

*Dealing with Reviews and Overcoming Rejection**Henry L. Roediger, III, Kathleen B. McDermott, and Eric Eich*

This chapter addresses how to handle the reviews and action letter on your submitted paper. Our advice will doubtless overlap with that in other chapters in this volume. If you have followed advice in previous chapters on preparing your paper and making a compelling argument, your chances of publication are certainly increased. However, a large part of the process of academic publication involves rejection. Even the most esteemed researchers face rejection on a regular basis; indeed, they will often report that their most important papers were initially rejected, and sometimes they had to try two or three journals before gaining acceptance. In fact, probably the more exciting your paper is, making strong claims that generally upset the conventional wisdom, the more likely you are to be given a rough time in the reviewing process. After all, the reviewers believe the conventional wisdom; your new paper must convince them that they are wrong. A paper that is a landmark in retrospect might have originally suffered rejection for this very reason of going against the grain of the field (Sternberg, 1998, 2003).

Some writers decry the conservatism of the “scientific establishment,” but actually this skeptical attitude is what makes the scientific process great (e.g., Gawande, 2016; Lilienfeld & Ammirati, 2012; Stemwedel, 2011). As Richard Feynman famously remarked, “Science is a way of trying not to fool yourself. The first principle is that you must not fool yourself and you are the easiest person to fool” (Hutchins, 1985, p. 343). And, to add Carl Sagan’s (1996, p. 304) thought,

At the heart of science is an essential balance between two seemingly contradictory attitudes – an openness to new ideas, no matter how bizarre or counterintuitive they may be, and the most ruthless skeptical scrutiny of all ideas, old and new. This is how deep truths are winnowed from deep nonsense.

Reviewers and editors provide the skeptical check on new claims, and they should.

To convince other scientists that the conventional wisdom is wrong, the case must be convincing and the evidence overpowering. The hope is that conservatism in the publication process will keep false positives from arising in science too often. However, recent events across science show that the pendulum toward “acceptance” may have swung too far, and more rigorous (hence conservative) scientific procedures are now being encouraged and are often required for publication. And thus rejection may be a more likely fate of many papers, at least at the best journals where you want to publish your work.

Categories of Rejection

But back to you and your paper. You (and probably your colleagues) had an idea, conducted research, and now are attempting to report your findings to the world. You have chosen a journal and submitted your manuscript. The research took months, maybe years, to complete, and you and your collaborators worked hard on the paper, trying to make it excellent. So, you are hopeful when you see a letter in your inbox from the action editor of the paper. Does he or she, and the reviewers, think your paper is as great as you do?

The answer is almost certainly *no*. In our experience, virtually no papers are accepted without any changes. (It has never happened to any of the three of us.) There are, roughly speaking, four categories of rejection, and our comments later in the chapter will be nuanced to taking into account the type of rejection.

The first category of rejection is what we will call *desk rejection* or *triage*, which means having your paper rejected by the editor without outside review. In fact, for some journals, like *Psychological Science*, you may be lucky just to get your paper reviewed. About 70 percent of submitted papers at that journal are desk-rejected, meaning that the two editors who first examined your paper decided it did not have a chance of publication at that journal. However, most psychology journals do not have such high triage rates, and most papers are sent out to review. Assuming your paper made it past the triage stage, there are three other types of rejection of varying severity.

The second type (after desk rejection) is what we can call the *flat-out rejection*: rejection with no opportunity for resubmission. Your precious paper has been sent out to review, but it has received two or more mostly

negative reviews. In this case, you usually get a brief note from the editor saying it is rejected without possibility of resubmission. Flat-out rejection is the worst kind of rejection for any reviewed paper, because it means you have to start all over at another journal, assuming the reviewers have not convinced you that your paper suffers flaws so great that you should simply abandon the project. In our experience, authors rarely reach this conclusion.

A third category of rejection is *revise-and-resubmit*. In this case, the journal editor and reviewers see promise in your paper, but they also see flaws that need correcting. Thus, the editor writes that she/he is willing to reconsider your paper, but only after you have revised it to take into account most of the complaints of the reviewers. If you are lucky, the editor will specify which perceived problems are the most serious and must be addressed and fixed, if possible. This form of rejection means that you have work to do, but at least it is possible, perhaps likely, that you can fix the problems well enough for your paper to be accepted. We can find no data on the issue, but our guess from our personal experiences is that authors of most papers that are eventually accepted originally received a revise-and-resubmit form of rejection letter.

