

Where are all the Low-Risk R&Rs?

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When we have received revise and resubmit (R&R) decisions, editors often characterize them as “high risk.” But we can’t remember ever receiving a “low risk” R&R. This is strange given that any R&R is lower risk than was the initial submission. A ballpark 80% rejection rate of initial submissions (either at the Editor’s desk or after initial review) is common at selective journals (Bliese, 2020; Boer et al., 2023). Of the 20% of papers that receive an R&R, approximately one fourth to one half of those will ultimately be accepted for publication (reflecting a 5–10% overall acceptance rate). That means editors frequently characterize papers carrying a 40–50% rejection rate as being “high risk”, even though the initial submission was almost twice as risky (what should we call the initial submission—EXTREME risk screaming in all caps with a Red Bull in hand?).

A recent editorial (DeCelles et al., 2019) illustrates just how normative the high-risk R&R can be. In an allegory of the publication process, the fairytale character Goldilocks submits her manuscript to three excellent journals in turn. She receives rejections from the first two journals, but a “high-risk revision” at the third journal. This brings Goldilocks relief and makes her exclaim, “Ahhhh, just right!” But shouldn’t a low-risk R&R be “just right”? Or is Goldilocks simply exhibiting learned helplessness, knowing that low-

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risk R&Rs are simply not reality in our science. Why is this? Let us speculate...

Propositions (and Proposed Solutions) for the Lack of Low-Risk R&R's

The Veridical Quality Explanation

Perhaps the field is saturated with incompetent writers. Maybe the riskiness of R&R's does not, in fact, follow a normal distribution with a few papers falling in the low- and high-risk tails and most in the moderately-risky middle. The true distribution could be skewed such that only one manuscript a year, across all journals, merits a low-risk R&R. Or it could just be us. Perhaps we'll receive loads of emails from researchers documenting their riches of low-risk R&Rs (and toner abs too). We'll feel sheepish but at least the normal distribution would prevail.

Solution: As a field, write better. Or, if it's just us, we should write better. Sorry to those of you who have been our reviewers.

The Technical Error Explanation

Maybe Manuscript Central has a software problem, causing system errors if the button for 'minor revision' is clicked (instead of 'reject' or 'major revision'). Rumor has it the 2021 Amazon Web Service outage was caused by a reviewer clicking 'minor revision' (she was never seen again...).

Solution: For heaven's sake, will someone please call IT!?!)

The Mythology Explanation

In this view, low-risk R&Rs don't exist and never have. Like unicorns, Big Foot, the Abominable Snowman, leprechauns, or the Tooth Fairy. To test this hypothesis, we ran a rigorous, double-blind, controlled experiment where we randomly assigned manuscripts to put under our pillows at night. Results showed overnight low-risk R&R rates were identical across conditions (i.e., zero), supporting the hypothesis.

Solution: There comes a time, in a person's life, to abandon childlike beliefs in fantasy. Recognize the low-risk R&R was a useful tale when you were a naïve

graduate student, but it's time to grow up and face the cold harsh reality (sorry to PhD students reading this; your advisors will understand if you cry a bit tonight).

The Frame-of-Reference Explanation

As academics, perhaps we have a limited understanding of the potential risk inherent across human activity. For example, a professional bull rider has a 3.2% probability of serious injury every ride (we looked it up: [Butterwick et al., 2002](#); it's honestly lower than we expected). Over the course of two 25-ride seasons, that makes for an 80% chance of being injured in competition (not to mention practice, etc.). Talk about high risk. Maybe if we had some editors moonlighting as bull riders (we're counting on you, Kevin S. Cruz), they would more appropriately characterize the risk inherent in an R&R¹.

Solution: How about a risk conversion metric? American Author, simply convert European Editor's "high-risk" R&R from Celsius into Fahrenheit. That way, you'll never really know the actual level of risk inherent in a revision (there's a 5/9 ratio, or maybe 9/5, but only during daylight savings time).

The Normative Explanation

Unconventional explanations aside, the motif of the high-risk R&R has so entered the lexicon of editors, reviewers, and authors that it has lost its true meaning and function. Editors use this phrase to 'manage expectations' for every paper regardless of its true level of riskiness in the first round of review, reviewers consider every paper (but their own) in need of major revisions, and authors accept this decision because, "hey, it's an R&R!"

Solution: Reassess the meaning of "high risk" when characterizing revise and resubmit decisions (read on...).

The (Relative) Meaning of "High Risk"

When an editor writes that they consider an R&R to be "high risk," what do they really mean? We consider two explanations here: the level of risk due to the *stage* in the review process, and the relative risk inherent in the manuscript's *content*.

