Peer reviews: the dreaded rejection

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Abstract

This commentary considers the reasons for rejection of manuscripts during the peer-review process. Poor methodology, inappropriate statistical analysis, irrelevance, and technical errors are cited frequently as motives for manuscript rejection. Guidance, such as selecting an applicable journal, conducting a rigorous study, and writing efficiently, is provided for authors to prevent initial rejection. Researchers are reassured that rejection is a common consequence of peer-review and subsequent submissions to other journals are often successful publications.

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Body of Article

Dissemination of research is the cornerstone of modern scientific understanding. Over the last century, scientific journals have turned to peer review as the major mechanism for accepting manuscripts [1]. A peer-reviewed journal is one in which submissions are evaluated externally by experts in a given field [1]. The method is meant to optimize objective evaluation of submissions and maintain quality and credibility [1]. Given the limited amount of print space and the growing number of articles submitted, about 50% of articles are rejected across all peer-reviewed journals [2]. International authors face increased scrutiny during the review process; though the number of international submissions are rising, the percent of acceptances from Brazil, Russia, India, and China has either remained the same or dropped [2]. Facing rejection is a harsh outcome of the peer review process and even seasoned researchers are not immune to this consequence. An understanding of the factors that are implicated in manuscript rejection is an invaluable tool for both inexperienced and veteran researchers to encourage high-quality submissions. Anticipating flaws may therefore augment the probability of acceptance.

Several common themes have been implicated in manuscript rejections. Most importantly, reviewers may not find utility or relevance in a paper that presents stagnant and unoriginal findings [3, 4]. Second, flaws in design and methodology or a poor research question hinder acceptance for publication [3]. Inappropriate statistical design with analysis mistakes or shortcomings are considered red flags to reviewers [5]. Even if the study is well-conducted, sometimes the particular journal is not the ideal fit, as the content of the manuscript is outside the aims and scope of that journal [4]. Semantic considerations for rejection include nonadherence to journal guidelines for submission, incompleteness, or typographic errors [4]. Grammatical or spelling errors may be a particular problem for non-English speaking authors, who have been found to have a greater number of language errors in their submissions [6]. Reviewers also report that "badly written" articles tend to be rejected more frequently than more cohesive and concise submissions [6].

Increasing the odds of acceptance requires awareness of these errors. First and foremost, select an appropriate and relevant research question. Assess whether the study offers something new to readers and to the scientific community; research the journal to understand its general focus and readership. Knowing the journal's subscribers is important; submit to a journal with an audience that fits the manuscript's niche. Importantly, select the appropriate format for given data. Looking into submission guidelines for a given journal is important to assess the types of formats that are published. For example, with a small data set with significant findings, a research letter may be the best option for submission. Following the guidelines for technical information and application guidelines will prevent avoidable errors.

During the writing process, pay attention to language and style. Brevity and clarity with concrete language and active voice is highly valued for both reviewers and readers [6]. Avoid redundant information in subsequent sections and lengthy discussions; readers of clinical journals will want to glean innovative material to implement in clinical practice in an efficient manner. Use English-speaking editors to review manuscripts for spelling and grammatical errors.

If an author's manuscript falls into the rejection category, there may be still an opportunity for remedy. A large proportion of manuscripts are accepted with contingencies or may be considered for acceptance after a revision process by the author [7]. In this situation, it is of utmost importance for authors to take the comments by peer reviewers seriously. Each comment should be addressed and taken into consideration before resubmission. However, this process should be undertaken efficiently; papers that are resubmitted more quickly are accepted more frequently than papers that had a longer author review period [8]. Finding a balance between comprehensive review within an acceptable time frame may be difficult depending on the degree of revision needed.

If the manuscript is outright rejected, authors may find it helpful to know that there is still a good chance of publishing elsewhere [5]. About 50% of declined manuscripts to medical journals were published in a two year period [5]. Authors should still consider the advice of the initial reviewer's comments before resubmission to another journal. Utilize the feedback garnered from the initial reviews to create a more concise, cohesive paper and resubmit to a journal more appropriate for the paper.

Rejection of manuscripts may ultimately lead to a superior end-product. Studies have shown that articles initially rejected from biomedical journals published elsewhere have a greater number of citations [9]. Understanding the paper trail of rejected manuscripts is vital to evaluating the peer review process and measuring the impact of journals. Further studies should analyze rejection and scholarly impact as well as the relationship between rejection and scholarly activity. Rejection is a disappointing situation for authors in all career stages, but persistence is the key to eventually achieving publication. Authors should take rejection as an opportunity to reassess and improve their manuscript rather than being dissuaded.

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