

How to Publish a Scientific Comment in 1 2 3 Easy Steps

Prof. Rick Trebino
Georgia Institute of Technology
School of Physics
Atlanta, GA 30332
rick.trebino@physics.gatech.edu
www.frog.gatech.edu

The essence of science is reasoned debate. So, if you disagree with something reported in a scientific paper, you can write a “Comment” on it.

Yet you don’t see many Comments, and many scientists complain that it can be very difficult to publish one. Some believe that this is because journal editors are reluctant to publish Comments because Comments reveal their mistakes—papers they shouldn’t have allowed to be published in the first place.

Fortunately, in this article, I’ll share with you my recent experience publishing a Comment, so you can, too. There are just a few simple steps:

1. Read a paper that has a mistake in it.
2. Write and submit a Comment, politely correcting the mistake.
3. Enjoy your Comment in print along with the authors’ equally polite Reply, basking in the joy of having participated in the glorious scientific process and of the new friends you’ve made—the authors whose research you’ve greatly assisted and the editor whose journal you’ve helped to improve.

Ha ha! You didn’t really believe that, did you? Here’s the actual sequence of events:

1. Read a paper in the most prestigious journal in your field that “proves” that your entire life’s work is wrong.
2. Realize that the paper is completely wrong, its conclusions based entirely on several misconceptions. It also claims that an

approach you showed to be fundamentally impossible is preferable to one that you pioneered in its place and that actually works. And among other errors, it also includes a serious miscalculation—a number wrong by a factor of about 1000—a fact that's obvious from a glance at the paper's main figure.

3. Decide to write a Comment to correct these mistakes—the option conveniently provided by scientific journals precisely for such situations.
4. Prepare for the writing of your Comment by searching the journal for all previous Comments, finding about a dozen in the last decade.
5. Note that almost all such Comments were two to three pages long, like the other articles in the journal.
6. Prepare further by writing to the authors of the incorrect paper, politely asking for important details they neglected to provide in their paper.
7. Receive no response.
8. Persuade a graduate student to write to the authors of the incorrect paper, politely asking for the important details they neglected to provide in their paper.
9. Receive no response.
10. Persuade a colleague to write to the authors of the incorrect paper, politely asking for the important details they neglected to provide in their paper.
11. Receive no response.
12. Persuade your colleague to ask a friend to write to the authors of the incorrect paper, politely asking for the important details they neglected to provide in their paper.
13. Receive no response.
14. Ask the graduate student to estimate these parameters herself, and observe that she does a very good job of it, reproducing

their plots very accurately and confirming that the authors were wrong by a factor of about 1000 and that their conclusions were also wrong.

15. Write a Comment, politely explaining the authors' misconceptions and correcting their miscalculation, including illustrative figures, important equations, and simple explanations of perhaps how they got it wrong, so others won't make the same mistake in the future.
16. Submit your Comment.
17. Wait two weeks.
18. Receive a response from the journal, stating that your Comment is 2.39 pages long. Unfortunately, Comments "can be no more than 1.00 pages long, so your Comment cannot be considered until it is shortened to less than 1.00 pages long."
19. Take a look at the journal again, and note that the title, author list, author addresses, submission date, database codes, abstract, references, and other administrative text occupy about half a page, leaving only half a page for actual commenting in your Comment.
20. Remove all unnecessary quantities such as figures, equations, and explanations. Also remove mention of some of the authors' numerous errors, for which there is now no room in your Comment. The archival literature would simply have to be content with a few uncorrected falsehoods. Note that your Comment is now 0.90 pages.
21. Resubmit your Comment.
22. Wait two weeks.
23. Receive a response from the journal, stating that your Comment is 1.07 pages long. Unfortunately, Comments "can be no more than 1.00 pages long, so your Comment cannot be considered until it is shortened to less than 1.00 pages long."
24. Write to the journal that, in view of the fact that your Comment is only ever so slightly long, and that it takes quite a while to resubmit it on the journal's confusing and dysfunctional web site,

perhaps it could be sent out for review as is and shortened slightly to "1.00 pages" later.

