My Rebuttal-Writing Process for HCI Venues

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CHI rebuttal season just passed, and while the topic is front-of-mind, I wanted to share the guidelines that I use (and that I suggest to my interns) regarding the art of rebuttal writing. My approach to this process has been shaped by my experience writing many rebuttals (I've published over 100 peer-reviewed HCI articles), as well as a great deal of experience reading them – I have been a papers subcommittee chair for CHI twice (in 2011 and 2018), technical program chair for CHI (in 2009), and program chair of CSCW (2014), ITS (2012), and ASSETS (2017), as well as frequently serving as a program committee member for CHI, CSCW, UIST, ASSETS, and other HCI venues. That being said, this is my personal opinion only, so take it with a grain of salt! I'm sharing it because I think it might be a useful guide for new members of the HCI community, particularly students.

Step 1: Read the Reviews, then Sleep on It

When the reviews arrive, read them. *Do not start writing the rebuttal yet*. In most cases, you will be angry, frustrated, or annoyed. This is not a good frame of mind for writing a polite rebuttal, nor for being receptive to the nuggets of wisdom the reviewers have to offer (which *will* actually make your paper better, though it may not feel that way at first). Let your subconscious process the feedback for a day before taking any further action.

Step 1a: Do not Vent about your Paper on Social Media

Remember, you are not the only person who feels frustrated and wronged by the reviews. Academic life is full of constant criticism and rejection. Sometimes reviewers are lazy, sometimes they are mean, sometimes they are wrong; you are not unique in experiencing poor reviews. The reviews may not even be wrong, but you may need some time and distance to appreciate their feedback. Venting on social media will not increase your professional reputation; also, it is quite possible that the ACs (who, unlike the external reviewers, know the author's identity) will view your post, and this likely will not benefit you or your paper.

Step 1b: Do not Complain to the Program Chair* (*with very rare exceptions)

Complaining to the Program Chair will rarely change the outcome of a decision regarding your paper. You are not the only author who thinks the reviewers are ill-informed, underqualified, lazy, etc. Reasons to contact the program chair include serious breaches of process or protocol, such as if all papers were to receive four reviews and your paper only received two, or if a review's content crossed well over the border of professional objectivity, such as by using racist language. True emergencies that may impact your ability to write a rebuttal in a timely fashion are also valid reasons to contact the Program Chair (e.g., you just went into labor and must go to the hospital to deliver a baby).

Step 2: Determine Whether to Write a Rebuttal

Case 1: Very Low Scores

Just because you are offered the opportunity to write a rebuttal does not mean you should necessarily do so. Some conferences will only allow authors with viable scores to rebut, directly rejecting lower-scored work; however, some conferences offer all authors the chance to write a rebuttal. If the scores of your paper are quite low (all below the borderline score is a good rule of thumb), then it is highly unlikely the rebuttal will result in acceptance. Considering the content of the reviews and the scores, reflect carefully on whether it is a good use of your time to write a rebuttal. In some cases, it may still be useful, such as if it would provide a learning opportunity for a graduate student, or if writing the rebuttal would help you craft new text that you will be able to re-use when you improve the submission for another venue. Be realistic in your assessment of whether rebuttal writing is truly worth your time.

Case 2: Very High Scores

For authors with very high scores, I strongly encourage you to submit a (brief) rebuttal; I have witnessed at least two instances where program committees rejected a paper that had relatively high scores because the authors did not write a rebuttal that indicated they would address reviewers' concerns in their camera-ready papers. While I personally disagreed with those decisions, I think it is important for authors to be aware that some reviewers or program committees expect rebuttals even from high-scoring works; in the case of strong scores, a rebuttal for a high-scoring paper might be something simple that indicates you will keep reviewer feedback in mind as you make your final version. An example might be: "We appreciate the detailed reviews, and are glad the reviewers rated this work as having a strong contribution. The reviews indicate several minor areas for clarification, such as including the references mentioned by R1 and expanding the discussion of Future Work as suggested by AC2. These changes will be straightforward for us to incorporate into our camera-ready paper, if accepted, and we look forward to doing so."

