

Rejected! Now what? : How to deal effectively with rejection and move forward

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A common and somewhat demoralising situation that almost every researcher would have faced at least once (and perhaps a multitude of times) in their career is dealing with the rejection of a manuscript.

Every year, thousands of junior researchers send their carefully prepared manuscripts to reputed journals, only to get the heart-breaking & dreaded reply: 'Manuscript rejected'. The million-dollar question they face at this critical juncture is : What next?

For such authors, four options exist:

1. To abandon the manuscript.
2. To send it to another journal without modification.
3. To send it to another journal after incorporating the suggestions.
4. Appealing against the decision.

The first thing to consider is that rejection by a journal is not the end of the world or the end of all avenues—it simply means that the scope, context or the main focus of the work is not appealing to the journal concerned. The junior researcher should not feel like a jilted lover—rather, he or she should handpick the next plan of action without dejection. In fact, recently concluded research found that 72% of the articles rejected by a reputed American journal got published elsewhere.¹

Moving forward- Regaining confidence and maintaining emotional composure

Rejection by a journal may be emotionally challenging, particularly for young researchers. It may be sensible to stay away from the rejection letter for a few days after receiving it. What seems rude and shocking on the first day may seem

better, a few days later. The researcher should remind himself or herself that a single rejection is not the end of the world, nor is it proof of sub-standard work. Reputed journals receive thousands of manuscripts each year and it is not possible to publish all of them. Competition for space is intense.

After a few days, the researcher should move ahead and consider one of the following options:

Abandoning the manuscript

The researcher would be well advised not to think of giving up until his/her manuscript gets rejected by at least four or five journals. A study has shown that nearly a quarter of researchers abandon their ideas after the first rejection.¹ After all, every manuscript is a culmination of hard work by the researchers and has the potential to benefit the scientific community. In fact, it has now been shown that at least 20% of published articles were first rejected by another journal.¹ An older study found that about 1% of published articles were rejected by four or more journals before being accepted.¹ However, if the manuscript, even after careful editing, gets rejected by five or more journals, it may be time to question the worth of the idea and move on to a better one instead. In this context, it may be prudent to be sure that the research one wants to publish will be of value to the scientific community. For example, an article claiming “a fifth case report from India” is not likely to be accepted by a journal since it adds no new knowledge.

Sending it to another journal with or without modification

If a journal has put forth suggestions while rejecting the article, it may be worthwhile to incorporate them. But the researcher should know that there are two schools of thought on this issue: Some suggest submitting to another journal without editing because if a journal recommends changing X to Y,

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there is every chance that another journal will recommend changing Y back to X. Robert Heinlein said years ago, “Don’t rewrite unless someone who can buy it tells you to”. If the journal is not going to “buy” it, why revise for them?¹

As a practical point, it may be prudent to incorporate some suggestions put forth by the journal, which may be acceptable to a majority of other journals such as minor changes in format, language, style etc, without incorporating major changes which may change the very identity of the research. A major change may be considered if three or more journals put forth the same comment. Incorporating sensible suggestions may also aid in selection in higher-ranked journals—this may be successfully exploited in submission strategies, as described below. Research has shown that editors agree with each other regarding papers of poor quality; but with good quality articles, editors’ views were split.¹

Which journal to choose next

The most important factor that dictates the chances of a successful publication is the journal selected. Some points to consider while deciding this are:

