to be favorable to the paper. This makes the first revision of the paper particularly critical, although, of course, subsequent revisions are important.

I have observed authors approach the first revision in markedly different ways that are ineffective. At one extreme, there is the cosmetic approach: authors interpret language such as risky revision in editorial decision letters as perfunctory, make tweaks to the paper, and roll the dice. At the other extreme, there is the high-effort, no-plan approach: authors try to address each reviewer comment, major and minor, individually and without a game-plan such that the paper does not have a clear message and breaks down in cohesion.

My purpose of this editorial is to share my perspectives that have developed through my experiences as an author, reviewer, editor, and mentor on how to approach the first revision as well as through my conversations with colleagues, editors, and students on their approaches and experiences with first revisions. I do not intend to be exhaustive—each revision has its necessarily unique elements and each author has his or her unique work styles. What I share is a set of practices that can be applied by authors to aid with how they formulate and develop the first revision (see Table 1).

Table 1. The First Revision	
Plan for a Cool-Down Period	• Step back after receiving the review packet—emotions can obscure assimilation of the feedback
Develop a Holistic Understanding of the Feedback	• Map the issues into categories to interpret the connections in the feedback from different members of the review panel as well as the areas of convergence and divergence
Develop a Revision Strategy	• Conceive alternative pathways to address an issue • Cascade the implications of a choice • Evaluate the revised story for plot, coherence, credibility, and punch • Seek feedback on the revision strategy
How to Rewrite the Paper	• Safeguard against the rewriting block • Pursue a virtuous cycle of thinking–writing–presenting • Watch for fractures to the macrostructure
Write the Response Document as Scholarly Conversation	• Lead in with the big picture • Explain the choices to address the issues, along with an enumeration of changes • Include evidence, beyond what is in the paper, to address reviewer concerns • Disagree, without being disagreeable
Start Early, Have a Timeline	• Get off the starters block • Schedule revision activities • Allocate time for refining

Plan for a Cool-Down Period

If authors are deeply in love with their initial submission, they may be inclined to reject feedback, even that which can make the work better. Self-justification and sunk cost considerations after years of work on a project can make it challenging to cognitively process disconfirming viewpoints and evidence.

Instead, if authors are willing to rethink key aspects of the paper, reanalyze the data, and rewrite the paper, they are likely to be in a frame of mind to understand and address the type of feedback that we tend to receive on an initial submission to a top journal.

The challenge in processing feedback can be exacerbated by a mindset that the review panel is "clueless and just does not get it." Although this may happen in some instances, overgeneralizing from a reviewer missing a point to the entire feedback from the reviewer or the review panel can lead to dismissal of useful feedback.

Some colleagues refer to a mandatory cooling-down period after receiving the review packet. The first step to understanding the feedback is to calm high-strung emotions that cloud interpretation of feedback that is quite critical on work in which we have invested significant time and energy and whose outcomes have implications for incentives and career progression. As authors, it is also important to remind ourselves that the comments pertain *only* to the paper and are not a critique about us as individuals or scholars; this requires not conflating the professional critique of an article with personal critique.

Develop a Holistic Understanding of the Feedback

A review packet typically includes the decision letter from the Senior Editor (SE), the Associate Editor's (AE) report, and the reviewers' reports. A useful first step in developing an integrative understanding of the feedback is to organize the comments into categories, for example, issues and suggestions pertaining to motivation, theorization, research design, analysis, and implications.

A coding scheme, by category and review panel member, can illuminate the connections in the feedback from different members of the panel, and surface the convergence and divergence of the feedback. When organizing the feedback, it is also useful to differentiate major issues from minor ones.

At this stage in the process, it is useful to try not to consider or start making changes to address individual issues but to focus attention on understanding the comments in a holistic manner.

To avoid the risk of misinterpretation, authors can validate their assessment of the issues through discussions with co-authors and senior colleagues.

Develop a Revision Strategy

Over the years, I have heard many authors and editors reflect on the utility of conceiving a revision strategy, where authors take stock of the feedback and evaluate how the major issues can be effectively addressed, not individually but collectively, to develop the paper cohesively.

