



An Insider's Insight into Handling Rejection

Occasionally, a manuscript will be accepted on first submission without revisions. But it's rare. At prestigious journals, most manuscripts are rejected.

All authors get some form of rejection from a journal at some point in their careers. Do you amend the paper, based on the feedback, and resubmit, or do you go back to the drawing board?

We offer some insights from the Niche medical writing team, who have been managing journal submissions successfully for the pharmaceutical industry and academia since 1998.

Before you start

Rejection by a journal isn't the end, even if there is no suggestion of an opportunity for resubmission.

- You have an ethical duty to payers, participants and yourself to publish your scientific data
- Accept that feedback from the referees and the Editor is provided in the spirit of improving your work
- Invest time in your manuscript. View publishing as an iterative process where each iteration improves the quality of your work

Prepare to succeed

Did you target the right journal?

When submitting your manuscript did you write to the Editor describing the context of your work and the value your data add to the field of study?

Are the criticisms from the referees addressable?

Can you construct a clear and concise rebuttal if your manuscript has been rejected because a referee has misunderstood some key point in your manuscript?

Key Insights

When you submit a manuscript you can expect one of three responses from your target journal: acceptance, rejection with revision/resubmission or rejection. Few manuscripts achieve the elusive 'hole-in-one' and offers of acceptance are usually dependent on you providing adequate responses to issues raised by the editor and/or referees. Perhaps the hardest decision is what to do following a request to markedly revise your manuscript. This can often involve re-starting the submission process once you have addressed editorial concerns. Most studies contain imperfections. The question hangs on the nature and severity of those flaws.

- Discuss feedback with your co-authors (if applicable) and decide on your next steps. Getting past the journal's editorial gatekeeper can be a lottery and most papers are rejected outright, never getting sent out for peer review. Therefore, if you have received comments from referees it is worth considering whether you should stick with your original choice of journal as you already have a foot in the door.
- When resubmitting to the same journal review carefully the wording of the Editor's letter; often its language indicates whether they feel that you should revise and resubmit or submit elsewhere.
- If an editor offers the opportunity to resubmit, careful consideration should be given as to whether you can make all the required changes (e.g., you may not want to add more experiments to your paper before seeing it in print), your argument or methodology may be fatally flawed or you may not have the budget or opportunity to address requests for additional work. You'll have to work that out for yourself but our schematic might help you decide.

If you receive an outright rejection you could consider a rebuttal if you think an editor or referee misunderstood your methodology or arguments; only consider this if you can build a compelling case.

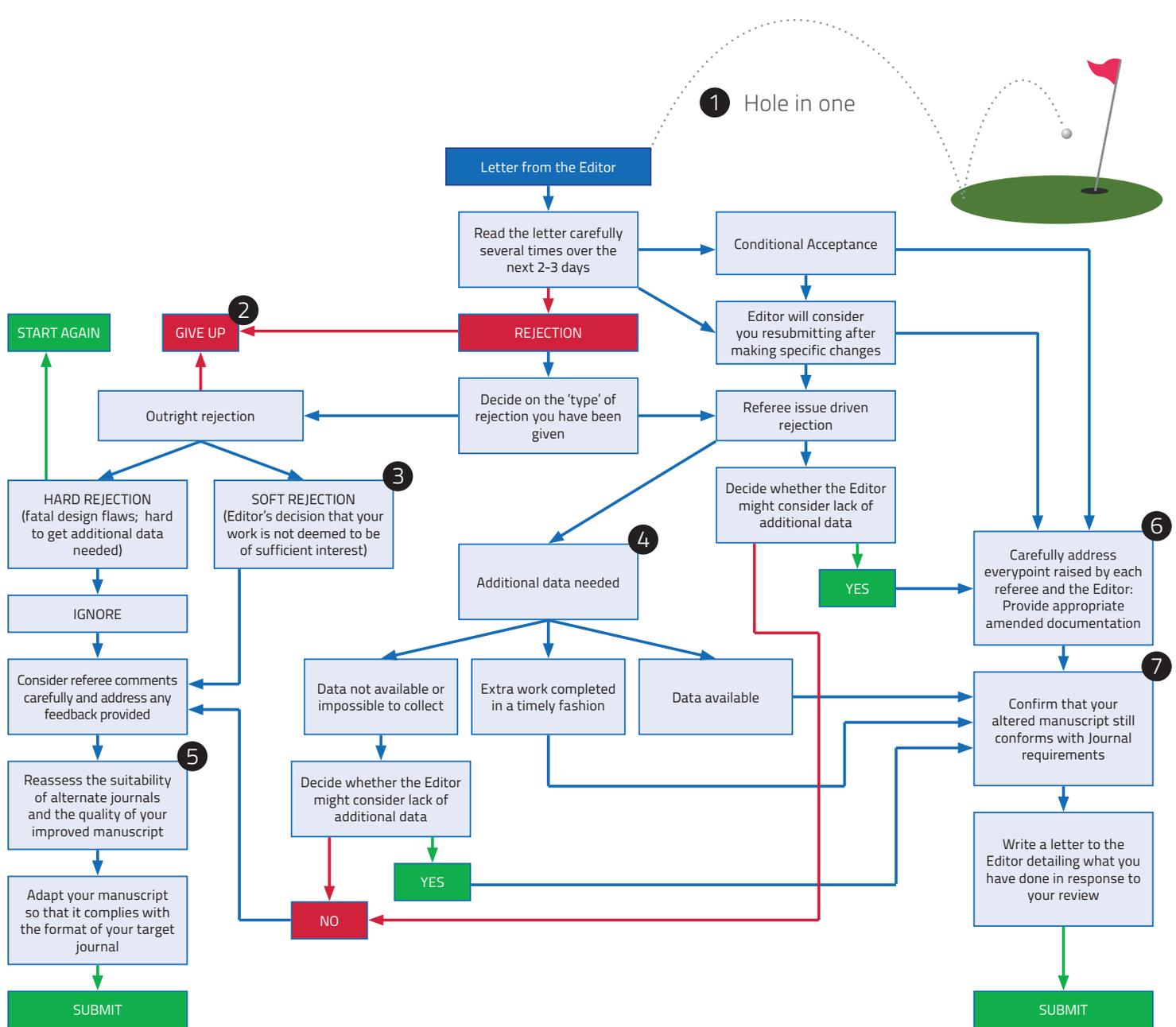
Manuscript rejection is common.

