



EDITOR'S NOTE

Rejection Under Peer Review

The broad concepts of peer review are well understood: knowledgeable, objective, and clear-thinking individuals critically assessing work produced from a knowledgeable, objective, and clear-thinking position. The process cannot be without bias because our expertise and experience do produce bias, but the goal is to rise above the pejorative elements to deliver insightful evaluations. The system is not perfect, but when appropriately implemented, it can help to make any manuscript better.

Even with the well-intentioned effort of authors, reviewers, and editors, many manuscripts will end up being rejected. This can be shocking to authors, particularly if they feel they did all the right things in trying to address reviewer concerns. Getting beyond the emotional response, however, is most productive.

Many issues can lead to a reject decision: fatal flaws in research design or execution, inadequate development, unresolved concerns with interpretation or overstatement, an absence of relevant or meaningful insight, or poor journal fit.

Frustration can mount if substantial revision effort is put into a manuscript before rejection. This frustration, though, can affect everyone. Authors might think about it only from their perspective, but the reviewer team will also have invested a substantial amount of effort. Although everyone saves time when fatally flawed or unsalvageable product is rejected quickly, it may take one or more iterations for critical flaws to be uncovered or an intractable state to be realized.

Giving authors the benefit of the doubt with initial submissions is a service to them. If shortcomings can be

adequately addressed through revision and no fatal flaws are uncovered, a manuscript may advance. If shortcomings cannot be adequately addressed, rejection is appropriate at any point in the process. If authors are convinced that a reject decision is not warranted, they may choose to submit elsewhere. The effort that went into reviewing and revising may still help the work succeed. Similarly, if insights gained through the back-and-forth help them decide that the work should not be published, the time of other reviewers can be saved.

One of the misconceptions occasionally expressed is that a relationship with previous literature increases the publishability of work. This is not necessarily true. A lot of material gets published through inadequate oversight, be it in predatory journals that care only about collecting publication fees or through failed peer review. Replicating weak work is a poor choice and rejection a clear possibility. There is no justification for publication simply based on alignment with previously published work.

The rejection of a manuscript can make some leery of further participation in research activity. A more productive approach, however, is to make the rejection a learning opportunity to strengthen future efforts. It is possible that rejection can ultimately improve scholarship more than having an inadequate manuscript accepted. This comes back to objectivity. Those who choose to stay engaged and grow from any experience may well become productive contributors and effective educators of the next generation.

Neal W. Pollock, PhD
Editor-in-Chief