CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

Look at submission, revision, and resubmission "as an iterative process." --Phil Corlett, University of Cambridge

If at First You Don't Succeed, Cool Off, Revise, and Submit Again

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United Kingdom
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The sting of rejection was just as sharp the fourth time around for Marcus Bischoff, a postdoc at the Laboratory of Molecular Biology at the University of Cambridge, U.K. "There's a lot of disappointment," he says, when your manuscript gets rejected by a journal. After a year of trying, he was both relieved and pleased when the fifth journal--a "good journal," he says--accepted his paper.

Academic assessments focus on publications--and overwhelmingly favor publication in a few widely cited journals--so the pressure's on to publish and publish well. Yet all scientists have manuscripts rejected at all stages of their careers. So it's best to get used to it--and learn to deal with it effectively to give your manuscript another chance. Look at submission, revision, and resubmission "as an iterative process," suggests Phil Corlett, a postdoc at the Brain Mapping Unit at Cambridge.

THE ELUSIVE HOLE IN ONE

Occasionally, a manuscript will be accepted on first submission with no--or few and minor--required revisions. But it's rare. At prestigious journals, the majority of manuscripts are rejected. "We reject something on the order of 90% plus, and that's the same for *Nature*, *Cell*, and *Science*," says Robert Shields, an editor at *PLoS Biology*, and editorial rejections--rejections by the editor without sending the manuscript out for review--make up the majority of those rejections.

There are two common reasons for editorial rejection: Editors have decided the work does not fit the journal's purview, or the experimental approach was judged inappropriate or unconvincing. "It should be obvious from the letter" which one is the case, says Simon Young, editor of the *Journal of Psychiatry and*

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Once the manuscript makes it over this first hurdle, it may still fail to pass muster with the referees. In that case, the referees' reports, or selections from them, will be included with the rejection letter. The rejection letter plus those referees' reports are the key to deciding your next move. "The important thing is not to react emotionally," Young advises, noting that his two most widely cited papers were rejected without review before being published in different journals.

Simon Young

TO REBUT OR NOT TO REBUT?

Often before the disappointment fades, a scientist's fighting instinct kicks in, provoking an appeal. Many journals consider rebuttals, but you need to make a compelling case. Don't just fire off a snide reply to the editor.

"The majority of appeals are unsuccessful," Shields says. "Usually, the outside person we consult will agree with the editor." Bischoff challenged the first rejection of his mouse embryogenesis manuscript because he thought it had received unfair reviews by subscribers of a competing school of thought. The rebuttal failed.

Marcus Bischoff

"You very often get mixed reviews," says Bischoff, "and there's always a temptation for rebuttal." But it's usually best to move on, which is just what Bischoff did. You can consider a rebuttal if you think an editor or referee misunderstood your methodology or arguments, and you can make a compelling case. In those situations, you have legitimate grounds for a rebuttal, says Andrew Sugden, international managing editor of *Science*. Still, given that rebuttals are rarely successful, it's worth being sure that there are "major errors" in the reviewer's letter, he adds.

Submit at a different journal

It is hoped that you carefully considered the appropriateness of the journal before you submitted your manuscript. But if your article was rejected because the editors or referees judged it unsuitable or not novel enough for their journal, you may want to submit it intact without revision to a more suitable journal. Too often, "young scientists argue for a high-profile journal, perhaps even higher than a group leader thinks is likely to succeed," says Peter Lawrence, Bischoff's supervisor in the Laboratory of Molecular Biology at Cambridge. The result: lost time and even publishing priority, if a competing group places similar work at a more suitable journal first.

"Read the other journals and see the sort of stuff that they're publishing," Shields advises. Choose a more appropriate, less competitive journal, or one like *PLoS One* that publishes any experimentally sound result. "Sometimes people are very happy to do that; they just want to get their stuff out," Shields says. Even if you resubmit without substantive revision, always recast the manuscript in the new journal's format. Editors expect it, and laziness never makes a good impression. "You can tell when [a manuscript has] been around the block," Shields says, because the format is that of another journal. It's not a good idea to tip off the editor that your manuscript has already been rejected.

Revise and (re)submit

If the editor and reviewers had major criticisms, you'll want to consider them carefully and use them to strengthen your manuscript. Those reviews are, after all, expert feedback on your

research. Your revisions may require substantial changes to the experimental methodology, additional experiments, or analyzing the data over again in a different way. Sometimes even the journal that rejected your manuscript will reconsider it after some additional work; usually, this is specified in the rejection letter. If it isn't, ask the editor who handled your manuscript. If you're resubmitting to the same journal, it's all the more important to make sure you have convincingly dealt with all of the criticisms.

When Corlett had a paper rejected recently, it "made me more motivated to get it right," he says. He took his inspiration from a senior postdoc in his lab who, after getting a rejection for another manuscript, incorporated the "useful things from the review ... and within 3 days he'd resubmitted," in his case, to a different journal. So, Corlett reanalyzed his data and resubmitted at another journal, which accepted it.


Phil Corlett

The example taught him that "you can't afford to dwell on rejections," Corlett says, and that it is possible to use rejections to your advantage. When a rejection letter comes back, he discusses it with his colleagues to see if "there is another way of marshaling the data we have." Reviewers' comments provoke useful insights that are incorporated into future drafts.

Whether you're resubmitting to the same journal or a different one, a thoughtful and well-written cover letter is second only to the revision itself in shepherding a rejected manuscript into the fold. In addition to addressing all the issues raised by referees, it pays to maintain a professional tone. "We do sometimes get knee-jerk reactions," says Sugden, which "don't go down very well with editors." Shields adds, "You can say respectfully that you don't think the referee's right."

Authors may save time using the presubmission process available at many journals, to which authors submit an abstract, and editors provide a quick and dirty assessment of suitability. The system may help scientists gauge the needs of each journal, says Shields.

And many experts say that a young scientist's best strategy is to consult their supervisors for advice. "In my experience, graduate students are shy about doing that," says Young.

Bischoff did consult his supervisor--Lawrence--who advocated patience and prioritizing the discoveries over the publishing. "If you're keen and good, you do discover things," Lawrence says. "It's not as if there's nothing out there!"

The author, Lucas Laursen, is a freelance science writer in Cambridge, U.K.	DOI: 10.1126/science.caredit.a0800123
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