25. Wait a week.
26. Receive a response from the journal, stating that your Comment is 1.07 pages long. Unfortunately, Comments "can be no more than 1.00 pages long, so your Comment cannot be considered until it is shortened to less than 1.00 pages long."
27. Shorten your Comment to 0.80 pages, removing such frivolous linguistic luxuries as adjectives and adverbs.
28. Resubmit your Comment.
29. Wait three months, during which time, answer questions from numerous competitors regarding the fraudulence of your life's work, why you perpetrated such a scam on the scientific community, and how you got away with it for so long.
30. Read the latest issue of the journal, particularly enjoying an especially detailed, figure-filled, equation-laden, and explanation-rich three-page Comment.
31. Receive the reviews of your Comment.
32. Notice that Reviewer #3 likes your Comment, considers it important that the incorrect paper's errors be corrected and recommends publication of your Comment as is.
33. Notice that Reviewer #2 hates your Comment for taking issue with such a phenomenal paper, which finally debunked such terrible work as yours, and insists that your Comment not be published under any circumstances.
34. Notice that Reviewer #1 doesn't like it either, but considers that its short length may have prevented him from understanding it.
35. Also receive the topical editor's response, pointing out that no decision can be made at this time, but also kindly suggesting that you consider expanding your Comment to three pages and resubmitting it along with your responses to the reviews.

36. Expand your Comment back to three pages, replacing adjectives, adverbs, figures, equations, explanations, and corrections of author errors you had had to remove earlier to meet the 1.00-page limit. And, in an attempt to enlighten Reviewers #1 and #2, include a separate extended response to their reviews.
37. Resubmit your Comment.
38. Wait three months, during which time, receive condolences from numerous colleagues regarding the fraudulence of your life's work and how sorry they are about it having been debunked.
39. Fail to enjoy your colleagues' stories of other deluded scientists in history whose work was also eventually debunked, and try to explain that, in fact, you feel that you don't actually have that much in common with alchemists, astrologers, creationists, and flat-earthers.
40. Read the latest issue of the journal, which includes another detailed three-page Comment, almost bursting with colorful and superfluous adjectives and adverbs, some as many as twenty letters long.
41. Receive the second set of reviews of your Comment.
42. Notice that Reviewer #3 continues to like your Comment and continues to recommend its publication.
43. Notice that Reviewer #2 continues to hate it for taking issue with such a phenomenal paper, which finally debunked such terrible work as yours, and again insists that your worthless Comment not be published.
44. Note further that Reviewer #2 now adds that your Comment should *under no circumstances* be published until you obtain the important details from the authors that you confessed in your response to the reviewers you were not able to obtain and are not ever going to.
45. Realize that Reviewer #2's final criticism inevitably dooms your Comment to oblivion until such time as the authors provide you with the important details, your best estimate for which is never.

46. Notice, however, that Reviewer #1 now sees your point and now strongly recommends publication of your Comment. He also strongly recommends that your Comment remain three pages long, so that other readers can actually understand what it is that you're saying.
47. And, in an absolutely stunning turn of events, note also that Reviewer #1 writes further that he has also somehow secretly obtained from the authors the important details they neglected to provide in their paper and refused to send to you. Even better, using them, he has actually checked the relevant calculation. And he finds that the authors are wrong, and you are correct.
48. Realize that it is now no longer necessary to respond to the impossible criticism of Reviewer #2, as Reviewer #1 has kindly done this for you.
49. Add a sentence to your Comment thanking Reviewer #1 for his heroic efforts in obtaining the authors' important details and for confirming your calculations.
50. Receive the editor's decision that your Comment could perhaps now be published. Unfortunately, Comments "can be no more than 1.00 pages long, so your Comment cannot be considered further until it is shortened to less than 1.00 pages long."
51. Point out to the editor that most Comments in his journal are two to three pages long. Furthermore, it was the editor himself who suggested lengthening it to three pages in the first place. And Reviewer #1 strongly recommended leaving it that long.
52. Wait a month for a response, during which time, answer questions from numerous friends regarding the fraudulence of your life's work and asking what new field you're considering and reminding you of how lucky you are to still have your job.
53. Turn down a friend's job offer in his brother-in-law's septic-tank pumping company.
54. Obtain the latest issue of the journal and enjoy reading yet another nice lengthy Comment, this one swimming in such extravagant grammatical constructions as dependent clauses.

