

It's Time for Insulting Reviews to Stop.

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### It's Time for Insulting Reviews to Stop.

As researchers, we have all had our fair-share of negative, insulting, reviews of papers we have submitted. We share our stories of such reviews over coffee with colleagues, as if they are “battle-scars”: evidence of intellectual warfare in the theater of the academy. Maybe you are one of those rare researchers who have never had this happen to you. Fear not, you can read of others’ experience:

[www.shitmyreviewerssay.tumblr.com](http://www.shitmyreviewerssay.tumblr.com) provides a collection of anonymously-submitted negative and insulting comments researchers have received from their reviewers.

Spending some time reading these comments might brighten your afternoon: schadenfreude is indeed alive and well in academic circles. (To demonstrate I am no better, my favourite exemplar is “*Find your inner nerd—it must be a big part of you—bind and gag it and then dump it in the ocean tied to a large rock.*”<sup>1</sup>) Scientists fortunate enough to be in permanent academic positions—replete with high-impact publications and grant income—would likely be able to shrug off such comments to their work<sup>2</sup>. But my concern is not for them<sup>3</sup>.

My concern lies with the next-generation of researchers. We are in danger of alienating some of the brightest junior researchers by degrading their hard work via insulting reviews. Imagine—perhaps you do not need to—you are a junior researcher from a non-English speaking country. You worked impeccably hard during your undergraduate degree to excel and be accepted on to a graduate program, which itself brings with it long-hours, no evenings, and no weekends. You toil in the laboratory in your chosen research question, design what you believe to be a sound experimental procedure, and execute it with care and precision. You analyse your data scrupulously, and find the predicted results. Excitedly, you write your paper, submit it, and wait. Of course, you understand rejection is a (likely) possibility, but you are thrilled at the prospect of seeing your fellow researchers’ opinion of your work. However, upon opening the decision email, you see Reviewer 2 states “Have you no command of the English

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<sup>1</sup><http://bit.ly/1PrcAyR>

<sup>2</sup>But why should they?

<sup>3</sup>Although, why shouldn't it be?

language?”<sup>4</sup> Maybe science has just lost this promising researcher.

It is time for insulting reviews to stop. They serve no purpose other than to degrade our fellow scientists. Yes, poor papers will be submitted to our journals. Yes, we will feel frustrated with the lack of detail and rigour provided by authors. Yes, oftentimes researchers will over-interpret their results, or miss a glaring confounding variable in their experiment. But we should not allow our responses to become personal attacks on the author. If a paper is truly poor, we should highlight the critical shortcomings in an objective, clear manner, without resorting to insults.

Done well, peer-review is one of the true successes of the scientific discipline. Done poorly, it is one of its failings. Ensuring insulting reviews stop is ultimately in the hands of individual scientists, each making their own dedication to make certain their reviews are insult-free. In time, insulting reviews can cease via this bottom-up process. I ask you to start now.

However, editors to our journals have an immediate responsibility to purge insulting reviews. Every insulting review you have ever received has passed the eyes of an editor. As editors, we owe it to our scientific community to deal with insulting reviews in a top-down manner. How this is achieved, I leave open for discussion. A simple solution is for editors to return any insulting review to the reviewer, with the request to amend their comments accordingly. The editor could remove any insulting aspect of reviews should the reviewer be unable to comply.

The pressures of the academy—the ever-increasing competition for journal pages and funding—understandably creates a fierce sense of competition. We need to ensure this competition does not spill over into hostility. It is certainly time for insulting reviews to stop.

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<sup>4</sup><http://bit.ly/1mV2Cii>