1. **The scope of the journal:** This is a significant aspect—a work that does not fall within the scope of a journal, no matter how important or novel that work may be, is likely to be editorially rejected, without even going through peer review. The core subject of the work should closely fall within the ambit of the journal, for example, an article that discusses the sensitivity and specificity of the various stains used for cutaneous amyloidosis is likely to be rejected by a journal dedicated to dermatosurgery, while it may be a good fit for dermatopathology or general dermatology journal. Some research may also fall within the ambit of non-dermatology journals and it is perfectly acceptable to submit it to them. For example, an article that discusses the risk of adverse cardiac events in those with advanced androgenetic alopecia may be submitted to either a dermatology or a cardiology journal.^{2,3}
2. **The rejection rate of the journal:** Many journals have a rejection rate upwards of 90% and the young researcher may feel demotivated if their articles get repeatedly rejected by these journals. It is important to match the quality of one’s manuscript and the quality of the target journal. Probably for beginners, it is reasonable to target journals with rejection rates of the order 80–90% since a rejection rate of this order gives an author a fighting chance of being published. If a journal has a rejection rate below 80%, it may be wise to verify the journal’s credentials since many predatory journals have very low rejection rates and are best avoided, as discussed below.
3. **The target audience:** It is important to identify the scope of the research and the target audience even before embarking on the research activity. The target audience can include country-specific or discipline-specific audiences. For example, an article that discusses the current epidemic scenario of dermatophytoses in India is more likely to be accepted by an Indian journal over an American one because the issue being discussed is of primary importance to the Indian dermatologists.^{2,3}
4. **Avoiding predatory journals:** This has now become a burning problem in India and elsewhere, which is compounded by the dearth of an exact definition of the term ‘predatory journal’. To put things into perspective, Jeffrey Beall first put forth the concept of ‘predatory journal’ as a broad umbrella term for those journals whose publishing ethics are questionable. They often imitate or closely imitate names of reputed legitimate journals. They publish articles, many of which are flawed or literally substandard, without proper peer review. Most of the time, a hefty charge is levied on the authors. The key problem with predatory publication is the limited visibility of the article and many institutions throughout the world have policies not to include articles published in them for academic promotions. There is no sure-fire way to spot them, particularly for novice researchers, but one way might be to check if the journal in question is indexed in a reputed database. Indexation in databases such as Pubmed (or Medline), SCOPUS and Embase are considered hallmarks of quality.⁴
5. **Impact factor:** Simply put, this is a proxy measure of how frequently the journal is cited in literature. It is defined as the ratio of the number of citations in the past two years from the journal to the total number of articles published in the past two years. An impact factor above three is considered excellent whereas an impact factor of one is considered average.⁵ In between, an impact factor of one to three is considered “Good”. Of note, the impact factor should be calculated by Clarivate Analytics, which calculates it from the ‘Journal citation report database’. A journal citation report is an objectively collected publisher-neutral data which is used to calculate how many times an article in a journal is cited by other researchers. This is then used to calculate the impact factor.⁶ It is available only for articles dating back two years. Many predatory journals tend to falsely inflate their impact factors, primarily by citation stack and citation exchange. Citation stacking is a new menace to young researchers. It refers to an anomalous citation activity that involves a disproportionate number of citations being exchanged between two or more journals.⁷ Typically, an agreement is reached between two journals, one of which serves as a ‘donor

journal', which publishes articles and then requests the other journal, called the 'recipient journal', to extensively cite those articles from the donor journal. This artificially inflates the impact factor of the donor journal. Such a practice is unethical by the journals, and often, such journals are excluded as a penalty from journal citation reports.⁷

6. Unfortunately, journals having high impact factors also have very high rejection rates. The impact factor should be a smaller consideration for the novice researcher and not the primary one, as considerable heterogeneity exists in the calculation of impact factors.
7. **Turnover time:** Turnover times have substantially decreased the world over, thanks to faster editorial and peer review processes with set deadlines. Nevertheless, it is always a good idea to check the average time, from submission to first decision, and from first decision to publication times. In general, international journals have a lesser turnover time (or higher article processing speed) than Indian journals.⁸
8. **Appealing against the decision:** A few journals offer this option—and appealing against the decision will, most likely, not yield its desired results. As such, unless dispassionate reasoning demands an appeal, it is not usually advisable to appeal, especially for young authors.