Pierson DJ. *Respir Care* 2004; 49:1246

At least 62% of published papers have been rejected at least once.

If your article was rejected because the editors or referees judged it unsuitable or not novel enough for their journal, you may want to submit it intact without revision to an alternative journal. However, ensure that you adapt your manuscript in light of the comments made by your peers (as points raised by previous referees may come up again) and review the content to ensure it fits with the alternative journal's style.

Hall SA, et al., *Epidemiol* 2007; 18:262–265



1. Manuscripts rarely get accepted without changes
2. Never give up – you have a duty to publish
3. In replying to your submissions editors often reason that your article is not of sufficient importance or that it isn't in-line with the current focus of the journal – no matter how unjust you feel their decision is this response usually means 'NO'
4. If your peers think additional work is necessary to make the final manuscript a valuable contribution to the scientific knowledgebase you should show that you have given this opinion serious consideration. However, for reasons of funding, time or lack of opportunity it may not be possible to deliver additional work
5. You do not necessarily have to target a lower impact journal when submitting a revised manuscript to an alternative journal – responding to peer review comments may well have improved it
6. Check as not all journals allow you to respond with both tracked changes AND clean documents
7. Don't fall at the last hurdle. See our pre-submission/re-submission checklist to avoid common mistakes and omissions

What Next?

Irrespective of whether you are responding to a letter of acceptance that requires you to make superficial changes to your manuscript, a request for revision/resubmission or contesting a rejection, we suggest that you adopt the strategy described below. You will find a response template to aid you with this process on our website.

As with writing a manuscript, responding to a journal should be approached as an iterative and organised process.

Step 1:

Review the information provided by the editor and the referees separating out each comment and criticism individually by author (Editor; Referee 1; Referee 2, etc.). One dilemma you may encounter – particularly when English isn't the native language of the referee – is whether or not you should copy typographical or grammatical errors. Our advice is to include verbatim copies of every comment.

Many top-tier journals have high rejection rates of over 90%.

Wager E. Getting research published. Oxon, 2005

If the referees have major criticisms, you'll want to consider them carefully and use them to strengthen your manuscript. This may require substantial changes to the experimental methodology, additional experiments or analysing the data in a different way. If you can show that you have addressed these issues appropriately the paper may be reconsidered. In some cases, it won't be possible to address a criticism in a manner that actually fixes a point of issue – at that point you will need to rely on your rhetoric to defend your position.

At least 50% of rejected manuscripts are published within 2 years of first journal submission.

Wager E. Getting research published. Oxon, 2005

Take every opportunity to thank the referees for their comments. The overriding theme of your response should be one of respect and gratitude for those who gave their time to critique your work. For example: 'We thank the referee for their careful evaluation of our work. We hope that in addressing each of these points, the Editor agrees with us that the submission is substantially improved.' The only exception to this might be in the correction of typographic errors, but even here it doesn't hurt to thank referees for catching them. Address all points made, large and small alike!

Step 2:

Address each comment and criticism carefully – we advise you provide your responses in an alternative colour or typeface to ensure that any changes you make to the text are not missed. Often a comment by one referee reiterates a comment from another, but this doesn't matter; address each individually. Don't refer Referee 2 back to a response given to Referee 1, just state your response again.

