

The science and philosophy of manuscript rejection

A three-time Pulitzer Prize winner and American Poet, Carl Sandburg (1878–1967) summarized one of his experiences as follows:

“I wrote poems in my corner of the Brooks Street station. I sent them to two editors who rejected them right off. I read those letters of rejection years later, and I agreed with those editors”.

Manuscript rejection is a dreaded fear that most authors anticipate and is an experience that every researcher faces.^[1-3] Rejection is an integral part of a scientific career.^[4-6] It is common knowledge that reputed journals reject manuscripts in higher numbers than the numbers accepted. Some studies have shown that as many as 62% of the published manuscripts were initially rejected.^[7] Hence, it is essential to reflect on the causes of rejection, its significance in the scientific process, and how we can minimize it. The fundamental need of Science is to keep its knowledge secure and maintain its role as a powerful tool in understanding nature. The peer-review process is a critical step in fulfilling such an objective. Surveys have shown that the peer-review process helped 91% of the respondents to improve their manuscripts.^[1,8] A researcher, therefore, gathers enough evidence to satisfy the peer-reviewers and skeptical competitors. While all may not be satisfied, a critical majority needs to endorse the work to have the desired impact. The mandate of the present editorial is to discuss the common causes of manuscript rejection, measures to deal with them, and present a simple checklist to minimize manuscript rejections. These are by no means an exhaustive list, but the intention is to present the literature trends and the editor’s experience and perspectives.

Causes of Manuscript Rejection

There can be several reasons why a manuscript is rejected, and many a time, the decision is secondary to a combination of multiple reasons. As an Editor-in-Chief, section editor, and reviewer, the author has summarized 20 common reasons, which are as follows:

1. Poor study design
2. Lack of originality or repetition of established literature
3. Inadequate or improper methodology
4. An inadequate presentation of results
5. Lack of supporting figures or images
6. Incorrect research claim
7. Extrapolating findings beyond the data
8. Poor or inadequate statistical analysis
9. Conclusions not supported by data
10. Poor or misleading title
11. Incomplete literature search
12. Irrelevant discussion
13. Poorly written manuscript
14. Failure to satisfactorily address reviewer comments
15. Non-adherence to the journal’s instructions
16. Non-adherence to the standard scientific reporting guidelines
17. Inappropriate journal selection
18. Simultaneous submission to another journal

19. Plagiarism
20. Infringement of ethical principles

Dealing with Manuscript Rejection

“Rejection is in the fabric of what we do. We send our papers, carefully crafted to consider every angle and interpretation of our hard-won data, and ‘Slap!’ we’re squashed like vermin.”^[9]

Manuscript rejection can initiate ‘grief-like’ emotions and may not be very easy to deal with. The authors, more so younger ones, may go through phases of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. However, specific measures can help in mitigating the pain and dealing with it positively. The following are 25 such measures:

1. Read the decision letter carefully to differentiate a conditional rejection from an outright rejection.
2. Do not take a rejection personally. It is the work not the person who is rejected. Remember, the editor or the reviewer feedback is for what one has written, not on what one knows.
3. Avoid basing self-worth or self-esteem on the outcomes of a manuscript.
4. Do not get embarrassed by rejection. Remember, this is going to be a recurring process.
5. Accept rejection. Accept the emotions that accompany them without excessively indulging with the negative thoughts or the behavior of prolonged wound licking.
6. Acknowledge that reviewers can make mistakes; they are, after all, humans.
7. Identify trusted people (family, friends, professional colleagues) to vent the occasional frustration.
8. Avoid the temptation to discard the manuscript. This is a known initial response. Do not equate manuscript rejection with failure.
9. Do something that makes one feel better, like sports or eating a favorite dish.
10. Value diverse opinions and see peer-review as a constructive process.
11. Do not undervalue the critique. Discounting the reviewers’ opinions is usually the first response.
12. Try seeing the review from the reviewer’s perspective without presumptions.
13. Perceive rejections as a learning process.
14. Minimize self-doubt to help with the anxiety arising out of it.
15. Please read the comments carefully, and then leave them aside for a few days; it helps manage the emotions.
16. One coping strategy is to write down all the positive comments, followed by those that can be easily addressed, followed by the difficult ones.
17. It is all right to disagree with some of the reviewer comments, provided there is support for such disagreement. However, avoid a defensive or hostile response.
18. Take help from colleagues and mentors for assessing the reviewer comments and strategizing a response or further work. Colleagues can also help in reviewing the manuscripts before submission.
19. Work on some other small project to gain some confidence.
20. Persevere the goal to improve the manuscript for a revision or resubmission.

21. Create a list of potential alternative actions, which may include alternative strategies to address critiques or alternative journals.
22. One cannot know everything, hence, develop a mindset for life-long learning.
23. Try developing an individually customized strategy for dealing with rejections.
24. Create an environment where help and support are easily accessible to researchers.
25. Find the joy in one's work!

Reducing the Manuscript Rejections

The hard fact of life is that rejections cannot be eliminated. We can probably minimize them to a certain extent by at least taking care of some of the research aspects. I have tried to summarize a manuscript checklist of 15 items. The answer to each of these 15 items should be a 'yes' before one proceeds with the manuscript submission

Checklist before submission to minimize rejection

- I. General
 - a. Is the subject of the manuscript within the scope of the intended journal?
 - b. Has the manuscript adhered to all the author instructions?
 - c. Does the manuscript add something to the existing literature?
 - d. Is the language clear and free of grammatical errors?
 - e. Were the standard ethical guidelines followed?
- II. Manuscript contents
 - a. Is the title reflective of the contents of the manuscript?
 - b. Is the purpose clearly stated?
 - c. Does the abstract convey the key message clearly?
 - d. Is the core methodology elaborate and direct?
 - e. Are the statistics perspicuously presented?
 - f. Are the results explicitly presented?
 - g. Is the discussion relevant to the manuscript's core context?
 - h. Are the strengths and limitations addressed directly?
 - i. Are the conclusions clearly supported by the data?
 - j. If applicable, are the standard reporting guidelines followed?

In summary, manuscript rejections are tough to take. However, the authors need to remember two things. First, that rejections are merely someone's opinion. Second, manuscript rejection is the rejection of scientific work, not of the authors. Rejections should be considered as a normal part of a scientific career and should only be used as a catalyst for growth. The ultimate goal is to normalize rejections and develop strategies to convert rejections into successful resubmissions. For a

researcher to be successful and productive, it is crucial to develop effective strategies to manage rejections. Work is incomplete till the manuscript gets published!

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