The stage-oriented interpretation essentially characterizes all first-round revisions as "high risk" to reasonably reflect the risk inherent in this stage in the review process. Editors don't want to make (even implicit) promises to authors not knowing how the revision process will play out, authors vary in the extent and quality of their revisions, and addressing reviewers' concerns

may lead to other problems in later rounds. Moreover, editors may be reluctant to assign lower levels of risk to a revision early on because if the manuscript is ultimately rejected, authors may think they have violated a psychological contract (e.g., “the editor thinks this will go in, so I don’t have much work to do”, which then backfires in subsequent rounds and creates horror stories for all involved). Supporting this interpretation, recent evidence suggests that the riskiness of a revision may be simply a function of revision stage. Boer and colleagues (2023) examined all manuscript decisions for *Creativity and Innovation Management* in 2021. Only 19.5% of papers were awarded a “minor or major” revision in the first round, and nearly 100% of those (if not all) were major revisions² (see Table 13). A minor revision decision was more likely after two to three revisions (see Table 11).

However, the second explanation, focused on the content of the manuscript, is more problematic. A content explanation means that the editor thinks a manuscript needs much more revision than a “typical” first-round R&R. To progress to the next round, a manuscript needs more changes (e.g., entirely new theoretical framing; new or additional empirical data, etc.) than other manuscripts at the same stage of the review process. We suspect that authors frequently understand the phrase “high risk” through this content-based interpretation, which puts them in a dilemma regarding their next steps (Vogelgesang Lester, 2020). It can scare them and potentially discourage them from pursuing the revision (Chen, 2011; Faems & Hannah, 2018); whereas receiving a minor instead of a major revision decision encourages authors to pursue that revision instead of considering other options (e.g., submitting to a different journal) (Altman & Baruch, 2008).

And back to our main point: if this is what editors mean by “high risk,” *where are all the low-risk R&R’s?* If editors were attempting to accurately assess manuscripts’ probabilities of publication, we would expect some decisions to have average or (gasp!) low risk. Authors would benefit from this information, and yet there is a complete lexical disconnect: editors might intend to convey something about the stage in the review process, or they might mean to convey something about the unique content of the manuscript that authors should consider, or both. The review process is full of “reading between the lines” already, and authors might misconstrue messages in this process (for an example from the editor’s point of view, see Rynes, 2006).

Reconsidering Field Norms

So, what are stakeholders to do? We propose a richer normative meaning of “high risk.” Risk assessments are ultimately about assessing the likelihood a revision will result in a publishable manuscript. In making this judgment,

what should all parties (editors, reviewers, and authors) be thinking? We suggest that two broad categories comprise this assessment: the manuscript's extent of revision (i.e., its *transformation*), and the line-of-sight to get there (i.e., its *trajectory*). As an illustrative metaphor, we found it helpful to imagine a LEGO-building competition for a particular kind of spaceship (go with us for a minute).

First, the extent of the manuscript's revision depicts how much of a transformation it must undergo to complete it. In LEGO building, something that looks like a duck has a long way to go to become a spaceship. Very few of the pieces or modules can be reused or repurposed. Such a redesign would have a far greater transformation than taking a spaceship that is pretty close and simply changing the colors, replacing a module, or adding a few features. Similarly, the riskiness of a manuscript's revision is in part a function of how much the manuscript needs to change to be publishable. A paper that requires new theory and new data has more to change than does a paper that only requires new theory. A paper that only needs to add or expand an explanation for a hypothesis requires less transformation; it's already closer to what the outlet is looking for.

Second, the clarity of the trajectory connecting the current and end states of the manuscript might play a role in editorial risk assessments. In LEGO building, there aren't instructions to convert a duck into a spaceship. Not only does the duck have to transform significantly, but also the steps to change it are not readily apparent, requiring a lot of trial and error, and changes made through experimentation might be in irreconcilable conflict (e.g., if a foot is used for a rocket booster, what will remain for the landing gear?). Similarly in publishing, it is not always clear at the time of a decision letter how a concern could be resolved, or even whether it can be resolved (this is the forefront of science, after all!). And, in many revisions, solving one problem may lead to other problems popping up—addressing a weak theoretical link by adding a new theory may raise questions in terms of contribution or empirical analyses. From the editor's perspective, there are not only unknowns with respect to the manuscript, but also with respect to the reviewers (e.g., who may disagree a priori about the necessary revisions or disagree post hoc that the revisions were successful), the data (e.g., addressing a major empirical concern may substantially change the findings), or the literature (e.g., new studies currently under review might be published and change the way we think about the present study).

