An author's guide to submission, revision and rejection

'Continuous effort, not strength or intelligence, is the key to understanding our potential.'

Winston Churchill

The sting of rejection is nasty. However, when you get that letter (which you will), remember you will be in esteemed company. Many of us would like to publish in *Science* or *Nature* but what better revenge when they reject you than a Nobel Prize! This is exactly what happened to Hans Krebs, the biochemist who won the Nobel Prize in 1953 for discovering the citric acid cycle, commonly known as the Krebs cycle. Krebs submitted his findings to *Nature* but was faced with rejection. Never has Frank Sinatra's famous quote been truer: 'The best revenge is massive success.'

Nature has admitted to many other such *faux pas* in its publishing history and it is not unique in its misjudgements. Publishing is a game of risk-taking behaviour and strategy. Authors must convince editors and referees that their work is worthy of publishing. When journals do not publish this work, authors must remember the value of their manuscript and persist in finding it another home.

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No research is complete unless it is published. Much time is spent conducting good research, more time writing a manuscript and, finally, hours are spent finding a suitable journal in which to publish the result. Then, the wait...

Finally, decision day arrives, and most researchers will recognise the wave of disappointment and anger when the manuscript is rejected. Many academics will claim that if you have not had an article rejected, you simply haven't submitted enough for publication!

Readers will take some solace in the knowledge that more than 20 Nobel laureates had their articles initially rejected by many journals.¹ Nobel laureate Jack Steinberger comments that 'new ideas are not completely easy

to accept, sometimes even by the brightest and most open of people'.²

Although scientific rejection is a normal part of the publishing process, it is rarely discussed and there is little advice on how to manage such a decision. This article focuses on the reasons for rejection and provides some advice on how to deal with it.

What are the possible decisions after submission?

There are really only three possible outcomes once your article has been submitted: accept, reject or revise. Some variations to this theme are discussed below:

Desk rejection: This occurs when an article has been rejected outright by the editor-in-chief, usually without being sent for peer review. This can happen even if it is the journal's policy to send articles for peer review, usually to save the precious time of peer reviewers. Possible reasons for rejecting an article are listed in the appendix but rejection at this stage includes the following: does not fit with the scope of the journal; poor English; poor data analysis.

Such a decision will arrive swiftly but you may save time by seeking informal advice prior to submission. Ask the editor-in-chief if the manuscript is of interest, which can be done while it is still in preparation. Once submitted, suggest at least 2–5 appropriate reviewers.

Accept without change: This is a very rare decision.

Conditional acceptance pending major revision: Once the article has been revised, it may be sent out for peer review again to the same or different reviewers. There is still no guarantee of acceptance at this stage but the chances are certainly higher than at initial submission.

Conditional acceptance with minor revision: These articles are usually published if the revisions have been made.

Rejection after peer review: Dealing with this is a key skill required of any academic.

How should you revise a manuscript?

Most journals will seek the opinion of at least two peer reviewers and their comments will be sent with the decision letter or email. It is crucial that every single comment is addressed to maximise the chance of subsequent publication. Some suggestions are given below:

- > A major rewrite will require a significant amount of time and you must therefore decide whether this is a worthwhile investment. Alternatively, at this stage, you could consider submitting your article to another journal.
- > Address every comment on a point-by-point basis, however vague or incorrect they may appear. Prepare a letter with all the comments and your response to each one in detail.
- > Highlight any changes that you have made in the manuscript itself so that these changes are apparent and stand out easily.
- > Even if you chose not to make a change in response to a specific comment made by the reviewer, you must state the reason why. You are allowed to disagree with the reviewer providing you explain your reasons.
- > Do not rush through the revision process or avoid responding to any points.
- > Remain constructive and polite regardless of how irritated you may be by the comments.
- > It is not uncommon for a journal to request several revisions of an article.
- > Your article may still be rejected after it has been revised although if all suggested revisions have been made, then this is unlikely.

How should you handle rejection?