The process of constructing a revision strategy to address major issues is not straightforward.

There can be different pathways to address the major issues, which can have cascading implications for other parts of the paper. Moreover, the effectiveness in how a particular issue is addressed can depend on the choices that are made to address the other issues.

Conceive Alternative Pathways to Address an Issue

Oftentimes there can be different pathways to address a major issue. Authors can engage in independent thought-trials on different ways to address the issue. However, as Weick (1989) notes, researchers are constrained in doing so because of "grooved, habituated, redundant thinking," and suggests that they can overcome these constraints through "disciplined imagination" to conceive diverse conjectures (p. 522). This process entails engaging in different literatures and discussing with scholars and practitioners with different viewpoints and classification systems to look at a problem or solution.

For example, reviewers may observe that the choices to conceptualize a phenomenon (e.g., which theory bases and constructs are in the foreground, what assumptions are made) obscure key features of the phenomenon. They may point to what is obscured by the conceptual choices made by the authors. Authors can engage in a process of disciplined imagination by considering different literatures or employing other approaches to conceive alternatives to their classification systems for describing the phenomenon. These thought-trials can enable them to reconceptualize the phenomenon in ways that place salience on the obscured features. As another example, reviewers may point to alternative explanations for the results. The authors can conceive plausible approaches to evaluate these alternative explanations and explain how they considered and assessed them.

Cascade the Implications of a Choice

How an issue is addressed requires thinking about potential cascading effects through the manuscript. For instance, changes in the theorization may require cascading changes to the analysis and implications. An initial submission may have employed a design-science approach to develop and evaluate the utility of an artifact with novel gamification features. A major issue from a review process may identify the need to develop the theorization of the mechanisms through which the gamification features affect outcomes. If there is a revision in the theorization to place salience on the causal mechanisms through which the gamification features affect IS use, there may be an opportunity to leverage the process trace data on IS use in the analysis. While the review panel may not have explicitly requested such a corresponding change in the analysis, such a change would lead to alignment between the revised theorization and the analysis.

Evaluate the Revised Story for Plot, Coherence, Credibility, and Punch

Will the changes result in a compelling plot, coherent storyline backed up with credible evidence, and compelling takeaway? Or will they lead to a disjointed story with no discernible plot and a fragmented story? Addressing reviewers' comments in a piecemeal manner is likely to result in a revised paper that, as one editor noted, "looks like a camel with too many humps and bumps," and another referred to as "porridge."

Authors need to assess how well the changes gel: is the overall story enhanced by a cumulative set of changes? There may be issues that are no longer relevant given the revised direction of the paper and how an issue in one category is addressed may warrant changes in other parts; the changes need to be jointly evaluated in terms of how they can advance a coherent and credible story with punch.

Seek Feedback on the Revision Strategy

Authors can obtain feedback on the revision strategy through discussions with their co-authors and with colleagues. Editors may indicate that they are willing to provide feedback on a revision strategy or clarify specific issues. In such instances, authors can share a concise revision strategy with the SE. A word of caution: authors should not construe the process of obtaining feedback on a revision strategy from an editor as obtaining sign-off. The evaluation of a revision necessarily requires holistic assessment by the reviewers and editors.

How to Rewrite the Paper

Safeguard Against the Rewriting Block

When it comes to writing a revision, the challenge of writer's block manifests as a *rewriting block*: hang-on-to-my-old-draft. Even when the feedback warrants extensive rethinking, authors often start with the initial submission and wedge in adjustments. By tweaking the initial manuscript, authors reduce their writing effort but dramatically constrain their rethinking of how the feedback can be addressed. To the extent that addressing the feedback requires *rethinking* how the work is motivated, theorization, analysis, and implications, an approach to insert changes into the initial write-up anchors the revision quite strongly to the initial choices and the macrostructure of the work that was in place. Rethinking calls for ruthless rewriting—starting afresh is a prudent approach for those parts of the work.

