The Importance of Resubmitting Rejected Papers

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If your research paper is rejected for publication by a peer-reviewed journal, what do you do next? Some editors would suggest that it should not be sent to another journal, yet there are contributors who would just put a ‘failed’ paper straight back in the mail to another journal and trust to luck. I argue that rejection should be a time for reassessment, when the input of the editor(s) and reviewers(s), all experts in their field, should be considered and acted upon as necessary. The revitalized and improved contribution can then be sent to a new journal with confidence.

There are, broadly, two kinds of academic research journals: those with a policy of peer review of submissions and those without. The greatest kudos is attached to publication of research papers in the former. Although we all publish in a range of academic forms and forums, such as conference abstracts, book reviews, papers in conference proceedings, invited chapters, and books and monographs (whether written or edited), it is the peer-reviewed journal articles that receive most notice from promotion panels and search committees in many areas of enquiry. Although administrators in research institutions use various metrics to gauge the performance of their staff, the focus in many fields is on publishing research papers in the top journals in the given field, whatever the imperfections of assessing the merit of such publications merely by counting them.1 This means that the editors of these journals wield considerable power, and it is not too much to say that an
editorial decision made during a crucial review period may make or break a career. So any decision to reject a research paper needs to be made on the basis of the best available advice, that is, the input provided by one or, commonly, more than one expert external referee. The journal peer-review system is imperfect, and has been rightly criticized, but many suggestions for ‘improvement’ only succeed in outlining more cumbersome systems that would increase the workload of editors and their reviewers, all of whom are already overworked.

Peer review is imperfect, but we all hope that it is as fair as it can be. Indeed, we all have tales of editors and reviewers who have bent over backwards to ensure the publication of good research that was, at first, poorly presented. But what happens when this spirit of assistance fails? Consider the following, reported to me by a colleague. My correspondent was attending a meeting to discuss, among other topics, ‘best practice’ guidelines for peer-reviewed journals. A member of an advisory board said that a journal should automatically reject a paper that had obviously already been rejected by another journal. I was delighted to hear that this suggestion was not supported, but appalled that such a perversion of the system should be worthy of serious comment.

An obvious flaw of this argument is this: just how can an editor be sure that a paper has already been rejected by another journal, unless the author tells him, or it is common knowledge ‘on the grapevine’? There are, of course, ways to detect whether a paper submitted for review to Contributions to Bee has previously been offered to the Journal of Aye. The most obvious is poor reformatting: the submission retains telltale features that would only be included in a typescript destined for the Journal of Aye. More subtly, the editor of Contributions to Bee might recognize a paper as an unlikely (though not improbable) candidate for her own journal, following which a telephone call to the editor of Journal of Aye might confirm that it had already failed the reviewing mill at that journal. But there are contributors who will openly inform the editor of Contributions to Bee in their covering letter that their paper was rejected previously by Journal of Aye, even including copies of editorial correspondence and reviewers’ reports, and explaining how the typescript has been improved and why it is worthy of publication now. Surely such transparency deserves serious consideration?
Rejection doesn’t mean that a paper is wrong (although, of course, it may do); it could, for example, be outside the narrow subject area of the target journal. Some years ago a colleague had a paper rejected from the *Scottish Journal of Geography* because it was too geological. The paper was reformatted and resubmitted to the *Scottish Journal of Geology*, where it was rejected because – you guessed it – it was too geographical.

Peer review isn’t just a yes-or-no system. Referees’ comments help improve any paper, whether it is eventually published in the target journal or not. Indeed, perhaps the worst reviews are those that say ‘publish as is’; they fail to contribute to the paper and, indeed, are potentially harmful if the reviewer has not done his or her job.6

There are two common reasons why even well-written, publishable submissions are rejected by journals. Perhaps most commonly, papers are submitted to the wrong journal. I am not suggesting that anyone would send, say, a paper on the psychology of the criminal mind to a journal on nuclear chemistry. Rather, even though the subject of the paper may lie within the broad area of study covered by the journal, it falls into a sub-discipline that is outside the normal remit of the target publication. This is easiest to illustrate using an example from my own experience. My own journal states in its instructions to authors that ‘The majority of publications in *Scripta Geologica* are the result of research projects of the Nationaal Natuurhistorisch Museum, Leiden, or are based mainly or entirely on specimens in the collection of the Museum. Other papers are accepted, very rarely, at the Managing Editor’s discretion.’ In truth, ‘very rarely’ only really applies to thematic special issues, which include invited papers or contributions arising from conferences organized within the museum. Any other paper that is not connected to my museum’s collections is automatically rejected without review.

More subtly, the emphasis of a journal may change with the arrival of a new editor(s). An example of this sits on my desk right now: a journal in which I have been publishing regularly since the mid-1980s, and which has never rejected one of my papers, did so this morning, without review, a decision by the new editor. I submitted this paper, confident in the knowledge of the sort of research that the target journal would publish, but the goalposts
have moved. My next task will be to reformat it and resubmit elsewhere.

Rejection may also come from what I would call geographic prejudice. Most of the leading international journals in any field are published in North America or Europe, have mainly North American or European editors and reviewers, and publish a lot of papers on North America and Europe. One of the strongest cards played by reviewers and editors of these journals in rejecting a paper based on data from outside the North Atlantic region is that a paper may be considered ‘parochial.’ I make this charge with feeling, based on twelve-and-a-half years at the University of the West Indies in Mona, Jamaica. Having an exciting discovery on, say, Jamaican palaeontology, one that you think deserves international exposure, labelled ‘parochial’ by a reviewer is, to be polite, galling. The reviewer may be a leading expert in a subject area but, perhaps, not on its implications outside North America or Europe. Yet it is very difficult to argue with an editor once the ‘parochial’ card has been played.

Rejection is surely part of the structure of academic publishing, as much as publishing itself. But rejection should lead the author to re-evaluate and strengthen the paper. Are the comments of the editor(s) and reviewer(s) valid? Do they justify extensive revision, perhaps new data analysis, or even renewed sampling? Then proceed accordingly. A bad, rejected paper, submitted elsewhere and without any improvement, is still bad and is always likely to be returned. An improved, formerly rejected paper – better written, with new data, improved analysis, or whatever – should not be prejudged on its earlier failure, but should enter the review process as a new contribution, worthy of critical examination. What editors and authors need to appreciate is that the rejection of a paper should lead to its being strengthened, which, in turn, makes it more likely to be accepted for publication.7

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4 I thank my correspondent, who prefers to remain anonymous, for sharing this editorial experience with me.


6 Donovan, ‘The Joys of Peer Review’