The best possible rejection letter, which is partly an acceptance letter, is for the editor to write, “Technically, I am rejecting your paper. However, I believe your paper has an excellent chance of acceptance. If you do X, Y and Z to your paper, I will accept it. I will not send your paper out for further review, but will handle it myself.” Although technically a rejection – that step ensures that the author will take the editor’s points seriously – this form of rejection is actually the best possible outcome for your paper. In our experience, virtually no authors ever receive a letter on a first submission saying, “I am happy to accept your paper. Neither the reviewers nor I even have suggestions for you to consider.” Maybe some researchers get such letters, but we don’t. And our guess is that you won’t, either.

Reacting to Reviews

This section, like the others, is based on our experiences and listening to our colleagues. A small percentage of researchers may deal with reviews in a calm, mature manner: “Oh, this is what reviewers thought of my paper, how interesting! I see I did a poor job of expressing myself, of making my contribution clear. And, sure enough, the data analytic technique Reviewer 2 suggests is much better than the one I chose. I guess I will

need to rethink this whole project. I am lucky to have gotten such astute reviewers.”

Most researchers cannot respond immediately in this mature fashion, although after a couple days of reflection on the critiques, this level of appreciation can often emerge. A widespread reaction on first receiving an action letter is to skim the letter and reviews to get some notion of how bad the news is, then walk away from the message (or, in the old days, chuck the letter and reviews into a desk drawer). There the material sits while the author occasionally reflects on the situation and musters the courage for a close look. If you find yourself in this latter category, and you may, we encourage you not to let this first phase last too long. Get back to the project after a few hours; discuss the reviews with your co-authors (if any) or with close colleagues, if there are no collaborators. Here are stages you may go through along your journey to resubmission.

Five Stages of Dealing with Rejection Letters

We find it useful to adopt Elizabeth Kübler Ross's (1969) five stages of grief in thinking about how we deal with manuscript rejections. Of course, her original theory was about stages of grief upon learning of a terminal illness. Receiving a rejection letter on a paper you thought worthy is certainly nothing so dismal as this, but it can still provide a sharp wound, especially for one of your first papers.

Denial. You click on the action editor's letter, expecting to be greeted by an acceptance. Instead, you get one of the two stages of rejection we called flat-out rejection or revise-and-resubmit. The first one is truly depressing, but often the second one can seem nearly as bad: “The reviewers want me to reframe the paper, consider a new theoretical framework we did not use, use a new data analytic strategy, cite their work more, and suggest that we will reach different conclusions. Surely, they must be kidding! My paper cannot really need that much work. Is it really that bad?” That's denial at work, and it can lead to:

Anger. “No, damn it, it's not that bad. I have been thinking about this problem and reading about it as much or more than the reviewers. My collaborators and I know what we are doing. We are going to fight this decision. Reviewer B, in particular, is off his or her rocker. It's probably Snerdly. He always has it out for me. Too cowardly to sign his review, but I bet it is him.” Anger feels good. Enjoy the catharsis. Go have a beer with your collaborators and beat up on the reviewers for a while. But don't write the editor and ask for reconsideration because Reviewer 2 is

an idiot (or for any reason, really). Appealing an editorial decision is not recommended; your editor made the best decision she or he could on the basis of the reviews, his or her own reading, and also some bottom-line recommendations (accept, major revision, minor revision) and checklists (how significant is the research question?) asked of the reviewers that you as author cannot see. Also, reviewers usually have the option of adding private comments to the editor. Anyway, after you and your collaborators get angry and vent for a bit, it's time to get serious about practical next steps, which leads to:

Bargaining. "Well, on reflection, Reviewers A and C, and even B, make some good points. I have made a list of eight major points suggested by the reviewers and endorsed by the editor. Maybe I could do the six I am coming to agree with, but make a case that the other two don't matter. I'll talk to my co-authors on the paper." This may lead to:

Depression. "Oh, my colleagues and I disagree on which ones of the eight points we should attend to. Lisa thinks the two points I omitted are really among the most important ones. Steve seems to agree. Of course, as first author, I need to do most of the work, so that's easy for them to say. Still, they do make good points. The reviewers really were thoughtful, even wise. How could I have not seen these things when I was working on the paper?" This thinking leads to:

Acceptance. "Well, all right. I still disagree with the reviewers on some minor things, but let's face it, by and large all eight points need attention. I will just have to buckle down and work hard on the paper. The upside is that if I do what the reviewers suggest, including several analyses that I would have never thought of myself, the paper will be much better, is quite likely to be accepted, and I will look a lot smarter than I apparently am."

