

# How to Read and Respond to a Journal Rejection Letter



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**A**fter putting your best work and thoughts and efforts into a manuscript and sending it off for publication, the day of decision arrives. As you open the letter a wave of anger sweeps through your body. Your paper has been **rejected!** Or has it?

**WAIT 24 HOURS.** It is almost impossible to read a rejection letter or critical reviews objectively while still smarting from the rejection. It is important to be (relatively) calm when trying to understand the nature of the rejection.

## The Decision

First read the letter carefully. Was the rejection editorial (without review) or was your manuscript rejected after review by several experts? Here are some translations:

***The paper is not acceptable in its present form:*** This essentially means that the manuscript is likely to be accepted, subject to satisfactory revisions. Most journals have the *pro forma* policy to reject manuscripts that require more than cosmetic corrections or shortening. The journal may be interested in your study, but will not commit itself until the editors and reviewers see the added data or corrections. This type of rejection letter will usually say that should you choose to resubmit, the manuscript would need to be received within a reasonable period of time (usually 2–3 months) to be considered as a revision.

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***The paper did not get a high enough priority:*** Only a few journals have the policy of publishing all manuscripts that are scientifically sound. Most scientific



journals publish a predetermined and limited number of pages annually. As a result, they set priorities, based on the perceived interests of their readership. If the rejection was editorial, then the manuscript was viewed as not being a likely candidate for acceptance even if reviewed favorably. With electronic submission, the editorial rejection can occur within a few hours, and thus allows you to turn it around quickly for another journal.

***The study is interesting but too preliminary:*** Here the editor indicates that the manuscript is interesting, but is not a complete story. This is an opening for a revised manuscript. The main question is whether you actually have the data. Were you saving the data for another manuscript, perhaps with other authors, or is this the first step in a long series of studies? Will the complete story take five more years of work?

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*What is perceived as a serious problem may require showing data that you omitted, or a simple experiment. If you can address these issues, the paper may be reconsidered.*

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***The study is interesting but is technically flawed:*** Here the editor indicates that the reviewers have serious reservations about some of the data. What is perceived as a serious problem may require showing data that you omitted or a simple experiment. If you can address these issues, the paper may be reconsidered.

***The work is more appropriate for a specialized journal:*** This statement says that the manuscript seems specialized for the journal in question. This also means that a revision is unlikely to be considered.

***The reviewers' comments will help you prepare the manuscript for another journal:***

This statement implicitly indicates that the journal will not consider a revised manuscript.

## The Critique

The reason for writing papers is to communicate your science. The most important thing to communicate is the excitement and the significance of the work in a broad context. Next, the question being addressed must be considered to be interesting and matched to the journal. The reviewers' comments indicate whether they were able to understand the logic and believe the conclusions of the study and whether they find those conclusions interesting and significant. Most studies have some imperfections. The question is the nature and severity of those flaws.

***The study is descriptive:*** This is the death knell of reviews. All research by its nature describes observations. When this is used as criticism, the reviewers are indicating that the study reads as a collection of data that do not come together into a clear, hypothesis-driven study.

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***The study is incremental:*** All science builds on the work of others. But how far do you need to go to be publishable? If the study repeats experiments in a slightly different cell type with essentially the same outcome, it may not be of great interest. Did you research the literature thoroughly to find out if your study is an original contribution?

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***The manuscript lacks important controls:*** With limitations on manuscript length, control experiments are often left out. If these are critical they should have been part of the manuscript. If it is important to show these controls, they may be supplied as supplemental data for the reviewers and later published online.

***The data are not convincing:*** You have not provided enough compelling data to convince the reviewer of your conclusions. Did you use several ways to come to the conclusion? Did you do the experiment sufficient times to get statistical validity? Is the quality of the data (gels, photographs, and scatter in the data points) good enough to be convincing?

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***If the reviewers misread your manuscript or missed a point, chances are that your writing style confused them.***

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Are the criticisms fair? Poor writing, poor organization of the manuscript, inadequate knowledge of the literature, poor quality or poorly labeled figures and tables, repetition, spelling and grammar errors, inconclusive results, and lack of controls are also reasons that the reviewers may not find your study

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compelling. If the reviewers misread your manuscript or missed a point, chances are that your writing style confused them. If your conclusions go against conventional

wisdom, then you need to explain and convince the reviewers why your view is the valid one.