55. Receive the editor's response, apologizing that, unfortunately, Comments "can be no more than 1.00 pages long, so your Comment cannot be considered further until it is shortened to less than 1.00 pages long."
56. Download pdf files of all Comments published in the journal in the past decade, most of which were three pages long. Send them to the editor, his boss, and his boss's boss.
57. Receive the editor's response, apologizing that, unfortunately, Comments "can be no more than 1.00 pages long, so your Comment cannot be considered further until it is shortened to less than 1.00 pages long."
58. Shorten your Comment to 0.80 pages, again removing gratuitous length-increasing luxuries such as figures, equations, explanations, adjectives, and adverbs. Also again remove your corrections of some of the authors' errors.
59. Also, replace extravagant words containing wastefully wide letters, such as "m" and "w", with space-saving words containing nice lean letters, like "i", "j", "t", and "l". So what if "global warming" has become "global tilting."
60. Resubmit your Comment.
61. Wait two weeks.
62. Receive a response from the journal, stating that your Comment is 1.09 pages long. Unfortunately, Comments "can be no more than 1.00 pages long, so your Comment cannot be considered further until it is shortened to less than 1.00 pages long."
63. Shorten your Comment by removing such extraneous text as logical arguments.
64. Also, consider kicking off your coauthor from a different institution, whose additional address absorbs an entire line of valuable Comment space. Wonder why you asked him to help out in the first place.
65. Also, consider performing the necessary legal paperwork to shorten your last name, which could, as is, extend the author list to an excessive two lines.

66. Vow that, in the future, you will collaborate only with scientists with short names (Russians are definitely out).
67. Thank your Chinese grad-student coauthor for having a last name only two letters long. Make a mental note to include this important fact in recommendations you will someday write to her potential employers.
68. Resubmit your Comment.
69. Wait two weeks.
70. Receive a response from the senior editor that you cannot thank Reviewer #1 for obtaining the missing details and confirming your results, as this would give the appearance that the journal was biased in your favor in the Comment review process.
71. Assure the senior editor that, if anyone even considered asking about this, you would immediately and emphatically confirm under oath, on a stack of Newton's *Principia Mathematica's*, and under penalty of torture and death that, in this matter, the journal was most definitely not biased in your favor in any way, shape, or form in the current geological epoch or any other and in this universe or any other, whether real or imagined.
72. Receive a response from the senior editor that you cannot thank Reviewer #1 for obtaining the missing details and confirming your results, as this would give the appearance that the journal was biased in your favor in the Comment review process.
73. Remove mention of Reviewer #1's having obtained the necessary details from the acknowledgment, realizing that it's probably for the best in the end. If word were to get out that, in order to do so, he had managed to infiltrate the allegedly impenetrable ultrahigh-level security of the top-secret United States government nuclear-weapons lab, where it happens that the authors worked, he would likely be prosecuted by the George W. Bush administration for treason. And if he's anything like the other scientists you know, he probably wouldn't last long in Gitmo.
74. Resubmit your Comment.

75. Wait two weeks.
76. Receive a response from the journal stating that, in your submitted MS Word file, the references are not double-spaced. Your Comment cannot be considered for publication until the references in this document are double-spaced.
77. Add lines between the several references, a process that requires a total of twelve seconds.
78. Resubmit your Comment, a process that, due to dysfunctional journal web-site problems, requires a total of three hours.
79. Wait two weeks.
80. Receive a response from the senior editor that, while your Comment is now short enough and properly formatted, over the many modifications and shortenings that have occurred, its tone has become somewhat harsh. For example, a sentence that originally read, "The authors appear to have perhaps accidentally utilized an array size that was somewhat disproportionate for the corresponding and relevant waveform complexity," has evolved into: "The authors are wrong."
81. Have numerous telephone conversations with the senior editor, in which you overwhelm him with the numerous other issues you have had to deal with during the Comment evaluation process until he forgets about your Comment's tone. Indeed, compared to your verbal tone during these telephone calls, the paper's tone seems downright friendly.
82. Celebrate this minor victory by deciding not to include in the final draft of the Comment's Acknowledgments section a description of certain individuals you've encountered during this process—a description that would have involved such colorful terms as "bonehead" and "cheese-weenie."
83. Wonder whether your Comment has finally been sent to the authors for their Reply, or instead was lost, trashed, or sent back to the reviewers for further review and possible rejection.
84. Wait four months, during which time, respond to numerous close relatives regarding the fraudulence of your life's work and who remind you that at least you still have your health, albeit in

a noticeably deteriorating state over the past few months. And perhaps you'd like to join them at the local bar for its daily Happy Hour.