Step 3: Re-Read the Reviews, and Prioritize the Reviewers' Comments

Now that you've slept on it, you are ready to start the rebuttal. Read the reviews in full a second time. Make notes of the most important points to respond to. You will not have space to respond to every single reviewer comment in great detail – you need to prioritize! A strong AC will call out in the meta-review which comments you should address in the rebuttal; if you are lucky enough to have such a responsible AC, then follow their advice! I prioritize rebuttals to include (1) anything the meta-reviewer specially called out as needing to be in the rebuttal, (2) any items brought up in any AC's review, since ACs take part in the program committee meeting, so their opinions tend to carry more weight than those of the external reviewers, (3) any items brought up in more than one review (if one person is confused, perhaps they were a lazy reader; if more than one person is confused, then the paper wasn't clear), (4) any items brought up by reviewers with borderline scores whom you might be able to sway. Given space constraints, I de-prioritize responding to small items from reviewers with already high scores, as well as from any reviewers with extremely low scores whom I am unlikely to persuade.

Step 4: Thematically Group Comments

A strong rebuttal is organized and concise. Now that you have a prioritized list of reviewer comments, group similar ones thematically. Create an outline of key themes. Use this outline structure within your rebuttal, providing clear headings. I find it helpful to call out next to each heading in parenthesis which reviewer(s) this heading is relevant to, which can help the reviewers skim the rebuttal and understand which parts of the rebuttal address their concerns. For example, headings might be things like: "Statistical Analysis (R1, AC2)" or "Related Work (R1, R3, R4)".

Step 5: Write a First Draft

Using the framing, write a first draft of the rebuttal. Clearly delineate sections using the organizing headers you developed in Step 4. Don't worry yet about length, you can trim later. In a typical seven-day rebuttal cycle, I advise having a complete first draft by the end of the third day (Day 1 is read-and-sleep-on-it, Day 2 is re-read-prioritize-outline). Your rebuttal draft should have the following qualities:

Be Polite: Even though you followed Step #1 and slept on it for a day, you are probably still annoyed that the reviewers didn't see your brilliance. You will be tempted to use angry or condescending language in your rebuttal. Resist this temptation! Reading a rude rebuttal will certainly not put reviewers in a frame of mind to be persuaded by you. Even if you felt the reviewers were condescending to you, take the high road. Nasty rebuttals can backfire; I was once in a program committee meeting where a paper with borderline-plus scores was rejected out-of-hand because the tone of the rebuttal was so toxic. I'm not saying that I necessarily agreed with that decision, but rather

bring it up to illustrate to rebuttal writers that there can be consequences to a negative tone. It is a common convention to open by thanking the reviewers for their feedback; however, it is not necessary to be obsequious or to include multiple statements of thanks.

Be Specific: Be as specific as you can within the space constraints. For example, if a reviewer asks about a missing statistic, provide the results they ask for directly in the rebuttal (e.g., "R2 asked about the standard deviation of variable X; the value was 8.2; we will include this number in our revised paper"), rather than being vague (e.g., "We will include the standard deviation information in our revisions."). If a reviewer asks about the relevance of a piece of related work, summarize it concisely (e.g., "AC2 wondered if our work is similar to that of Morris et al. from UIST 2007; the Morris paper contributed a system to support remote collaborative search, whereas our paper is focused on co-located scenarios, which Morris herself [Morris et al., CHI 2008] noted require unique solutions. We will update the Related Work section to include this distinction."). If the reviewers indicate that discussion of a topic is missing, use the rebuttal to present the exact text of the new paragraph you propose adding to the Discussion section. Specific content helps the reviewers understand the answers to their questions and helps assure them that the changes you will make to improve the paper are realistic and will not fundamentally alter the paper so much that it requires re-review. If you promise to do something in your rebuttal, you *must* be prepared to follow through on that promise if the paper is accepted; do not make promises that you cannot keep. The PC members know your identity, and if you fail to follow through on what you said in your rebuttal it may impact the value of your rebuttal for future papers (and the PC may even choose to reject your camera-ready submission).

Step 6: Revise!
Revision makes everything better. Now that you have a first draft, send it off to your co-authors, advisor, or other trusted colleagues to get their feedback and comments. After that, revise it yourself with fresh eyes. In your revisions, you will want to be on the lookout for opportunities to tone down any remnants of anger or snark that linger in your writing, as well as to trim content so it is concise and within the allowed character limits. If none of the paper authors are native English speakers, I strongly recommend enlisting the assistance of a generous colleague or of a professional proofreader for all of your scientific writing, including rebuttals; while I understand that it is challenging to author in your non-native language, and that the use of English may unfairly disadvantage non-native authors, these are the circumstances of our current system, and clear, grammatically correct writing is more understandable and persuasive. Do not submit intermediate drafts to the review system; depending on system settings, your rebuttal might be immediately visible to any program committee members or external reviewers who access the system, even if the rebuttal deadline has not yet passed. You probably do not want them to read your semi-final draft, so wait to submit until you have finalized your text.

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