

Are Bad Reviews Truly as Negative as They May Seem?

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In today's online environment for scholarship of all kinds, everyone is a potential reviewer, and the nature of reviews has changed accordingly. Traditional scholarly reviews written by academics, scientists and other specialists can still to be found, of course, and sometimes in a context apart from more general reviews, but often the two are encountered alongside one another, as they are on a book's online product page or in the comments added by readers of a blog or a pre-publication draft of a paper. In such an open context, it is virtually impossible to receive positive comments about all aspects of your scholarly writing from every reader who bothers to review it, yet it remains true that commentary of any kind is usually better than no response at all.

Every author can imagine the joy of reading nothing but glowing assessments of his or her new article or discovering a long string of five-star reviews under his or her book title. Such reviews stand as confirmation that an author has reached readers in ways those readers find pleasing. However, it is far more likely that you will find a variety of reviews associated with your publications, a situation that suggests you are reaching readers and doing so in more sophisticated ways than

simply pleasing them or meeting their expectations. It may be difficult to convince yourself that you are expanding your readers' horizons when you earn one- or two-star reviews, but it is relatively certain that you have not given those readers exactly what they expected, and that can be an extremely good thing. Very few true advancements of knowledge come without a struggle, after all.

It is important when faced with a potentially negative review to read that review as critically as you would the sources you use in your research and writing. What do the reviewer's attitude, statements, assumptions, claims, grammar, spelling and punctuation tell you about him or her? Does the reviewer seem qualified to assess your research, its findings and your analyses and conclusions? Does his or her use of language indicate an ability to comment on yours? Can you detect a hidden agenda that could be more instrumental in generating the negative response than the content of your paper may be? Your answers to these questions will help you accurately evaluate the reviews you receive.

In some cases you will be able to find other reviews or comments offered by the readers who have responded to your work, and these can be incredibly informative as well. If, for instance, the individual who gave your book a two-star review also gave a two-star review to the scientific writing of Albert Einstein or the poetry of John Donne, you are in very good company, and the poor review becomes something of a backhanded compliment. Consolation comes with the thought that other readers may well encounter the same information and judge the situation similarly, just as many of them will be able to detect when a negative review is written by someone who has neither the knowledge nor the language skills to assess your research and writing accurately.

As consoling as it may be to discover reasons other than the content of your work to explain the negative comments you receive, the fact is that poor reviews, particularly in the form of those glaring one- and two-star ratings, can prevent potentially interested people from reading and buying your writing, and that is all the more troubling when the reviewer causing the problem is unqualified and the review unjustified. It is therefore important to remember that negative reviews can also inspire people to read your writing, especially when they appear alongside positive reviews. The most innovative research can, after all, receive as many negative reviews as poor research does, and those readers who are truly interested may wonder why your work has received such different responses and read it to decide for themselves how valid and valuable a contribution it really is, which is of course exactly what you want them to do.

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