The trajectory and transformation of the revision are two distinct components of risk, even if they may be related. In our view, blurring these two have contributed to the "high risk" mess. *Some* revisions that require a significant amount of transformation shouldn't be classified as high risk, because

they have clear lines-of-sight. For example, reviewers and editors agree on what needs to be done, and there's a reasonable level of confidence that if those things are done the manuscript will meet the expectations of the outlet.

Figures 1 and 2 convey the transformation and trajectory of a manuscript in relation to our proposed decision labels (we just had to put a 2×2 in here, it was too tempting to resist...) and in relation to a normal distribution curve of the population of manuscripts given an R&R decision in any given round. When a manuscript requires a lot of transformation and its trajectory is unclear, relative to other manuscripts in the same stage of the review process, a high risk or major revision decision seems reasonable. Note that this means separating the content of the risk from the stage of the process – not all first-round R&Rs need be labeled as high risk. Where there is little transformation needed and a clear trajectory, a low risk or minor revision decision is warranted (again, while this may not be characteristic of many manuscripts after first submission, it very well could be for a few). And where there are discrepancies (lots of transformation required but the path is clear; little transformation required but the path is ambiguous) or where transformation and trajectory are typical compared to other manuscripts in the same stage of the review process, this manuscript should receive a “revision” decision (no qualifier needed!). Notice how nicely this fits onto a normal distribution curve with its empirical rules – we just love this visual...68% of revision decisions

		Manuscript Transformation	
		A little	A lot
Manuscript Trajectory	High clarity	“Low-risk revision” / “Minor revision”	“Revision”
	Low clarity	“Revision”	“High-risk revision” / “Major revision”

Figure 1. Manuscript decisions based on extent of transformation and clarity of trajectory.

Note. “Reject” means the manuscript went to the wrong foursquare area at the playground.

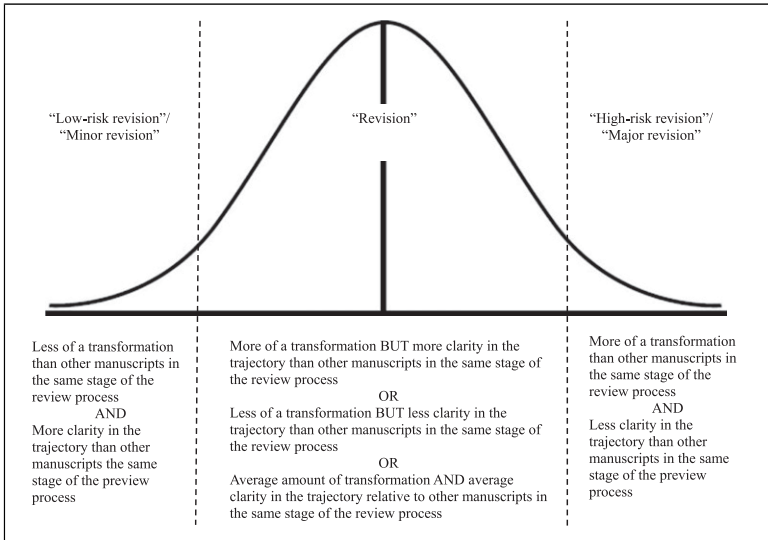


Figure 2. Distribution of manuscript decisions for any given stage of the review process.

could just be “revision” at any given stage of the review process, and 16% could be “low-risk”!

Based on our above musings, we want to acknowledge the perspectives and roles of different stakeholders in the review process, offering some practical ideas for shifting these risk assessment norms.

Food for Thought for Editors

Look, editors have a tough job. They devote countless hours to decision letters that integrate disparate reviewer comments and provide guidance to authors who may not revise the paper effectively or at all (Bliese, 2020). And they do it all for peanuts in pay (if any) from profit-generating publishers. But through these efforts, they actively raise the scholarship of our field by engaging in collaborative inquiry (Daft, 1995) even beyond any given submission to their journal (Ragins, 2018).

In this vein, we ask editors for two things. First, consider reducing the use of the phrase “high risk” in decision letters. Authors should certainly be aware of the significant amount of effort that is necessary to improve manuscripts for acceptance in top journals (Vogelgesang Lester, 2020). However, we question

whether the blanket use of the phrase “high risk” captures this point. Instead, consider reserving it for papers requiring the most significant revisions relative to others in the same stage of the review process. To be sure, future stages of the revision process are unpredictable (e.g., new flaws may become apparent in later rounds: [Gardner, 2020](#)), but just because this *might* happen doesn’t mean that all papers should be labeled as high risk from the start. Also, if you believe a paper to be high risk, consider whether it should really warrant a revision decision. Setting a higher bar for R&R decisions may reduce the phenomenon of rejecting papers after multiple rounds of revision ([Spector, 2023, 2024](#)).