Why Are Manuscripts Rejected?

Many reasons exist for rejection, and often the reasons are particular to your paper. Nonetheless, common reasons for rejection exist; the three of us have many years of editorial experience, which means we have written numerous rejection letters. Here is our list of common reasons for rejection. The list is admittedly idiosyncratic, but try to avoid them in a submission or resubmission.

1 "This Manuscript Does not Make a Significant Contribution to the Literature." This one is a killer, because it is based on the reviewer's

subjective opinion, having just read your paper. But when you are writing your manuscript, you will want to keep this potential criticism in mind. Do make clear your research question. Do not write a manuscript that is narrow in scope (e.g., designed to clean up some flaws in Experiment 2a of some previously published paper). Tell the reader what interesting knowledge they will possess after they have read about your studies, and highlight the importance of this knowledge. However, do not overdo it. Don't say "This manuscript makes a profound contribution to the literature for the following reasons." Avoid calling your own work "important," claiming to show something "for the first time" or using other similar terms. You do want to leave the impression with the reviewer that the work is important, but you must write so that they will draw that inference, not by baldly telling them. On the other hand, you may need to ask yourself, "What is the realistic contribution of this paper to the literature? Am I aiming at too lofty a journal?" Journals differ in their standards for what is a "significant contribution" and judging where your paper will fit is important. Of course, you should start at the best outlet that you think is appropriate. You can always work your way down the hierarchy, if you need to. But try to be realistic in the first place. Not all your work belongs in high-profile journals, and that doesn't mean it isn't worth publishing.

2 "*This Manuscript is Boring*" or "*This Manuscript is Incomprehensible and Filled with Jargon.*" These are two of the more deadly comments from reviewers. Assuming your research and findings are not criticized and that you believe they are interesting, then the problem usually lies with your writing. You need to tell a compelling story. You present an issue or puzzle in the introduction; you specify the means for addressing or solving it in the method; your results provide the outcome; and the discussion finishes off the rest of the story. Skillful writers can bring a reader through a paper like a good story, making him/her eager to know how the research came out. You need to write with verve, but without going overboard. Find researchers whose papers you admire and study them: What made their papers great? It's also worth considering that this kind of criticism is much more likely at a general journal (e.g., *Psychological Science*) than a specialty journal (e.g., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*). The broader the journal's audience, the greater the requirement for broad appeal. A more specialized journal will not have the same broad-appeal requirements, although needless jargon (and numerous acronyms) should still be avoided, and contact with a big-picture research question is still important.

3 “*The Authors Missed Some of the Literature and they Should Consider the Recent Papers of James Madison on this Topic.*” This kind of comment often (but not always) comes from James Madison himself, hiding behind the anonymous review process. It can be irritating. On the other hand, in our experience, the reviewer is often right. Keep in mind that the reason a reviewer gets your paper to review is that she or he is an expert in the topic area or a closely related one. Hence, they also know the literature well, and they may have some knowledge that you do not possess. This is especially true if you have just begun research on this topic. So, consider such comments carefully.

4 “*The Authors have Recently Published Several Other Papers More or Less Like This One. This Contribution is Merely Incremental and Should be Bundled with Others to Create a Stronger Package.*” This is another killer, especially if the reviewer is right. The reviewer is basically accusing the author of piecemeal publication: the practice of scattering research using the same paradigm across many journals when it would have been more appropriate to package the research in two or three papers involving multiple studies. Our best advice is never to read this complaint in the first place by creating a strong package of multiple studies (when appropriate). If you get this complaint, you should consider adding other studies to make your manuscript have a contribution that will be perceived as more important.