85. Take them up on their offer, but learn that they expect you to pay for drinks, which, regrettably, you can't because sales at the small company you formed to sell devices based on your work have fallen to essentially zero.
86. Learn from one of your grad students that a potential employer asked her, "Hasn't your work recently been discredited?"
87. Learn that she was not granted an interview.
88. Attend a conference, where a colleague informs you that he is Reviewer #1. Attempt to hug him, but be advised that a simple "thank you" for merely doing his job is sufficient.
89. Learn from Reviewer #1 that he has not received the authors' Reply for review, or any other correspondence from the journal in the several months since he submitted his review.
90. Realize that you had stopped carefully reading the journal, and, as a result, had missed the "Erratum" published by the authors on the paper in question six months earlier, shortly after you submitted your short-lived three-page version of the Comment.
91. Note that, in this "Erratum," the authors actually admitted no errors and instead reported new—similarly incorrect—numbers, which they concluded "do not change any conclusions" in their original paper.
92. Feel old, as you can remember the days when Errata involved correcting old errors and not introducing new ones.
93. Note also that, in their "Erratum," the authors have actually responded to some highly specific criticisms of their errors you mentioned in the three-page version of your Comment—criticisms that you had removed when shortening it to meet the journal's strict 1.00-page limit. Criticisms the authors couldn't possibly have known about in view of the journal's strict confidentiality rules for submitted papers, unless this version of your Comment was somehow leaked to them...

94. Realize that, with this "Erratum," the authors have effectively already published their "Reply" to your Comment.
95. Note also that, while your Comment has been kicking around for close to a year, its publication date nowhere in sight, the authors' "Erratum" was published in a mere *nineteen days*.
96. With two mathematical mistakes by the authors to consider now and plenty of time in which to consider them, realize that their main mathematical error was simply to forget to take the square root when computing the "root-mean-square"—a childish mistake.
97. Note that this is consistent with the fact that, on both their paper and "Erratum," one of the authors' names is misspelled. This is consistent with the fact that, by now, you've already spent approximately 100 times as much time correcting their errors than they spent making them.
98. Realize that you must now modify your Comment to also include a discussion of the "Erratum." Ask the editor if you can do this.
99. Receive a response from the editor that, after much discussion among the journal editors, it has been decided that, yes, you can do this.
100. Include a couple of short sentences debunking the "Erratum" in your Comment, using up two valuable lines of text and three valuable lines in the reference list due to its rather long title.
101. Realize that your Comment is now several lines longer than the do-or-die 1.00-page limit.
102. Shorten your Comment by omitting noncritical words like "a," "an," and "the," giving your Comment exotic foreign feel.
103. Also, take advantage of the fact that, in some literary circles, sentence fragments are considered acceptable. Decide that, indeed, verbs highly over-rated.
104. Declare "death to all commas" a worthless piece of unnecessary punctuation if ever there was one.

105. Consider using txt msg shorthand 4 actual words 2 further shorten ur Cmnt, but decide not 2 when u realize that the 100s of frowny-face emoticons u couldnt resist adding actually lengthened it 2 2 pages :(
106. Resubmit your Comment.
107. Realize that modifying your Comment to include the "Erratum" has now, unfortunately, opened it up for additional criticism from the editors and possibly the reviewers.
108. Receive a phone call from the senior editor, who takes advantage of this opportunity. He has suddenly remembered that your Comment's tone is a bit harsh. He is concerned that the authors, who appear to be highly motivated and quite crafty, will complain loudly and aggressively about the obviously preferential treatment your Comment is clearly receiving from the journal and make his life miserable. He objects to nearly every sentence in your Comment, in each case, insisting on a considerably longer sentence. He insists that you not say that the authors are "wrong" and suggests instead "perhaps mistaken." He also insists on replacing the word "so" with the unforgivably long "therefore."
109. Realize that, if you accede to his demands, your Comment will be an unacceptable 1.2 pages long, dooming your Comment to oblivion.
110. Also learn from the senior editor that you cannot thank Reviewer #1 even for simply "confirming your calculations," as this would also reveal the obvious preferential treatment your Comment has clearly received from the journal.
111. Explain that this is a common type of acknowledgment, revealing no preferential treatment by the journal whatsoever, and send him a copy of a recent paper from his journal in which the authors thank a reviewer for actually *proving several theorems* for them.
112. Learn from the senior editor that another reason that you cannot thank Reviewer #1 is that there is no record of Reviewer #1 actually having confirmed your calculations. Apparently, the paper on which it was printed has, over the eons, turned to dust.

