



Journal Article Rejection: Why it Happens and What to Do About It

By Lindsay Peterson

It seems that a fact of life for everyone in academia, students, and professors alike, is peer review rejection. The numbers vary, but some journals reject 70 percent (or more) of all the articles they receive, either immediately or after review. Your advisers and colleagues will tell you not to take it personally, but it can still be painful and frustrating, especially when it's unclear why the article was rejected.

Here are some reasons why journals reject articles — and potential solutions — based on colleagues' experience and Wendy Laura Belcher's guide, "Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks."

Problem: Narrow focus

While you don't want your article to be too broad — you need to have a point and stick to that point — if you focus too tightly, editors may comment that the article is not of interest to enough of their readers.

Solution

Succinctly explain the relevance of your work to a larger problem, or put it in the context of a larger debate that is within the purview of your target journal. Also become familiar with the journal's audience, and the thrust of its articles. What is too technical or narrow for one journal may be appropriate for another. Don't assume, however, that a journal's readers will have detailed knowledge of your work. Provide enough background for an intelligent reader to grasp its significance.

Problem: Lack of originality

Journal readers are usually well aware of past research and are looking for "new knowledge" in their fields.

Solution

Be familiar with the latest peer-reviewed research on your topic, which can mean continually checking, even throughout the revise and resubmit stage. And while you need to provide a review past research as it relates to your topic, clearly specify how your work advances that past research. In every section where you can — methods, analysis, etc. — explicitly state what is unique or original about your work.



Problem: Lack of significance

Solution

Again, clearly and explicitly state why your work matters and to whom. Explain its implications. Point out, if applicable, that no one has written on your particular topic or has analyzed it in the way you have. If it fills a gap noted by previous research, highlight that.

Problem: Carelessness

One typo will not sink your manuscript, but multiple spelling, grammar, or journal style errors and redundancies resulting from poor structure can give the work a slipshod feeling and make other problems seem worse. Reading academic research is an effortful task, and reading poorly written research can be excruciating.

Solution

Read, rewrite, reread, rewrite; then proofread, proofread, proofread. Read and reread in the beginning for content and structure, later for detail. Ask others to read it. Read complicated passages out loud. Use your computer's spell check and grammar check, but do not rely on those. If you are unclear about how to use a word or phrase, look it up. Grammar Girl online is a good resource. Also, carefully review and follow the submission guidelines of your chosen journal.

Problem: No argument

Belcher highlights this as the main reason for rejection. The editor or reviewer may say an article is not suitable for the journal's audience or is not sufficiently original, but according to Belcher, the underlying reason is often that the author didn't make a persuasive argument. That is, the author didn't explicitly state what the research proposed to find (the hypothesis) and what the research-based evidence showed related to that hypothesis.

Solution

Think about the difference between a topic and an argument. Here's a topic: "This purpose of this article is to understand the effect of cognitive training on adults with heart failure." Here's an argument: "This article hypothesizes that cognitive training improves processing speed for adults with heart failure." It is basically a statement that a reader can agree or disagree with. Overall, it's the author's job to not only state the argument, but to show why it's worth investigating, and what the present research shows concerning its validity. Every piece of background and evidence and every observation should relate to your overall argument. If you want to read more about making a strong argument, Belcher recommends "The Craft of Argument" by Joseph M. Williams and Gregory G. Colomb.



Another must-have book for those who want to improve their writing overall is “The Elements of Style” by W. Strunk Jr. and E.B. White. It’s a classic. And it’s brief.

For more tips, be sure to access the ESPO Professional Development Webinar Series Archive for the February 2014 installment, “Increasing the Odds the Your Manuscript will be Published,” available at www.geron.org/webinar.