## The Response

Now consider whether to fight the rejection or to move on. Do the *Title*, *Abstract*, and *Introduction* communicate the points that you

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think are the most significant about your work? Can you respond to all the reasonable criticisms? Some of the responses will result in additions, deletions, or changes in the manuscript. Other responses are only directed to the editor or reviewers. Merely arguing about the criticisms does little good. If you disagree with the reviewer, the burden is on you to convince the reviewer, not to dismiss him or her. If the reviewer misinterpreted your study, the way you wrote about it is the likely culprit.

**Contacting the editor.** Journals will reconsider rejected manuscripts if you can make compelling arguments. If, after reading the letter and evaluating the reviews, you feel that you can respond in a way that may make the manuscript acceptable, it is a good idea to contact the editor in writing, asking if the journal will reconsider the paper on the grounds that you can respond to the critique, and send with it your rewritten *Abstract* and a brief list of the changes that you intend to make.

## The Next Time

**Did You Target the Right Journal for the Study?** Often authors choose journals based on their citation index rather than a more rational analysis of suitability. Where are comparable studies in your field pub-



lished? Is the study of broad interest or more specialized? Be realistic in targeting specific journals.

**Did the Manuscript Conform to the Style of the Journal to which it Had Been Submitted?** Nothing annoys reviewers more than a sloppy manuscript. If you cannot be bothered to make sure you write the manuscript according to the journal style guide, or

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if you are submitting a manuscript previously rejected by another journal and did not make the effort to change the style to that of the current journal, you are sending a negative message to the reviewers.

**Did the Title and Abstract Communicate the Major Findings Accurately?** Once a paper has been rejected, it is time to critically evaluate whether you really communicated your enthusiasm for your own study. Your letter of response will often outline the major points of your study better than your original summary. Rewrite the *Abstract* with this in mind.

**Did You Accurately Point Out What Was Novel in Your Study that Makes it a Significant Advance over Previous Work?** Often in their desire to be comprehensive, authors make it sound as if previous studies have already shown what their study now shows. It takes care in writing to make clear what is new about your study.

**Did You Accurately Point Out Controls and Shortcomings of the Observations?** Just as you do not want to understate your study, you do not want to hype it either, especially at the cost of ignoring controls and alternative explanations for the data. The data should never lie. Interpretations may change.

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**Did You Submit the Work Prematurely?** Rushing into publication means that the study may not be complete or the manuscript may not have had the time to pass the “shelf test.” If you can let the manuscript sit for a week or so, a fresh view may reveal flaws that should be changed.

**Did You Submit a “Least Publishable Unit?”** The pressure for productivity (for grant renewal, promotions, etc.) means that you need to publish with reasonable frequency. Cutting studies into multiple manuscripts can be risky. Reviewers still expect each manuscript to be a complete study. Short papers are not necessarily minimal studies.

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*Exclusive self-citation carries with it the danger that uncited competitors may review your manuscript.*

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**Did You Accurately Cite Previous Literature?** Those who do not know the past are doomed to repeat it. You need to cite literature fairly. Exclusive self-citation carries with it the danger that uncited competitors may review your manuscript.

**Did You Have Colleagues or a Scientific Editor Read and Critique the Manuscript?** You should send your best effort to journals. The review process should not be an alternative to careful writing and editing of your manuscript.

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### **Did You Get a Presubmission Decision?**

Journals that can publish only some of the scientifically valid manuscripts that they receive will usually give you an indication if a manuscript is of interest if you send a letter outlining the point of your study and the abstract. Since you can do this while your paper is still in preparation, you can find out if the paper is likely to be viewed as low priority without losing time.

### **Did You Suggest Appropriate Reviewers?**

A recurring complaint of the review process is that the reviewers do not have the expert-

ise to judge the work. One way to help overcome this problem is to suggest two to five scientists who would be appropriate reviewers. Chances are that the editors will use at least one of your suggestions.

### **Did You Assess the Value and Impact of Your Research Correctly?**

Did you target the paper to the correct level of journal in your field? If you overvalue your work, it will always be rejected. If you undervalue your work, you may be publishing in less visible journals than you deserve. In between, sometimes you will prevail, but not always. ■