There are several possible reasons for a rejection and it is important to read the decision letter carefully to establish whether it was with or without peer review. Remember that paper rejection is not personal rejection and there are three possible choices at this stage:

1. If you feel that the comments were grossly unfair or wrong, consider writing to the editor and request an appeal. It is worth noting that appeals are rarely successful and you will only have one chance at the appeal process. The editor may send the article for further peer review to new referees but this is highly unlikely unless there is a compelling argument to do so.
2. Send your article to another journal. Maximise the chances of publication elsewhere by focusing on any comments and incorporating these into your article. Essentially, profit from the criticism as this may actually improve your article. Additionally, your article may end up being peer reviewed by the same referee, who will be less than pleased to read the same article again if his or her comments have not been addressed.
3. Give up on the article. It is possible that there is a methodological or data problem with your article that invalidates the research. Although this can be a really hard decision, if the article is not reporting good research, then you should not publish it – it could harm your reputation.

If no feedback was received with the decision letter, there may be editorial marks on the returned manuscript. If not, ask the editor-in-chief for feedback. Remember that on some occasions, rejection has no bearing on the quality of the manuscript.

What happens after the article has been accepted?

Finally, you can put a line on your CV against the article stating 'in press'.

Once a journal has accepted your article, it will be copy-edited to enhance the quality of the article and maximise clarity. The article is then typeset and you will be sent a PDF proof. The proof may be accompanied by queries that have been raised and you will need to respond to each of these. Examples of queries at this stage include missing references, clarification of sentences and dates websites were accessed.

The PDF proof must be read carefully as this is the final chance to make any changes. This does not mean a rewrite but corrections to any errors and responding to the queries that have been raised. You must check all tables, illustrations and units of measurement at this stage. There is usually a tight deadline for you to reply and this can be as short as 48 hours.

The publisher may send a copyright agreement with the proof, which must be returned. The journal is unlikely to publish your article without a signed copyright agreement. Remember to send this back with your corrected proof.

Key messages

- > Journal decisions are limited to accept, revise or reject (with or without peer review).
- > All requested revisions demand a response, even if you disagree with the comments.
- > Remain polite and professional in your response to the editor.
- > If your article is rejected, do not be disheartened. Take on board the criticisms and send it elsewhere (or accept that the article should not be published).

The journal may publish your article online ahead of the print issue and it will normally alert you to publication with an email.

References

1. Campanario JM. Rejecting and resisting Nobel class discoveries: accounts by Nobel Laureates. *Scientometrics* 2009; **81**: 549–565.
2. Steinberger J. Early particles. *Annu Rev Nucl Part Sci* 1997; **47**: 13–42.

Coming up next time

Philippa Benson, who has kindly written for this series in the past, discusses the seven deadly sins of publishing.

Appendix Reasons for rejection

Journal reasons	Space constraints
	Sheer high volume of submissions
	Out of scope of the journal
	A similar article has already been published
	Journal policy to reject anything that needs major revision
Manuscript reasons	Evidence of plagiarism. (Note that this is serious ethical misconduct and may be reported to your institution.)
	Article has been sent to another journal. (Again, this is misconduct. You must only submit your article to one journal at a time.)
	Incomplete manuscript
	Poor English or poor grammar
	Figures unclear
	Article does not conform to the instructions to authors
	References are out of date or insufficient to substantiate the article
	Excessive use of jargon
	Flawed science – inappropriate methodology, poor research question, bad data, etc
	Methodology cannot be replicated owing to new techniques or technology advances
	Statistics are invalid or inappropriate
	Results not generalisable or original or reliable
	Results have no clinical or practical implications
	Unstructured arguments and conclusions that do not seem to be supported by the study data
	Biased discussions and findings
	Findings do not advance the field
	Not of interest to the readers – usually means you have picked the wrong journal
	Research and findings not novel and unlikely to have a significant impact
	Boring research – the editor may decide that your research is too mundane for the journal. (This happens more frequently with high impact journals.)