Melbourne Research Office

How to write an ARC Discovery Project Rejoinder

Should I write a rejoinder?

1. YES. All applicants should take the opportunity to lodge a rejoinder. Your position in the ranking can be improved by a strong rejoinder. This can affect the chances of being offered a grant.
2. Reading an assessor’s report can provoke many emotions. When you write the rejoinder you need to back your arguments with facts and examples, not emotion.
3. Writing an effective rejoinder will almost certainly take several drafts and benefit greatly from feedback by colleagues and friends.
4. Note that the assessor reports you receive only represent advice to the ARC. ‘Glowing’ reports do not necessarily mean you will receive a grant. ‘Critical’ reports are not necessarily damning. It is the ARC College of Experts that will make the final recommendations to the ARC Board and in turn the Minister. Your rejoinder needs to be designed to help the College make the best informed decisions. The membership of the College is available on the ARC website at: http://www.arc.gov.au/about_arc/expert.htm

How do I access my reports and lodge my rejoinder?

5. Assessor reports are available for viewing in RMS and rejoinders are created in RMS. The rejoinder is only able to be written during a limited period.
7. If you have forgotten your RMS password or User ID please select ‘Reset Password’ or ‘Retrieve User Name’ link on the RMS homepage and follow the prompts. Please refer to Section 1.1 of the ARCs Rejoiner Process Instructions document found http://www.arc.gov.au/applicants/DP12_Rejoinder%20 Instructions_27%20Jun%202011.pdf
8. The rejoinder is limited to 5,000 characters (including spaces).
9. You can save the rejoinder a number of times, but after it is locally submitted you will no longer be able to edit the rejoinder. If you need to make a change after the rejoinder is locally submitted, or you locally submit by mistake, (ARC-Discovery@unimelb.edu.au) at the Melbourne Research Office and we will “un-submit” your rejoinder and you will then be able to edit, save and locally submit again.
10. Make sure you submit in RMS by the internal deadline – this is set a day or so prior to the ARC deadline and enables the Melbourne Research Office to confirm that all the rejoinders have been finalized. Note: Melbourne Research does not provide feedback on the rejoinder prior to submission to the ARC.

The Reports

11. The reports you receive may have been written by ‘Oz Readers’ (Australian academics in broadly related disciplines who read and rank up to 20 proposals) or by ‘International Assessors’ (experts of international standing in specific discipline areas, who are often Australian). The report writers are anonymous to all except the ARC.
12. The ARC sends each application to two Oz Readers and several International Assessors and follows up overdue reports. Despite their best efforts, the number of reports they receive varies from one to six and, in rare cases, there may be no reports. The ARC makes available to academics all the reports it has received. There is no relationship between the chances of being funded and the number of reports.
13. A numeric score is not provided to applicants or the Melbourne Research Office. Scores are provided to the COE by assessors for each of the scheme’s selection criteria with a weighted average and it is the ranking of your application relative to others by the assessors that is most important. You cannot deduce the strength of your assessor’s support from their written comments alone.
14. The College panel to which your application is assigned then develops an overall ranking with relative weighting of Oz Readers, International Assessors and panel members. Even knowing an individual assessor’s scores would not indicate the final College ranking of your application.

Who reads my rejoinder?

15. Rejoinders are not sent to Oz Readers or Int Assessors - they are only read by members of the College of Experts.
16. There is no point in engaging in an argument with the author of a report as they will not see your rejoinder. It is more important to think about how the College will evaluate the claims made by the assessor and your response.
17. The principal spokesperson or ‘shepherd’ for each application on the ARC College Panel (and usually at least one other member of the panel) will read your rejoinder, in conjunction with the assessor reports, and will make final
recommendations on scores and rankings based on the responses provided.

18. If a spokesperson wants the assessment panel to consider some issue in depth or to convince them to readjust scores or ranks, they will need strong arguments. You need to provide those arguments in your rejoinder.

19. Just like you, College panel members are very busy with limited time. Members of the College will meet in Committee only once more. Clear, brief and compelling rejoinders are essential.

Getting started on the rejoinder

20. There is no one ‘style’ or ‘ideal model’ for rejoinders.

21. Write your rejoinder in simple, clear, direct ‘plain English’. Direct your rejoinder not to the assessor, but to the ARC College, not all of whom will be experts in your field.

22. Address all questions and criticism(s) raised in your assessor reports.

23. Put the most important argument(s) in the first one to two paragraphs. Catch the readers’ attention.

24. The College will give most weight to assessors’ comments on the project and they will take into account the relative weighting of the selection criteria.

25. You may wish to use short quotes from the assessor reports to reinforce certain points, juxtapose comments (e.g. where three reports help ‘rebut’ a criticism made in the fourth), or put your observations in context. This can also be useful because some College members may not have a copy of the reports in front of them when they first read rejoinders. However repeating an assessor’s comments verbatim where you do not tie them to an argument you wish to make, simply wastes valuable space. Refer to the assessor ID number and the relevant section of the report to identify issues.