A well prepared response document should be complete, polite and based on evidence, not emotion!

Williams HC, et al. How to reply to referee's comments when submitting manuscripts for publication. *J Am Acad Dermatol* 2004;51:79-83

Step 3:

Prepare a letter to the editor explaining your strategy. Take the opportunity to convince the Editor that you have dealt with all of the criticisms and why you feel so strongly that the journal should publish your work. Make sure that you thank all parties for their support. A thoughtful and well-written cover letter is second only to the revision itself in shepherding a rejected manuscript into the fold.

Check List

- ✓ Does your manuscript adhere to the journals style requirements? Double check word limits, tables and figures, document layout and the format of references.
- ✓ Does your discussion section describe the major findings concisely?
- ✓ Does your discussion explain whether your hypotheses were supported?
- ✓ Is the methods section sufficiently detailed to enable others to repeat your experiments or is there an appropriate reference provided, if described previously?
- ✓ Are your statistical analyses well-suited to your research question? Can you answer your initial question with the analyses performed?
- ✓ Were your analyses conducted correctly? Are there any errors in reporting the way the results are reported?
- ✓ Are the arguments you make concise, clear and effective at answering referee criticisms?
- ✓ Does your review of the literature support your research question, the grounds for your study, and/or your hypotheses?
- ✓ Does your discussion review the relevant literature and explain how your data fits within the accepted scientific narrative?
- ✓ Does your discussion list the shortcomings and/or limitations of your study?
- ✓ Does your discussion provide a conclusion and statement of where future research should go based on your findings?

Interview with our House Editor

Q What have you found to be the best approach when responding to journal editors?

A You must take time to digest what referees are saying but perhaps the best advice is to start the process of responding immediately, make the necessary improvements, and promptly return the manuscript or send to another publisher. A prompt response minimises the chance of the data becoming redundant. It is good to have Plan B in the form of a prioritised list of journals you might submit to if your optimal preference rejects your article. In many cases it makes sense to simply turn the manuscript around and send it to the next candidate on your list.

Q Are there a common mistakes that can be easily avoided?

A Authors often overlook the importance of the letter responding to the Editor, providing little more than a few lines of proprietary text re-introducing their manuscript and responses. You should not miss the opportunity to explain to the Editor the value of the work. Make your responses thorough, splitting comments into individual issues makes even the most annoying referee's comments seem manageable. Furthermore, when you send your manuscript to the journal if possible you should submit a clean draft and the original version with changes 'tracked' in the word processing program.

Q Are there hopeless cases?

A I do not easily give up on manuscripts. Of course, some may be lost causes for a variety of reasons but it should be possible to publish any study that has been well written and presents new non-trivial results. There are a great number of alternative journals and with electronic submissions, a rejected manuscript can be submitted elsewhere within a few hours. If you are sending to an alternative journal make sure the manuscript is altered to the new journal style. Individually, small errors may seem trivial. However, an accumulation implies carelessness on the part of the author, which is not the message you want to send.

Q What is the key lesson you have learned about rejections?

A Journals have a set number of research articles they expect to publish. As a result, they set priorities, based on the perceived interests of their readership. If the rejection was an editorial decision, then the manuscript was viewed as not being a likely candidate for acceptance even if reviewed favourably. Occasionally I have invested too much time getting involved in a rebuttal, pursuing an unrealistic result from an unsympathetic journal.

And finally...

Further insight into how you might address issues when you are responding to referees' comments can be found in the scientific literature [1, 2, 3, 4]. If doubts still remain you could always telephone the journal's editorial office and ask for guidance. If you find the exercise of addressing the comments of referees to be overwhelming you might find some light relief in RL Glass's 'A letter from the frustrated author of a journal paper' [5].

Authors occasionally feel that referees have been overly critical or even narrow-minded [6]. This can be frustrating for both authors and editors. Next time you review someone else's paper stop and think: am I being fair in what I am requesting? Remember, it is not an opportunity to show how clever you are, but to help another author by showing them where they might improve their manuscript.

It goes without saying that the best way of avoiding rejection – or at least minimising it – is to write the manuscript correctly in the first place. There are plenty of excellent resources readily available within the literature describing how you should write manuscripts. We highly recommend potential authors to read PD Homes' Quixotic article 'Techniques for ensuring that your next paper is quite unsuitable for publications' [7].

References

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7. Home PD. Techniques for ensuring that your next paper is quite unsuitable for publication. *Journal of the Royal College of London* 1988; 22:48–50

Next Steps

We created this Insider's Insight into Handling Rejection to share a few helpful pointers and key learnings that we have gained over the years. We have also shared a template you can use to respond to the journal, which can serve as a great start to finally getting your article published.

I hope you found our guide useful, if you would to discuss support with any of your publishing challenges please contact me at the email address below.

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Get in touch