Strategies for publishing after rejection

There are two strategies for publication:

1. **The start-at-the-top strategy:** In this strategy, first the article is sent to a top-rated journal with very high rejection rates; if rejected, the article is able to garner reviewers' comments which are used to improve the quality of the article and the revised article is then sent to a lower-ranked journal. The advantage of this approach is that the article gets better as it moves down the order; the major disadvantage is that it is time-consuming and the researcher can face multiple rejections, which can lead to frustration.
2. **The cold start strategy:** Authors start by sending their article to their second-choice journals first, and if their article is not accepted there, but they get useful reviewers' reports that lead them to make a strong revision, they then move up the chain and send the improved article to a better journal. The main advantage is that as one moves up, one gets a chance to get published in more prestigious journals.¹ In this context, one might do well to remember that the rigour of the editorial process in reputed Indian journals is almost the same as that of reputed international journals. Hence putting the

same effort that one puts in international journals for Indian journals might be prudent.

Ideas for avoiding rejection

It is said prevention is always better than cure. Ultimately, rejection is the worst nightmare for every researcher and putting in efforts to avoid rejection pays back rich dividends, although it is not always possible to avoid rejection, no matter how carefully a manuscript is drafted.

The first step in preventing a desk or editorial rejection is getting accustomed to the common reasons for rejection. The vast majority of research work in many journals is editorially rejected.³ Some common reasons for rejection following editorial or peer review include poor study design, weak methodology, unacceptably flawed interpretation of results and extremely poor writing. No new contribution to the existing knowledge, poor quality images, duplicate submission or plagiarized work, sweeping conclusions unjustified by data, lack of ethics committee approval and hypothesis not adequately tested are some of the commonly cited reasons for rejection.^{2,3}

Once common reasons for rejection are avoided, further steps can be taken to avoid rejection, either at the peer review level or elsewhere:

3. Is my idea novel & does it deserve to be published?

This is the first question that every author should ask oneself before even attempting to write a manuscript. Will my target audience do things differently than what they do now after reading my article? A good practice is to ask these questions to any colleague/ friend who may be able to answer dispassionately. If the answer is negative, it may not be worthwhile to proceed with the idea. For example, a description of something that has been already reported is unlikely to be accepted as it contributes nothing new to the discipline.

4. Writing a good and concise manuscript: reading 'authors' instructions'

The authors need to stick to the precise instructions—for example, if a journal wants articles to be double spaced, any article that is single-spaced is liable to be rejected. It is a good use of time to pay attention to every minute detail in the author's instructions: font, size, colour, text headings, spacing, etc.

The next important step to avoid rejection is to write the article in clear and intelligible English and in an interesting way. Avoiding repetitions, spelling and grammatical mistakes

ensure a touch of professionalism to the manuscript and also enhances chances of acceptance.

5. Writing a good cover letter

In many journals, the cover letter is the thing first read by the editor—so writing a good and appealing cover letter is a must, authors must try to specify the exact reason why the editor must consider publishing the article and in what way will improve outcomes among the target audience. Paying attention to grammar, sentence construction and use of appropriate English is helpful. Authors should ensure that the paragraphs are cohesive and are conveying the idea one wants to express.

6. Making the changes requested if accepted with revision

This is the next best situation where the journal requests some revisions following which the article can be processed further. Any such request from the journal is a sign of interest on the part of the journal and should, as a general rule, be complied with. Failure to make the requested changes can result in rejection.

7. Images

Many journals put a high premium on images—as such, it may be reasonable to learn the art of medical photography, which in itself, is a vast field.

Concluding remarks

In the end, the researcher would do well to remember that rejection is an inevitable part of the research process, no matter how well the manuscript is prepared or how novel

the idea is; the key to successful publication is knowing the appropriate steps after rejection, working diligently and above all, to persist.

As a famous philosopher put it:
 “Out of the caverns of the rain,
 Like a child from the womb,
 Like a ghost from the tomb
 I arise & unbuild it again”.⁹

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