How to Handle a Rejection

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Key Words

Publication · Acceptance · Rejection

Abstract

The rejection rate by scientific journals may be rather high, sometimes up to 70–90%. On receipt of notification of rejection, one may experience various stages of the Kübler-Ross grief cycle – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, with an initial shock and an intermediate ‘testing’ stage. A paper may be rejected because of several reasons, such as the following: (1) it was submitted to an inappropriate journal, (2) journal format was not followed, (3) reading was not interesting or scientific/clinically sound, (4) topic was not current, (5) research was not novel, (6) low publication priority despite the absence of major flaws, (7) poor English/writing style, (8) poor methods and statistics, (9) unbelievable results that were not properly discussed and (10) ‘recycled’ paper. Plagiarism is not tolerated. Simultaneous submission to 2 or more journals is not allowed. Outright rejection sometimes occurs in 70–80%; for 10–15%, the editor rejects without sending the paper to reviewers for obvious reasons as mentioned. For the majority, reviewers give feedback that leads to the editor rejecting the paper. On receiving notification of rejection, one should read the feedback and consider its contents prior to rewriting and submitting the paper to another journal (sometimes reviewers may see the same manuscript several times if asked by different edi-

tors). An invitation to resubmit ‘de novo’ occurs in only 1–5% of submissions; it requires substantial revision before resubmission. Being rejected but invited to resubmit a revised version occurs in 5–20% of submissions – it indicates a good chance of acceptance; one should carefully read the feedback and respond/comply with all suggestions. Papers rejected repeatedly may have ‘fatal flaws’ and are best abandoned.

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Introduction

There are increasing numbers of submissions to increasing numbers of journals, with thousands of research papers being published across a myriad of medical journals every year. In the current ‘publish or perish’ world of academia, researchers may feel the pressure to publish as many papers as possible in the shortest possible time for the purposes of promotion, application for research funding or just to retain one’s job [1]. Certain journals may be also be preferred, e.g. those with higher impact factors. The rush to write many papers within a limited period may result in poorer quality writing. This may lead to rejection of the paper as the standards demanded by the journal may not be met.

An author may feel that he/she has written the best possible paper, and that no respectable journal should re-

ject it. However, rejection is part and parcel of academic life. Few authors, no matter how well known, would have had all their submitted papers accepted fully at first submission. Rejection allows for reflection; it is a humbling experience and provides an opportunity for self-improvement. A thoughtfully reviewed paper with insightful feedback makes for a better revised paper, and may even translate to better research. Generally, rejection rates fall with increasing writing experience. Acceptance rates vary across journals, generally in the range of 20–30%. The journal *Stroke* has publically stated its acceptance rate as 19% similar to *Cerebrovascular Diseases* [2].

The Stages of Grief

Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, a medical doctor in Switzerland, spent a lot of time with the dying. In her book *On Death and Dying*, she described the now well-known 5 stages of the grief cycle – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance [3]. This has been extended to include an initial shock stage and an intermediate ‘testing’ stage before acceptance.

The receipt of notification of rejection, usually by email but occasionally by letter or fax, may lead to an initial state of shock and immobilization. At this stage, it may be best to sit down if you are not already seated, or even to lie down if needed. One should stay calm and take a few deep breaths as one carefully reads the notification again for the reasons for rejection.

In the denial stage, one may deny the occurrence of the rejection, and believe rejection is not true. One should put away the notification in a safe place, not discard it completely. There is probably little value in re-checking the notification to see if it was addressed correctly, referred to the correct paper, or was from the correct journal – editorial offices rarely make such grave errors. One should not wait for a second notification apologising for the error with the first, and saying the paper is actually accepted without revision, as this is unlikely to happen!

During the stage of anger, one should let out one’s emotions in a controlled manner. One might curse the editor, but sending a strongly worded letter/email is ill-advised. One may curse the journal, but one should not spam or hack into the website. One may curse the research project, the project leader/supervisor, or research as a whole. Such ventilation may actually be cathartic.

When bargaining, one may try to seek a way out. One could write to the editor asking for a second review/ac-

ceptance, but this is usually in vain. One could rewrite the paper and resubmit to the same journal, but this is unlikely to succeed unless one is asked by the journal to resubmit the paper.

As one realizes the inevitable truth of rejection, one may become depressed. One should take a break, cheer oneself up, avoid self-blame. Accept sympathy and support from colleagues and co-authors, especially those who have gone through a similar experience before.

In the final testing and acceptance stages, one seeks a realistic solution to the situation, a reasonable way out, e.g. decide to revise the paper based on the feedback of the reviewers and submit to another journal. This will lead to a return to stability, and one can attend to the matter at hand.

Not all authors will experience grief reactions, and not all who do so will go through all the stages mentioned above. If one has a grief reaction, one should try to get to the acceptance stage as quickly as possible.

Why Papers Are Rejected

While it varies according to the journal, rejection rates are generally high, more so with the more sought-after journals. There are a number of reasons why papers are rejected [4–9]. Understanding these reasons would aid the author in the initial choice of journal and so avoid the situation of immediate rejection and also understand why the journal rejected the paper:

- (1) Inappropriate journal – the paper may not be in the journal’s particular focus/area of interest. A too low/high impact journal for this paper was inappropriately chosen.
- (2) Journal format not followed – journals have set formats that should be strictly adhered to.
- (3) Issue not interesting or of scientific/clinical value – the topic may not be of general interest to that journal’s readership, or not of value to the readers in the course of their clinical or research work; the question being answered by the paper is not a clinically/research-wise important one.
- (4) Topic not/no longer ‘hot’/current – interest in a recent ‘hot’ topic may have already faded.
- (5) Not original/novel/new – the area being addressed has been well described before, in particular in the journal to which the paper was submitted.
- (6) Journal priority – based on priority decisions for publication for a journal, many manuscripts without any major flaws may still be rejected.

