

VIEWPOINT

My article has just been rejected!

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Unfortunately, articles submitted to journals are rejected more frequently than is desirable. Journals themselves estimate that more than 60% of submitted articles are rejected without review (for top journals, the figure may even be 80%).¹⁻⁸ Thus, whatever an article's content or quality, an outright rejection should be expected right from the time of submission,³ and a reaction strategy defined beforehand. Each rejection should be carefully examined and fully understood before attempting any response. Here are some hints for beginners—or for edgy authors.

What does the rejection letter say?

A rejection letter or message does not have to be a fine piece of rhetoric: it is either a very short and simple phrase or a form letter with clichéd expressions to soften the tone, such as 'has been carefully reviewed', 'we are sorry', and 'many excellent papers are rejected'. One may find the letter unintelligible because 1) it does not specify the reason(s) for rejection; 2) it is truly unexpected given the manuscript's quality; 3) it consists of vague, conventional phrases, standard formulas, or politically correct jargon to qualify the manuscript ('had a low priority', 'does not add much', 'does not match the journal's style', 'you may send it to ...', 'we wish you better luck', etc.); or 4) it is read while being particularly nervous. Such a letter, whatever its length, should benefit from a second – and deferred – reading if it is to be fully understood, properly interpreted, and adequately acted upon.

How long was the delay between submission and rejection?

Sometimes, an article is rejected within a week or even 24 hours! In this case, the first person at the journal who has merely read the abstract or the abstract and the conclusions decided right away that the subject of the article is not within the scope of the journal or is not trendy; the article is too long, gives excess of information (for example, too many tables), or is really very badly written. In other cases, the rejection occurs within a month; here, one or at best two people probably read the article and decided it was unsuitable for the journal because of 'borderline' adequacy of the subject, unconvincing research methodology, or overstated conclusions. In yet other cases, the rejection comes more than two months after submission; this usually means that the article was thoroughly read by more than one person and has been rejected most probably based on the decision of the journal's editorial board for several complex reasons.

Was the rejection after a review or without it?

If the rejection comes without a review, forget the matter for a couple of days and then search for another journal. If the rejection comes after only a cursory review, the comments may be technically fallacious: the sole reader may not have understood the content because of poor presentation or simply because of lack of time or competence.⁹ If you think you have been the victim of an incompetent selector or have received unduly harsh criticism, do not hesitate to complain directly to the Editor-in-chief—unless the latter was himself or herself the critic; in that case, look for another journal without delay, and do the same if you receive no reply to your complaint within a reasonable amount of time (say, two weeks).

At this stage, you and your co-authors may consider submitting the article to another journal in the following cases:

1. the comments of the editor or the co-editor do not sound encouraging;
2. the comments of the two reviewers are too unbalanced or even conflicting;
3. the comments of at least one reviewer are too severe or seem to come from a known or suspected opponent;
4. an additional reviewer has intervened as an arbitrator;
5. two or more major comments seem intractable; or
6. one of the reviewers tries to impose other methods or interpretations requiring a heavy burden of additional work or extending the scope of the manuscript way beyond what the authors intended.

If an outright rejection comes with a detailed review, the review may prove to be of some interest. In that case, wait until you have calmed down (say, a couple of days) before taking further steps but resolve to deal firmly with the rejection as soon as possible.

What next?

Examine your manuscript

In the case of a straight rejection without detailed comments, examine your manuscript and check the following issues before accusing the journal's staff of unfair treatment. Is the subject really consistent with the journal's aims and scope? Does the manuscript deal with a single problem? Is your objective accurately stated? Is the Introduction logically progressive? Are the Methods appropriate to the objective?¹⁰ Are the Results important and credible?¹¹ Is the Discussion 'rich'? Are the Conclusions clear, honest, and consistent with

the objective? Is the Abstract readable and representative of the manuscript? Is the writing clear? Is the manuscript written in reasonably good English?^{10, 11} This is a rather long list but such a systematic evaluation will help you understand the journal's comments and revise the manuscript (for more exhaustive and structured lists of flaws, see ¹²⁻²⁰ and the *EASE Guidelines for Authors and Translators of Scientific Articles to be Published in English*).²¹ Concurrently, share the review or the rejection letter with your co-authors (if the journal has not already done so) and tell them they will be involved in the revision process.

Examine the content of the rejection letter

Examine the review anew, more thoroughly this time, to sort out the comments. These may be already sorted as 'major' and 'minor' but you may need to sort them using other criteria including the following: 1) essential comments from which you may really benefit because they help you to fill the gaps, remove imperfections, or improve the presentation of the manuscript; 2) comments directed to specific co-authors according to their area of expertise; 3) comments that require additional analyses or a non-negligible amount of time and work; and 4) comments that call for additions to text. You may use different colours to highlight each category (or use the 'Comments' feature in 'Track Changes' if you are using Microsoft Word) to focus on various types of revision needed or to assign specific comments to specific co-authors.

Discuss with the co-authors

Now that you have probably assigned to each co-author the comments related to his or her specific area of expertise, send the highlighted copies or the files with track changes to the co-authors, requesting them to respond. This may take some time because the co-authors may be as disheartened as you, the corresponding author. However, it would be wise to limit this time to no more than a couple of weeks before you begin the process of revising the article.

Distribute the tasks

Analyse all the responses received from your co-authors and try to arrive at a consensus on each point. Now, redefine or rewrite these points precisely and assign each specific point to a specific co-author. Send this 'final response plan' to the co-authors and set a reasonable common deadline to all depending on the overall workload.

Collect the answers

Remind your co-authors of the deadline in time and do your best to collect all the responses within a week or two. Be patient: some are always late; be persistent: some are frequent procrastinators. Once all the responses are in, check that they are adequate and do not hesitate to ask for further details or explanations.

Draft the answers

Now that you have understood all the responses, spend enough time to write them in the same style as that of the original manuscript and find within the manuscript a place for each block of additional text (or table or figure, as the case may be). Make each addition stand out (underline, highlight, or use track changes). Read all revised paragraphs again and then the

entire revised manuscript to check for consistency, readability, and compliance with the word limits prescribed by the journal.

Circulate the revised draft

Send the revised version of the manuscript to all co-authors to check whether they agree with the way you have presented their additions and with the overall presentation. Usually, this does not require much time and should be over within a week or so.

Collect the comments

Given the efforts already made, the virtually final version should elicit only a few comments from the co-authors, if at all. Act on those comments. Most often, this version does not have to make another round for checks by the co-authors. However, ensure that you fully understand the earlier comments by the co-authors because unsatisfactory corrections may be taken badly and become a source of misunderstanding and disputes.

Finalize the formatting

The final version may not be yet ready for submission to another journal: you need to format the whole manuscript for the new journal in accordance with its style and instructions to authors. This may require rewriting the Abstract, shortening the text, rewriting parts of Methods or Discussion, adding new sections ('Summary', 'At a glance', 'Highlights', etc.), or reformatting and reorganizing the references. This may be time-consuming, and the manuscript might require the approval of co-authors, but such revision and reshaping are essential to ensure that your manuscript does not look like it has been 'hastily recycled'.

Before I forget ...

Keep in mind that the same process might need to be carried out all over again in the case of a second rejection—and good luck!

Competing interests

The author declares having no financial or non-financial conflicts of interests in relation with this publication. He has no relationships with editorial associations, commercial editing companies, or other organizations that might have an interest in the submission of this viewpoint.

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