

EDITORIAL

Advice to Authors: The “Big 4” Reasons Behind Manuscript Rejection

For everyone involved, publication is a big step — sometimes a hurdle — in the research process. Much is at stake. Continued funding, scholarships, positive annual reviews, and even promotions can be contingent on having the right number and mix of publications on one’s CV. No wonder publishing causes so much anxiety. In my role as Associate Editor and as a peer reviewer for *CJNR* and a number of other journals over the years, I’ve noticed a few patterns in what influences whether a manuscript gets accepted. Indeed the process of getting a paper into print isn’t as secretive or obscure as it might seem. I’d like to offer a few thoughts and suggestions for authors based what I’ve learned so far. Understanding why papers get rejected and intervening appropriately ahead of time can reduce frustration for everyone concerned; editors and reviewers can concentrate on manuscripts that are truly publishable, and authors can be spared the pain of delays in publication or flat-out rejection. None of the problems and none of the suggestions I’ll offer is especially obscure, but all are time-tested and most also apply to journals other than *CJNR*.

“Not Our Cup of Tea”

One of the most preventable forms of rejection could be called “not our cup of tea,” and it occurs when a manuscript is just inappropriate for the journal to which it has been submitted. Either the subject matter or the approach to it (research or scholarly analytic techniques) strays too far from the journal’s focus. The solution in this case is obvious: know the mission of the journal you are approaching.

Obtaining a journal’s up-to-date guidelines for authors and reading them carefully is fundamental to a successful submission. And if you are not a regular reader of the journal, make a point of picking up a year’s worth of issues (or scanning online versions) in order to examine the journal’s emphasis, tone, presentation, and style.

Ask yourself, *Why this particular journal?* How does my contribution fit? Seek the advice of colleagues about slants and preferences of particu-

lar journals. While such unofficial information must be taken with a grain of salt, it can be quite useful. The “impact factor” may enter into the choice of one journal over another. No academic can afford to ignore the fact that institutions differ in relation to the publications that hold value in terms of hiring, tenure, and promotion. (The premises underlying journal scoring systems and their ultimate effects are certainly open to debate. This is a subject we will take up in a future editorial.) Your mentors or collaborators may have very specific publications where they would like to see your work appear, likely based on solid rationale. Once you choose a particular journal for your submission, for whatever reason or reasons, make a point of familiarizing yourself with its publishing priorities. Know, for instance, that original research in the major methodological streams is the “meat and potatoes” of *CJNR*. We do not publish clinically oriented reviews or case studies, for instance — but other journals do.

Know also that each of our issues has a focus or theme, whereby a guest editor collects a cluster of articles in a broad area of research (consult the back pages of each issue for upcoming submission deadlines). If the timing is right, this can be a wonderful opportunity to have your manuscript carefully read by reviewers and editors. Each issue also includes contributions that fall outside the focus, so the theme concept offers special opportunities without putting any research articles at a disadvantage.

Another way to strike pre-emptively against a flat-out “not our cup of tea” rejection is to send a query letter or e-mail to the editorial staff to determine whether your topic and slant are appropriate. In some cases you should do this even before drafting your manuscript. Editors and editorial staff members will gladly suggest other journals that may be more suitable choices for your work.

“Too Much Development Required”

The second form of rejection might be called “too much development required” (or, less charitably, “not even close”). Editors are generally looking for work that can be brought up to an acceptable level of quality with one rewrite, followed perhaps by one set of revisions. Once writing issues and even resolvable issues of clarity and scientific accuracy reach a critical mass, the editors and reviewers may harbour grave doubts that the author is able to generate an acceptable manuscript within one resubmission. There are exceptions. A manuscript that has a bold or important message may get special treatment in this respect, with the editorial office or board providing direct assistance in redrafting the manuscript (beyond

the copy editing that all manuscripts undergo). At *CJNR* we rarely if ever have the resources to do that, and you cannot count on being allowed to submit multiple drafts. The message: get it close enough on the first round or face rejection.

The prevention of “not even close” rejection entails careful reading and rewriting prior to submission. Every serious author needs at least one friendly reader/editor, preferably a colleague who publishes in journals of a similar type. Busy reviewers become offended when asked to read hastily written, poorly edited work. Reviewers are usually reading someone else’s manuscript at the expense of preparing a manuscript of their own. Of the half dozen papers they may be asked to review each year, some are difficult to read and evaluate, as though they have been thrown into the wind to see if they will stick. No reviewer should have to slog through unreadable prose, or to play detective in order to draw connections across the sections of a manuscript. It is crucial that you make the reviewer’s job easier by expressing yourself clearly. Check and double-check writing mechanics and flow after a day’s gap between sittings, and have friendly readers check your work for grammatical, spelling, and typographical errors.