5 “*This Paper is Flawed Because of X, Y, and Z.*” X, Y, and Z could pertain to some specific method or confounding or analysis that is unique to your study, but we consider a few general problems here. In the last few years, and certainly since the Simmons, Nelson, and Simonsohn (2011) paper on “false-positive psychology,” several questionable practices have come under attack. One is conducting studies with too few observations to be powerful enough to detect effects (judged a priori), and then reporting an effect in a single study with a p -value of .039, that is, barely below .05. In this case, reviewers may suspect “ p -hacking,” meaning that the author exploited “researcher degrees of freedom” (Simmons et al., 2011) such as eliminating data from some subjects, testing multiple hypotheses in the data and reporting only the significant ones, increasing the sample size until just enough subjects have been tested to get below the .05 level of significance, among others. Most journals today require transparency in the form of at least open publication of the underlying data on which your manuscript is based. And it is no longer enough to

justify sample size to say, “we used the number of subjects customary for research of this type.” After all, the problem that Simmons et al. (2011) pointed out is that the extant literature is underpowered; saying you used the same number of subjects or observations simply compounds the problem that already existed. Instead, most journals want some type of power analysis based on past findings, although such analyses themselves involve making assumptions (or guesswork). In short, no amount of framing and novelty can overcome the concern that the findings themselves are not solid. Do your best to convince the reader that your work is solid replicable, for example, by replicating it yourself with many data points per observation. If you can’t do so, it may not be time for publication.

Of course, we have provided only a sampling of common criticisms of papers here. You will get specific remarks based on your paper. We encourage you to consider each carefully and thoughtfully, even when (or especially when) doing so is painful. Most editors would not expect you to change your manuscript in response to every quibble that every reviewer has, but you should give them honest consideration and address each of them in your Response to Reviewers (see below). And yes, reviewers can and do make mistakes and (say) ask for information you already provided. We do not mean to suggest that they are infallible. We move on now to the next stage in your process.

What to Do after Rejection? The Process of Resubmission

As we noted above, several types of rejections exist. We discuss briefly how to approach each type.

If your paper was triaged and you got little feedback, it is hard to know what to do next. Journals with high triage rates (*Psychological Science*, *Science*, *Nature*) often value “perceived novelty” and your paper perhaps did not pass this bar. Some question whether this is even a reasonable bar, and they argue that the need for novelty is what is crashing the scientific process. Researchers are making extravagant claims based on less than compelling evidence, hoping for an acceptance on the basis of novelty rather than solid science. Still, in the case of a triage decision, you should revise your paper, taking whatever morsel of feedback you received, and try a different journal, probably one that is more specialized to your field of work.

If your paper was flat-out rejected but reviewed, you will be submitting to a new journal (or possibly shelving the work if you become

convinced it is a dead end). You should *never* resubmit the same paper, not changing a word or changing only a few words. After all, some of the leading experts in the field have just given you their best advice, so you would be foolish not to use it in revising your paper. More pragmatically, the editor of the new journal you submit to may send the paper to one of the previous reviewers. This happens all the time, because most topics have a small coterie of well-known researchers; you do not want them to see you did not bother to incorporate any suggestions of the two or three experts who volunteered their time to review your prior submission. We know from experience that this situation is very frustrating (from a reviewer's point of view), and you can be sure the reviewer will relay the fact to the editor (i.e., that you failed to consider reviews from a prior journal before submitting to the new journal). Even if the initial reviews misinterpreted part of your paper, you can be sure that there are some morsels of insight in any set of reviews. Besides, if a reviewer misses the point of your paper, it is worth considering that at least part of the problem lies in your writing.

If you do submit a previously rejected manuscript to a new journal, you have the option of telling the new editor about your prior rejection. People disagree on this issue. On the side of not informing the editor about your rejection, there will be no stigma attached to the paper and the editor will not be thinking "If journal x did not take this paper, why should I? My journal is as good as that one." Of course, the editor might find out it is a resubmission from one of the reviewers.

The other avenue is to be upfront with the new editor about your rejection. Say, in your letter of submission,

I am submitting this paper to your journal. A former version of this manuscript was rejected from Journal x, but my co-authors and I have carefully reformulated our paper based on the previous reviews. We feel it is now a substantially improved paper. We are attaching the previous action letter and reviews for you, should you want them, along with responses to the reviewers' and editor's points.

If you follow this procedure, the new editor may be impressed. That is especially so if the initial reviews were reasonably positive (some may have recommended publication), and you have dealt satisfactorily with the points raised. We (authors of this chapter) have experienced almost immediate acceptance of manuscripts when we followed this procedure, sometimes without the editor seeking further outside review. Still, this procedure lets the new editor know that the paper has been rejected by another journal, which can be a problem. Still, if you received reasonably

positive reviews but the editor decided to reject it because it was not “novel,” it is probably worthwhile in most cases to notify the editor about your prior rejection. She or he is likely to find out during the review process, anyway.