113. Send a copy of the email from the journal containing Reviewer #1's review to the senior editor.
114. Also, offer to put the senior editor in touch with Reviewer #1, in case all records of Reviewer #1's identity have also been lost.
115. Also, learn from the senior editor that he admits no expertise in your field, but that he will nevertheless not allow you to say in your Comment that the approach that you proved twenty years earlier is "fundamentally impossible" is "fundamentally impossible." Instead, you must say that it "has not been shown to be possible."
116. Note that, if this could accurately be said about perpetual-motion machines, it would rekindle interest in that long forgotten field.
117. Receive no response.
118. Realize that this is probably good news.
119. Encounter a journal representative at a conference, who kindly mentions that the one-page version of your Comment was, in fact, sent to the authors for their Reply. And, after a series of delays, they have submitted it. But, unfortunately, it is extremely contentious and will be rejected unless toned down significantly. It's as if, for some reason, they want it to be rejected.
120. In preparation for the final phase of the Comment process, write to the editor asking if you will be able to see the Reply to your Comment and make minor modifications in view of it, as allowed by most journals.
121. For once, obtain a quick response: "No."
122. Finally receive notice from the editor that the authors' official Reply to your Comment has been reviewed and processed. Unfortunately, it was not found suitable for publication and so was rejected. And because, for maximum reader enjoyment, it is the policy of this journal that a Comment cannot be published without a Reply, your Comment cannot be published. This decision is final.

123. Be advised that the journal thanks you for submitting your Comment, and you should feel free to submit a paper on a different subject in the future, as this journal features the most rapid publication of any journal in this field.

Addendum

This ridiculous scenario actually occurred as written; I didn't make it up. I confess that, of course, I exaggerated the responses from competitors, colleagues, friends, relatives, and myself, but *not* those of the journal editors or the authors. Those events all happened exactly as I've described them.

The fate described in the last two steps actually occurred to a *different* Comment, which I submitted to a different journal a few years earlier, and which, in fact, never was published, precisely for the absurd reason given.

Over a year after submitting the Comment discussed in all the other steps, I realized that it was clearly doomed unless I took serious action, so I sent a copy of this story to the senior editor's boss. Shortly afterward, I received a call from the senior editor, who had suddenly withdrawn all of his objections. The Comment was fine as it was, and it would be published!

However, I was still not allowed to see the authors' Reply until it was actually in print. And when it appeared, it reiterated the same erroneous claims and numbers (for the third time!) and then introduced a few new erroneous claims, which, of course, I am not allowed to respond to. So I've run out of options and have simply given up.

I've withheld the names of the various individuals in this story because my purpose is not to make accusations (as much as I would like to; they're certainly deserved), but instead to effect some social change. Nearly everyone I've encountered who has written a Comment has found the system to be heavily biased against well-intentioned correcting of errors—often serious ones—in the archival literature. I find this quite disturbing.

And would it have killed these authors to email me their "results" prior to publishing them, so I could've enlightened them before they committed themselves to their errors in print, thus avoiding all this pain? In fact, one of them gave a talk at a conference on this work a few months before the initial paper's publication, but was pretty aggressively attacked by the audience in the question-and-answer period after it, so I had assumed that he had realized the error of his ways. Apparently not!

Finally, I should also mention that, to keep this story light and at least somewhat entertaining, I actually *simplified* it somewhat, omitting numerous additional steps involving journal web-site crashes, undelivered emails, unreturned phone calls to dysfunctional pagers, complaints to higher levels of journal management, and some rather disturbing (and decidedly unfunny) behavior by the authors and certain editors.

After all, I wouldn't want to discourage you from submitting a Comment.

Addendum to the Addendum

Within hours of its posting on the internet, this story went "viral" and found its way onto many web sites and blogs, including those of Harvard economist, Greg Mankiw, and the founder of Craigslist, Craig Newmark. It has been read by over 150,000 people on one site alone (www.scribd.com) and probably by 1,000,000 in all.

One such reader was Margaret Harris of the British magazine *Physics World*, who edits a physics humor column called *Lateral Thoughts*. She wrote and invited me to write for this column and, in particular, to adapt this story as my first contribution. However, she pointed out, it "cannot be considered further until it is shortened to less than 1.00 pages long."

To read more adventures of Rick Trebino, check out his soon-to-be-published book, '*Supermodels in the Jungle' and Other Ill-Advised Adventures*. It includes stories of his travels to such exotic locales as Siberia, the Australian Outback, and the Venezuelan jungle.