The sequencing of ideas in sentences within paragraphs and paragraphs within sections should be easy to follow. Lack of flow makes reading a chore. In terms of formal structure, the introduction should lead logically to the research questions or, in the case of an essay, should clearly indicate the territory the author intends to cover in the paper. Details about methods belong in the methods section and results are reported in the results section — not vice versa — and the discussion should never refer to findings that are not described in the results section. The discussion should nearly always refer, at some point, to limitations of the study design and should conclude by pulling the reader back to the overall significance of the paper.

You would be shocked at how often these conventions are ignored and at how much the stock of your manuscript is raised if you respect them. I have no scientific data to back up this contention, but I know that if two papers of similar substance are submitted, the one that is free of writing and structural problems will get a much more favourable review. Submit the best, most smoothly written manuscript you can manage. There is a counterpoint to this, however: know when to stop revising. If the manuscript is readable, you and your readers can find no gaping holes, and your colleagues tell you they can follow your line of thinking and know what it is you are trying to express, it’s time to submit.

“Fatally Flawed”

“Fatally flawed” is the third type of rejection. This category includes submissions that are turned down because of fundamental problems in study design that weaken or invalidate the conclusions. Such a criticism may take you and your colleagues by surprise, because we tend to become blind to a study’s flaws after working on it at length. Most of the methodological problems in general-interest nursing research fall into five categories: sampling problems, instrumentation (measurement tool) flaws, biased data-collection design, poor analysis strategies, and inappropriate or insufficiently guarded conclusions. Ensure that your analysis is correctly done by clearing it with senior colleagues and/or statistical consultants. Do not make your reader hunt for other methodological problems, and be forthright about limitations in your design; no study design is flawless and the odds are very good that you still have something important to say about the phenomenon you studied in spite of any inevitable imperfections.

Rejection on the basis of flawed design or analysis sometimes results from a misunderstanding on the part of reviewers about what you actually did in your study. You can attempt to address such impressions in a revision of the manuscript. You could also reanalyze data and present the new analyses (or show that reanalysis of your data does not change the conclusions you originally reached). It may well be, however, that data were collected using flawed techniques and little can be done about it. If this is the case, carefully explain, in your discussion section, why, despite irresolvable problems, the results are still significant and are worthy of further exploration.

Essays, reviews, and commentaries that are fatally flawed often have the basic facts wrong. The rejection of narrative pieces and reviews may also be grounded in unclear purpose or in writing problems, particularly with regard to clarity and organization.

“And So?”

The most discouraging reason why manuscripts are turned down might be called “and so?” (or, less politely, “so what?”). Bottom line: the “message” is unclear. What can be done about this? The purpose of scholarly writing is, of course, to inform, but it’s also to stimulate discussion, debate, and deeper investigation of various issues and questions. Contributions to the literature should move beyond what is already in print. They should expand or extend findings (confirming, qualifying, or refuting them), or, in some instances, synthesize, re-synthesize, or recast ideas that have already been published. Avoid finding out down the line

that you failed to identify other authors who have demonstrated the same or similar findings by doing a thorough literature search. Know how your paper will contribute to the literature.

Make sure your paper indicates to the reader the relevance of your work for the field. Needless to say, even under pressure to publish we strongly advise against overstating results or exaggerating the overall contribution or originality of your work. (You never know whom you might offend.) If you have nothing new to say, there's really no reason to publish. However, the odds are very good that even if your results look "old" you have something new to say about them. And sometimes there's a reason to present something "old" (an idea discussed or researched elsewhere) to a new audience. If this is the case, clearly state at the outset that this is your purpose. Avoid making reviewers guess what the "newness" of your paper entails.

Discussions about what is worth publishing are always interesting in light of the "publish or perish" imperative faced by junior researchers and faculty members. It has been said that good scholars publish only when they have something to say whereas good academics publish at every opportunity. Don't waffle about whether to submit your work, especially if your colleagues and mentors have suggested that it has clear appeal. However, if in doubt about whether your manuscript contains a "message" that is of sufficiently broad interest to merit publication, you would be wise to discuss the basis of your contribution with trusted colleagues. In order to come up with an appealing and interesting manuscript, you may need to re-focus or re-frame your results and discussion.

Concluding Thoughts

By the time a manuscript reaches the editorial offices of *CJNR* or any other journal, a great deal of effort has been invested. The odds of achieving a positive outcome will be dramatically increased if you submit your manuscript to the appropriate journal, after attending to writing mechanics and structure, making sure the strengths and limitations of your methods are clearly articulated (and are reflected in your discussion and conclusions), and establishing the contribution of your work to the scholarship in your field. For you and for us, few things are as depressing as rejection letters and nothing is as uplifting as receiving (or sending) an acceptance letter and seeing your ideas in print. A little extra work on the basics can really pay off.

Sean P. Clarke
Associate Editor