The next class of rejection to consider is the revise-and-resubmit decision. In some ways this is the trickiest, because the editor may have told you what you have to do and you may disagree with some points. One step to take is to decide, with your co-authors, on a list of items you must do (say, they were endorsed by two reviewers and the editor), things that you cannot do (tell the editor why – and if the answer boils down to “because I would have to do a lot of work,” then just get busy and do it), and points that you believe are misguided or plainly wrong. However, you need to defend these last points in your response.

Perhaps our best piece of advice in this section is for you to write a careful, compelling Response to Reviewers to accompany your resubmission. Do not write a short note saying, “we did all the things we thought were worth doing” or even “we did everything.” Instead, reprint the action letter and reviews in their entirety, with comments interspersed (perhaps in another font color) to say how you have responded to the comments/concerns. Here, we usually say what we did and then quote from the new section of the manuscript. Once the editor has read the comprehensive response to reviewers, he/she should have been reminded of all the prior concerns and have a good sense of how the manuscript has changed. He/she can then read the entire manuscript with these points in mind. Most of your responses should say things like “we appreciate the reviewer pointing out this ambiguity, and we have clarified the issue by adding the following text ...” On occasion you can disagree with a reviewer and explain why, but this option should be used sparingly. Remember that the reviewers will likely be reading your Response to Reviewers, and if you push back on too many points, they are unlikely to come back with a recommendation to publish. That said, if you fundamentally disagree with a reviewer’s point and think the manuscript will be substantially worse if you follow their suggestion, don’t do it.

Last, consider the rejection that is nearly an acceptance, the technical rejection pending a few changes. This is a great letter to get, but do not assume you are home free. We advise taking the changes seriously and (as before) writing a formal response to the reviews. In short, act as though you got a revise-and-resubmit letter, so the editor will be persuaded. Better to be too careful than not careful enough.

Reflections on the Peer Review System

The literature on the psychology and sociology of science (as well as in individual fields) is replete with attacks on the peer review system – that it is shallow, unfair, and biased, and lets reviewers snipe behind the barrier of anonymity. It is far too conservative and thus “great papers” are routinely rejected (e.g., Csiszar, 2016; Kelly, Sadeghieh, & Adeli, 2014; Smith, 2006).

Yes, bad and unfair decisions can be made, and they are made. Nonetheless, we defend the peer review system as better than any possible alternative (Roediger, 1987). The editors of journals are incredibly busy people, as most of them are trying to maintain their own research, teaching, mentoring, etc., as well as to edit a journal. The reviewers give their time for free to examine papers and provide opinions and advice. No one has the goals of being unfair or blocking scientific progress in mind, even if the system occasionally does that.

The whole issue of the “replication crisis” in psychology points to our traditional system of publication in many fields being, if anything, too liberal, with the publication of numerous “findings” that cannot be replicated.¹ The standards for publication in the field are changing, and reviewers’ standards will be changing, too. The entire field of psychology is upping its game. Thus, the standards for publication will become even more stringent, rejection more frequent, and the angst of rejected authors perhaps greater. Still, we see the peer review system as the best hope for our field and for science in general.

One last thought. We have discussed the case of being rejected by one journal. Suppose you receive a flat-out rejection by one journal, and then you provide a good-faith effort and try a second, perhaps less impactful, journal, and then you get rejected again by a new editor and a new set of reviewers. Then it might be time for you to take a hard look at your project and ask yourself if it might not be time to move on to something else. But if you really believe in the importance of your findings and your project, persevere! We suspect that the trait of perseverance is one key to success in academia.

¹ The replicability crisis and related issues are extensively examined in three sets of articles published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. These sets are titled *Special section on replicability in psychological science: a crisis of confidence?* (2012, 7[6], 528–654), *Special section on research practices* (2012, 7[6], 655–689), and *Special section of advancing our methods and practices* (2014, 9[3], 275–351).

Conclusion

Dealing with rejection is never easy, especially early in one's career. Still, if you are to be a researcher and academic, you had better get used to it; rejection is part of the publication process. We hope the strategies presented in our chapter should provide some tips for turning a rejection into a publication.

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