26. Your aim is to give College panel members reason to ‘go back’ to the reports, help them sort through perhaps contradictory remarks, convince them (where warranted) that one report or one assessor’s criticisms are out of step with the others, and then in effect help them present ‘your’ case to the College.

27. Some researchers like to address assessors’ comments by topic, e.g. if a number of assessors have made comments on a particular issue. Some organise rejoinders by selection criteria.

28. Acknowledge good suggestions made by assessors and indicate how you could include them in your proposal.

Rejoinders vary according to the mix’ of reports

29. Some people may be fortunate enough to receive reports filled with positive comments only. In such cases there is less to do in the rejoinder and the aims of the rejoinder are very different compared to other scenarios, e.g. where
- the one assessor makes both +ve and –ve comments, or
- some reports seem more +ve than others, or
- reports seem ‘in conflict’ with one another, or
- where all reports support some aspects of the application as good but raise questions or criticisms about other areas.

Tactics when all the comments are overwhelmingly positive

30. Keep the rejoinder brief.

31. Aim to reinforce to the College the support given by the assessors.

32. Identify the overall positive comments from each assessor report and summarise them in the first paragraph of your rejoinder. You can include key abridged quotes and the ID of the assessor quoted in brackets.

33. Briefly summarise the strong points made by the assessors again in the conclusion, perhaps using one final quote.

34. In some cases the “How could this application be improved?” section of an assessor report is blank but note that earlier sections of a report may contain direct or implicit suggestions, often under “Approach and Methodology.”

35. Update your publications with work accepted or published since you lodged your application. Note that in some fields, results of preliminary or pilot studies may be important to justify methodology or potential significance.

Tactics when some comments are not so positive or reports vary in their apparent support for the application

36. A rejoinder that effectively counters criticism(s) raised in assessor reports can lead to the College viewing the application more favourably.

37. An assessor report that is markedly different to others provided may be regarded by the College as being ‘out of touch’. In these cases a well written rejoinder can be influential.

38. This is where it might be very useful to juxtapose reports (e.g. “Assessors 1-4 all indicate the track record of the group is outstanding but assessor 5 questions key publication X. Recent citation statistics [give date] further indicate the standing of ….”). It is even more convincing if you can show that the assessor has made an incorrect criticism,
because they have misunderstood your proposal or because there is published literature that contradicts the assessor.

39. Don’t just structure your rejoinder around a negative report. Keep a balanced perspective on all the comments made by the assessors.

40. Address specific issues and make a reasoned response, citing references where possible.

41. Don’t question the expertise of the assessor in a personal or emotional way. Don’t accuse the assessors of ignorance or careless reading. Avoid irony or flippancy.

42. Accept valid criticism by acknowledging alternative approaches or new studies mentioned by assessors. If appropriate, outline how some of the suggestions are or are not relevant. If minor changes can be accommodated in the design to enhance the project, indicate to the College you will do so in the rejoinder.

43. Formulate a response to a negative report in a positive way. Explain how you may have already considered this issue.

44. If you can, substantiate your claims against negative reviewers using the claims of the positive reviewers. Then move on to address criticisms in the reports.

45. Don’t address criticisms in the format of a long list; select the critical few that have the most weight.

46. Don’t elevate minor criticisms into a major issue. Deal with minor criticism by returning to the positives in the reports (but without exaggeration).

47. If the criticism of your project is that it is too broad, don’t try and reformulate the project in the rejoinder. Simply restate what the core aims are and why they are sound and achievable.

48. Where an assessor’s report suggests ‘ideological divisions’ in the area of your project, one possible approach for the rejoinder is to state that you are aware that you are working in an area where these divisions exist and that your project transcends these divisions, then go on to state how. Use assessor reports as examples of the existing divisions.

49. Criticisms by assessors on budgets are now part of the selection criteria and important when the College determines the final budget. You should address any area of academic importance, e.g., a suggestion that a research assistant rather than a research fellow is required.

For all

50. Begin and end with the positives from the reports, e.g. you begin by saying: ‘All four assessors believe this project should be funded’ or ‘Each of the assessors point to the original and significant contribution this project will make to scholarship’. End by saying (after having addressed the negatives): ‘Despite these comments, the assessors have identified the importance of funding the project’.

51. The rejoinder is an opportunity for all applicants (especially early career researchers and DORA applicants) to highlight newly accepted or published work and other research and research training related activities/achievements since the time the application was submitted.

For further advice

52. Discuss your reports, the rejoinder process and successive drafts with your colleagues, and especially with ARC grant mentors, grant holders and applicants

53. Melbourne Research Office will hold a seminar to assist in responding to assessor comments. This is an opportunity to hear from past assessors/applicants on their experience with the rejoinder process.

54. It is very important that draft rejoinders are read by a number of people. This may involve ‘exposing’ the negative comments received to one’s colleagues but it is much better to seek advice than show the rejoinder to no-one.

55. Further information on rejoinder submission is provided by the ARC at: http://www.arc.gov.au/applicants/assessor_rejoinders.htm

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