Pursue a Virtuous Cycle of Thinking–Writing–Presenting

"Just as thinking clarifies writing, writing also clarifies thinking, and presentation can clarify both" (Huff 1999, Location 1364). A few observations related to this cycle for the development of the first revision:

- ***Start with a revision strategy, then iterate between the response document and the paper***: The writing of the response document can prove useful in thinking about the writing of the paper and *vice versa*. I have found it beneficial to take an initial crack at the response document, starting with the revision strategy, and to refine the strategy and responses to issues as the revision develops.

- ***Incorporate presentations in the revision process***: As authors, we get close to our work. This can lead us to assume obviousness of things that are not obvious to others, be constrained in how we interpret feedback from the review panel or conceive ways to address the issues, not see fractures in the macrostructures, or be blind-sided by new problems that are introduced with the changes. The uncomfortable, but highly revealing moment of the deer-in-headlights-look of an informed audience listening to the work, or the emergence of a radically different point of view from the audience on how to address an issue or improve the gestalt, can be invaluable in developing the revision.

- ***Provide the presentation audience with a frame of reference of the key issues***: Sharing with the presentation audience (e.g., internal workshops at one's university, small group of colleagues or an individual colleague over lunch, colloquium series at other universities) the key issues that surfaced from the review process provides the audience with a frame of reference to channel feedback on how the specific issues may be addressed and new ones to be sensitive to.

- ***Capture and share feedback from the presentations***: Documenting the feedback shortly after the presentation captures the feedback while it is fresh in our minds. I try to document feedback from presentations on the day that I present as this enables me to capture specific elements of the exchange, both during the presentation and following it, with greater precision and to share it with my collaborators. Sharing the feedback with co-authors enables the author team to process the feedback individually and then collectively assess how to modify the revision.

Watch for Fractures to the Macrostructure

The first revision typically involves changing different aspects of the paper that need to be reflected not only in the microstructure of the paper but importantly also in its macrostructure.

A revision is conducted over a period of time, can include trials and errors on how issues are addressed, and multiple authors may be involved in the writing. Authors can revise the paper in ways that focus on the microstructure but fracture the macrostructure. For example, they may individually rework the formulation and motivation of the research question, clarify the definitions of constructs and explain why a certain perspective is adopted for the study, develop the premises for their claims, explain the rationale for research design and analysis, or rethink the scholarly implications and practical utility of the work—but they may not work out the interconnections between these parts, leading to a breakdown in coherence. Authors can also inject way too many footnotes, add several citations and suggest the reader also read these works, and ask readers to jump to different parts of the paper, thwarting the readability of the paper.

Visualizing the entire paper, with a focus on the interconnections that are essential for coherence, can aid the authors in crafting a disciplined revision. While developing a revision is likely to involve back-and-forth jumps and trial-and-error pivots spanning different parts of the paper, the revision that is submitted must be disciplined in illuminating the interconnections from setting up the plot to solving it.

Write the Response Document as Scholarly Conversation

Accompanying their revision, authors are requested to provide their responses to reviewer and editor comments. The response document is where the authors have the opportunity to have a conversation with the editors and reviewers on how they addressed the feedback holistically as well as how they addressed individual issues and suggestions. There are notable characteristics of an effective response document.

Lead in with the Big Picture

Staring the response document, authors can summarize how they have addressed the major issues holistically and how the paper's storyline has developed. Presenting a clear big picture also signals to the editors and reviewers how diligently the revision was undertaken. As with any big picture statement, the summary of the major changes needs to be succinct, typically no more than a couple of pages.

Explain the Choices to Address the Issues, Along with an Enumeration of Changes

In point-by-point responses, it is important for authors to explain how they considered each issue and addressed it. In doing so, it is useful for authors to evaluate if their choices come across as personal preferences and opinions or if it is clear that the choices are well-reasoned and carefully informed by relevant evidence. It is also useful for authors to enumerate the specific changes made to the paper to address the issue. This does not require cutting and pasting entire sections of the paper into the response document; this leads to highly bloated response documents which are unlikely to be read carefully as a result. Instead, authors can point to the corresponding sections in the paper where changes have been made.

