REASONS FOR MANUSCRIPT REJECTION

Learn from the experts

ed tage Insights

Resources for authors and journals

ed*!*tage Insights™
Resources for authors and journals

INTRODUCTION

A vast body of research work is produced globally; however, a significant fraction of it remains unpublished for one reason or the other. This article attempts to highlight some of the reasons for this anomaly in the publication of research and provides a few insights and remedial measures for this problem. The first section lists the characteristics of a good research publication; the second section highlights common reasons for rejection of manuscripts; the third section presents a few tips and suggestions on how to handle such rejection; and finally, a few quick tips for effective research writing are provided.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD RESEARCH PUBLICATION

A good research publication is essentially a combination of quality research and writing. Negligence in either department can affect the acceptance and publication of the results as well as its future application. Thus, quality research writing is a key focus area for every researcher—student or principal investigator—regardless of his or her research experience.

Typically, the editor of a journal relies on referees (or reviewers) to evaluate manuscripts. Most peer-reviewed journals use 2–4 referees per manuscript. Referees assess a manuscript based on three functional areas: originality, technical quality, and presentation. A good research publication (individual paper or journal) delivers impeccable quality in all of the above areas.

The following are a few criteria that should be met in order to achieve this level of excellence in research writing:

Originality

- The research should be relevant—in time and content.

Technical Quality

- The research question should be clearly communicated and addressed in the abstract, discussion, and conclusion.
- The study design should be technically sound. The methodology adopted should be clearly stated or described. That is, all relevant information should be provided—inclusion/exclusion criteria, methods, materials, etc.
- The results should be statistically or substantively verifiable and should be

- A well-structured, logical argument should be presented with due credit to previous studies. That is, the relevant literature should be appropriately cited.
- The drawbacks or disadvantages of the study (for instance, limitations of the technique and/or methods used) should be discussed or listed.

Presentation

- The language should be grammatically correct, concise, and comprehendible.
- The findings should be presented in the best possible format, i.e., as figures, graphs, photographs, tables, etc.
- Headings, subheadings, and figure and table legends should be accurate and informative, yet concise.

Authors should ensure that the time and effort invested in designing, planning, executing, and completing the study are supplemented with a proportional effort in presenting the results.

WHY ARE MANUSCRIPTS REJECTED?

Referees read through several manuscripts to select high-quality research fit for publication; however, the final decision generally rests with the editor.

Most journals follow a 4-step recommendation process:

- Accept without any revision(s)
- Accept with revision(s)
- Reject, but recommend submission to another journal, with or without revision(s)
- Reject outright (manuscript is deemed unfit for publication)

Most journals have a rejection rate of ∼50%; this number depends on the ranking of the journal. For instance, the rejection rates of high-impact journals tend toward 80% whereas those of new, upcoming journals range between 10% and 30%.

It is extremely important for authors to understand the reasons for rejection as doing so will help improve future work. An editor or the referees will reject a manuscript if it raises any of the following concerns (listed in order of importance):

1. The research questions lack novelty and/or the research is of insufficient international importance or interest.
2. The research is redundant.
3. The research methodology/study design is biased or flawed. That is, the quality of research is substandard due to poor experimental design and/or methods.

4. Suspected misconduct: duplicate submission, plagiarism, or fabrication of data

5. The data is incomplete, inadequate, or incorrect.

6. The study objective is not well-addressed or the conclusion is improper.

7. Authorship conflict

8. The research topic does not align with the journal's mission statement or objective. That is, the subject is of insufficient interest to the readership of a specific journal.

9. Competing manuscript on a similar topic

10. Poor language or presentation of the results

The first 5 reasons indicate flaws in study design that label the research work as poor science. Such manuscripts are, of course, difficult to remedy and demand severe revision.

Reasons 6 and 7 can possibly be resolved on a case-by-case basis. Effective communication between the author(s) and the referee(s) followed by quick action in terms of providing supporting data or small revisions in content can build a case for reconsideration.

Reasons 8 and 9 can be overcome by approaching other journals.

Reason 10 seems too trivial an issue to be a cause for rejection. However, rejection of a manuscript due to poor English skills is a significant concern within the research community and should be addressed because it affects the timely acceptance and communication of the research. It is common for authors, especially nonnative speakers, to get demoralized when, despite presenting quality research, their work is rejected due to poor language and presentation. Authors should note that most journals rarely reject a paper solely on the grounds of poor language or presentation. In fact, if the quality of the research is good and it meets the publication criteria of the journal, referees and/or editors usually ask the author(s) to have the manuscript edited by a professional language expert. However, since poor language and presentation can often lead to a referee forming a negative opinion of the research quality, it is beneficial to understand the cause of this problem.

Largely, the role of the referee is to comment on the quality of science. Presentation and language are important but are not generally the deciding factors for the acceptance of a paper. Therefore, errors in the latter are a source of immense frustration and irritation to the referee. Very often, a few typographical errors (for example, *arrow* instead of *allow*), incorrect presentation of data (for example, $10-7$ instead of 10^{-7}), or extremely awkward sentence construction that obscures the intended meaning may lead the referee to form a negative opinion of the work. In the case of nonnative speakers, the main culprit could often be a poor translation. Therefore, it is critical to focus not only on the quality of research but also on the quality of writing.

WHAT TO DO IF A MANUSCRIPT GETS REJECTED

Rejection is not the end of the road. Authors should make a conscious effort to identify and understand the reasons for rejection and find a solution accordingly. An important focus area for authors is communication with the referees and/or the editor. An author's inability to provide sufficient explanations to the referees' comments or failure to respond within the stipulated time could lead to outright rejection.

Therefore, authors should respond to the referees' comments and suggestions in a polite and constructive manner — especially when they are convinced that their argument or study design is not flawed.

To ensure resubmission and acceptance

- Recheck the manuscript for any missing information such as inclusion/exclusion criteria, patient/equipment details, figures and tables, etc.
- Reply to each referee's comments by listing which changes were made, which ones were not, and why. Authors who respond to referee comments with a positive and constructive approach, rather than a defensive or confrontational approach, stand to gain from the experience of their peers. For effective communication, a point-by-point response by the authors to all the comments is recommended.
- If the manuscript is a translation, inform the editor and offer to get it retranslated from a reputed, well-qualified translator.

If an author is convinced that the reasons for rejection are unwarranted, he/she should adopt any of the following measures:

- Request the editor/referee to indicate remedial measures or provide constructive feedback to improve the work.
- Check the referee's qualifications with the editor of the journal.
- Check if the referee has any competing interest.

To summarize, researchers need to commit themselves not only to good-quality research but also to good-quality writing and presentation. Equal attention to both aspects is the only success route to global visibility and research application.

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE RESEARCH WRITING

Use the tips and suggestions offered in the article, both while drafting the manuscript and before submission.

- Read each section individually to check if it contains all the necessary information and conveys it in a concise manner.
- Ensure that the results and discussion sections are clear, concise, and conclusive.
- Ask peers to read the manuscript and provide constructive feedback on the presentation of study design and logical flow of ideas.
- Once the content and flow have been perfected, focus on the language and

- When using the services of a copy editor, it is helpful to communicate specific areas of attention if necessary. For example, you might want to make the conclusion sound more convincing but are unable to write it well. In such a case, authors should ask the copy editor for suggestions; these suggestions may or may not be applicable as is, but they will help you think better and improvise.