- (7) Poor writing style – very poor English; no ‘oomph’/punch; a poorly written or unfocused paper with no clear message, where the writing does not flow logically, further suggesting that the topic was poorly researched or thought through; the various sections Introduction/Methods/Results/Discussion not all equally well written; dated references; poor quality tables/figures.
- (8) Poor methods and statistics – methodology not rigorous enough, resulting in serious biases.
- (9) Results not believable/clinically or scientifically unsound – when findings go against the grain of known data or popular opinion, the authors need to make a very strong case in their discussion with rigorous methodology and analysis of their results.
- (10) ‘Recycled’ paper – many editors and reviewers sit on the review boards of more than 1 journal; they may be asked to review a paper they had reviewed before and rejected for another journal, and this ‘new’ submission is resubmitted without any amendments after the other journal’s rejection/comments for improvement.

It is far less likely that papers are rejected for political reasons – authors are able to indicate whom they do *not* wish to review the paper; the editor may be wary of that reviewer’s comments but may still ask him/her. While there is reviewer variability, 2–3 reviews are usually sought and differences in opinions looked at. Papers are not rejected primarily due to poor grammar, but an ungrammatical paper is hard to read. Plagiarism is not tolerated. Simultaneous submission to 2 or more journals is not allowed – if it is done, the editor should be informed.

Outright Rejection

This occurs 70–80% of the time. For about 10–15% of submissions, the editor makes a decision to reject without sending to the reviewers, usually for reasons 1–5 above. However, for the majority 60–75%, it is the reviewers who give feedback that leads to the editor rejecting the paper. On receiving the notification of rejection, one should read the comments of the editor and reviewers and rewrite the paper considering these comments.

The paper should then be submitted to another appropriate journal. One should avoid resubmitting without rewriting, i.e. ‘recycling’. The title may need to be tweaked; the journal’s format instructions should be closely followed. The comments of the previous review should be addressed – avoid recycling the same paper as the reviewer may be the same person! Reviewers often spend a lot of

time improving the manuscript and even recommend acceptance after revision to the editor. Parts of the study may need to be redone, additional data may need to be collected/generated, or reanalysis may be needed with the aid of a statistician. Reference lists may need updating or illustrations made more appropriate.

Do consult successful authors, co-authors and members – even the head – of your department, and be honest in all aspects of the paper: you may get valuable comments and recommendations. In case your native language is not English, contact a native English speaker and ask for his/her support. This can be very useful, in particular if he/she is familiar with the topic of the manuscript.

Rejected, Invited to Resubmit ‘de novo’

The invitation to resubmit afresh to the same journal occurs for about 1–5% of submissions. This approach is generally used when there is a need for substantial revision of the paper including new analyses and presentation of data of an important piece of work. It indicates that a decision cannot be made as the manuscript currently stands – the revised work is needed to take an editorial decision, which may be positive or negative, i.e. rejection may still occur. One should carefully read the comments of the editor and the reviewers, rewrite the paper considering these comments, and resubmit as soon as possible – most journals allow a 3- to 6-month timeline for resubmission.

Rejected, Invited to Resubmit

This ‘happy’ situation occurs for about 5–20% of submissions. While not confirmatory, it indicates a good chance of acceptance. One should read the comments of the editor and the reviewers carefully – all of them are experts in their field, so it would be advisable to make all suggested changes. These changes should be clearly highlighted in the accompanying ‘thankful’ cover letter, describing the change as well as the page and line in the text where the changes were made, and highlighting in the text the changes, in bold/underline/colour/track-changes mode, with an accompanying ‘clean’ copy. Each journal will have its instructions on resubmissions, which should be strictly followed.

If one strongly disagrees with the comments by the editor or reviewer, one can politely explain why and this may actually be accepted. One should adhere to the over-

all format of the journal. Resubmit as soon as possible, usual timelines are within 3–6 months. While unlikely, the paper may still be rejected. At times, a further resubmission is requested to clarify a few key issues. Thereafter, one merely has to await the most welcome notification of acceptance!

Abandoning the Paper

Repeated rejections by various journals may reflect ‘fatal flaws’ where the paper is not salvageable due to incorrigible problems with methods, results/analysis – such a paper may best be left unpublished. Most papers have ‘non-fatal flaws’, a redeemable paper, which a less rigorous journal may accept. A long, hard, honest look at the comments by the editors and reviewers would be most revealing. One should not give up too easily; not publishing important new information is unethical and unscientific [10, 11].

Conclusions

Rejection is part of academic life. Grief reactions are explicable and should be overcome as soon as possible. There are many fundamental reasons for rejection. If there is outright rejection, look at all comments, rewrite the paper, and resubmit to an appropriate journal. If the paper is rejected but the authors are advised to resubmit, follow all advice and resubmit as soon as possible. Consider abandoning only if the paper has fatal flaws – try, try again. The only way not to face rejection is to avoid submitting one’s work altogether [12]. Even if a rejection is received, one should have the satisfaction of knowing that efforts were made by the authors and the editor/reviewers; some papers never get that far. Persistently trying to publish will help one become a better writer with fewer rejections and make one a valuable contributor to the scientific and clinical literature.

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