Include Evidence, Beyond What Is in the Paper, to Address Reviewer Concerns

Authors can include additional information in the response document that they do not think can be effectively worked into the paper for reasons of cohesion or manuscript length but that are likely to be useful to address the reviewers' concerns on an issue. For instance, reviewers, seeking to gain confidence in the quality of the evidence, may suggest several alternative empirical estimation approaches. Details of such analyses may be an overkill for the paper but can be included in the response document (potentially with a summary of such analyses in the paper).

Disagree, Without Being Disagreeable

A reviewer may have missed a point in the paper, may be incorrect on a technical matter, or may have made a suggestion that does not align with the other feedback and the resulting direction of the revision. In such cases, authors can explain, providing specific reasons and evidence, as to why a comment was not addressed or was addressed differently than may have been suggested by the reviewer.

Moreover, it is important to be sensitive to tone. It is not productive to communicate in a tone that is irritated, argumentative, defensive, dismissive, or condescending. As authors, we expect a measured professional tone from reviewers and editors; editors and reviewers expect the same from authors. The process is likely to unfold in a more satisfactory manner if all parties involved maintain professionalism in communicating about the paper.

Start Early, Establish a Timeline

Developing an effective revision not only requires time but also requires careful time management, which can be aided by an early start, scheduling activities on a revision timeline, and allocating time to refine the paper.

Get Off the Starting Blocks

With inevitable uncertainty in how to address the feedback from editors and reviewers and in what the revised paper will look like, authors, particularly early-stage colleagues, may feel overwhelmed to a point that they defer kicking off the revision. At the other extreme, authors may vastly underestimate what it takes to develop an effective revision. Both of these scenarios of deferring the kickoff of the revision takes away valuable time from the allocated time for resubmission and can lead to a rushed revision. Discussing the feedback with co-authors and colleagues and sketching a revision strategy can help authors to calm down if they are overwhelmed or get a reality check on the work likely to be involved, and can assist in starting the revision.

Schedule Revision Activities

Must-dos of the day—the scheduled activities (e.g., committee meetings, teaching, research meetings)—are likely to win one's attention over unscheduled activities. Scheduling time to work on a revision first requires prioritizing the revision and allocating the time for the various activities. When it comes to collaborative work, collaborators have their schedule constraints and unexpected life events. Scheduling time to engage with collaborators to discuss issues and establish shared understanding, as well as define a workflow, can greatly help in forging ahead with the revision.

Allocate Time for Refining

Developing a polished revision requires allocating time to enhance coherence and quality of the revised manuscript, tie up loose ends in incorporating reviewer and editor suggestions and addressing their comments, and refine the response document to editors and reviewers. An effectively honed down manuscript sends a message to reviewers and editors on the care and attention that authors have paid to the revision. A manuscript riddled with blemishes or significant lapses sends quite the opposite message to editors and reviewers.

Concluding Remarks

With journals striving to arrive at an editorial disposition on a paper at the end of the first revision, the stakes for an effective first revision are high. Although each revision and author have idiosyncratic elements that will influence how to produce an effective first revision, authors can follow a set of practices that are likely to enhance the odds of doing so. This starts with cooling down so feedback from editors and reviewers on the initial submission is not dismissed due to raw emotions, synthesizing the feedback, and crafting a revision strategy. The development of the revision is likely to be greatly facilitated if authors safeguard against three salient risks: being tethered to the initial submission and tweaking it; deferring writing the paper, or presenting to colleagues for feedback, until wrapping up thinking about how the issues will be worked out; and injecting fissures in the macrostructure of the paper by following a piecemeal approach to addressing the issues. Authors can augment their revision with an effective response document by approaching it as a scholarly conversation, where they explain to editors and reviewers how the authors interpreted and addressed the collective feedback as well as specific issues. Although I have focused my remarks on how these practices can be useful for the first revision, they can be suitably appropriated to aid in developing subsequent revisions where there may be less need for as extensive rethinking and rewriting.

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