If you decide to invite a “high-risk revision,” clarify for the authors what you mean by this phrase. For instance, explain how the revision you are inviting is risky based on the transformation required (e.g., “this manuscript needs more changes than are typical in this stage of the review process”), and the clarity of its trajectory (e.g., “reviewers are recommending vastly different courses of action” or “the changes required are likely to raise additional problems”). Ideally, editors would also explain what more specifically related to these characteristics makes revising the paper high risk. The overarching goal of any risk assessment, if used at all, should be to help authors form reasonable expectations about the revision attempt.

Food for Thought for Reviewers

Reviewing is also a great service to the profession and to individual authors. Like editors, we encourage reviewers to consider the full range of riskiness of improving any given paper they are asked to review. Are they all nearly hopeless? Remember compromises you have made that have greatly improved your own papers. Help authors and the editor by separating out major concerns from minor concerns - not everything is a big deal ([Feldman, 2005](#)). Be willing to review a revision even if you would have written the paper another way. Work on developing competencies as a developmental reviewer ([Boer et al., 2023](#); [Köhler et al., 2020](#)) and seek to “do no harm” as an ethical approach to reviewing ([Spector, 2023](#)). Finally, save your trigger-happy finger for the ‘major revision’ button for papers that need the most substantial theoretical or methodological work; this will help editors make more accurate risk assessments (if warranted) in their letters.

Food for Thought for Authors

One question for authors centers on when and whether one should go through with an R&R (Disclaimer: the author team disagrees about this. One says

never walk away from an R&R, the other says it might be worth it to preserve your voice). If the editor's letter says, "we like [some part of] your idea, but please change your theory and your data," you might truly have a high-risk R&R in the sense that it requires more transformation and involves a more ambiguous trajectory than a typical R&R. The review team doesn't like your paper (i.e., it's a duck), but pictures a different paper that is maybe, kind of, close to your paper (e.g., a spaceship with duck-like colors). In this case, you need to decide whether to follow through with the extensive revisions or try a different outlet. Complying may result in a "Well, this seems like an entirely different paper..." reaction in the next round (oh, *really*, huh...!). In these cases, going to a different outlet might be a rational, and perhaps less risky, strategy.

If your editor and reviewers make sense of your manuscript using our handy-dandy figures and you get a "low risk" revision (joy!), do not assume publication is a sure thing, or that you can put very little effort into making the requested changes. Authors who have done so have created the tragedy of the commons we currently endure. Many editors have stories about trying to encourage an author to complete a revision, only to find they "mailed it in" and expected their work to be published. It creates headaches for everyone involved, but particularly for the editor! If we want editors to provide helpful information to authors, we must not punish them for it.

A Conclusion for the Field

There is a growing trend to increase the developmental nature of the review process. Scholars in any of the above stakeholder roles can benefit from reading helpful guides to publishing, reviewing, and editing (Baruch et al., 2006, 2008; Clark et al., 2019). There also exist many commentaries from editors of top journals and 'how-to' papers (e.g., Aly et al., 2023; Bliese, 2020; Boer et al., 2023; Faems & Hannah, 2018; Miller & Van de Ven, 2015; Ragins, 2017, 2018; Vogelgesang Lester, 2020), as well as podcasts, blogs, and videos that promise to demystify the craft and process of publishing (e.g., Byron, 2024; Fisher et al., 2023; Gruber, 2023).

Our contribution to this trend is to call for a reconsideration of the implicit risk assessment norms inherent in the publication process. We propose that risk assessments, if used at all, should be more squarely about the content of the manuscript rather than its stage in the review process, specifically the extent of transformation required and the clarity of its trajectory. Specifying these characteristics provides additional meaning for authors, reviewers, and editors, and can begin to help us better standardize what is admittedly an idiosyncratic process. And for full transparency, we just wanted to write this commentary so that one day, one time in our careers, we might receive a "low-risk R&R"!

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Notes

1. Through personal correspondence, Kevin S. Cruz suggested some willingness to save our field by riding a bull. However, he presented several unreasonable constraints that make such activity impossible. The discipline is doomed.
2. Personal correspondence from Harry Boer.

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