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Desk-rejection of manuscript: How to avoid it

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Editorial

It is true that authors do not like their manuscripts being rejected early at the editorial level, and they even think that it is an arbitrary judgment by the editor. Editors and journals take this rather seriously.

Desk-rejection (DR) is an important issue for all, authors and editors alike. It occurs even before the peer review of the submitted manuscript begins. Most authors experience DR sometime during their careers, though we are not aware of it until we encounter one, and may take it as a shock. Many a times, the journal editor rightly points out that a DR is mostly due to a 'premature' submission of a 'half-cooked' manuscript. It may not pass through in the very beginning due to abstract of poor construct, lack of clearly defined purpose of the paper, low standard of procedures undertaken, and insignificant principal findings, also referred to as the important 3Ps.¹ Up to 80% of the submissions are not processed further and are rejected early on within a few days without an external review.^{2,3}

Most journals have elaborate details in author guidelines for the preparation of manuscripts to avoid this. Also, editors and reviewers spend lots of time in various forms of training to help authors improve their scientific writing and publication skills.

A timely DR saves precious time of authors, reviewers and editors. The reasons for outright desk-rejections include poor-fit of the manuscripts with the scope of the journal, poor writing language, inadequate analysis of data, poorly constructed title to reflect the work, poorly formatted abstract to summarize the paper in a nutshell, and not following the style and word count. In the main text, a poor layout in different sections that leaves a poor initial impression is often an important cause for rejection. Also, the number of references and the style in which they are presented must be in line with the journal's requirements.

In an analysis of 552 rejections after initial screening (out of 902 submissions), the most common reasons were 'commonality of subjects, non-compliance by the authors, and flaws in methodology'.⁴

The single most important factor on the part of authors is failure to read and follow the instructions to authors while 'dressing' the manuscript for the target journal. First impressions are important and authors must seriously prepare the manuscripts to present their research in the best possible way while complying with the requirements of the journal.⁵ Careful preparation avoids a boomerang returning without hitting the target i.e. a successful submission to go past the initial scrutiny beyond the editor's desk, to reach the reviewers and finally accepted for publication.¹ During the submission, uploading a separate cover letter explaining the importance of work, the significant findings and usefulness to the readership of that journal is a crucial and important step.

Publishing a poor research work not only harms the author and the affiliated institution but also the whole scientific community and society. Normally there is a brief and informative feedback with a DR. If there is no feedback with the rejection, it is perfectly alright to ask the chief editor for it because not all rejections have a bearing on the quality of the manuscript and no system is perfect. In case of rejection without the peer review, i.e. a DR, the best thing to do is to revise extensively and re-submit, either to the same journal or even better, to choose a new one. Unlike the rejection after the review, when the author does not feel that the comments from reviewers are fair, it is perfectly alright to appeal by writing to the chief editor for a further review; but a DR does not follow this process. Instead, it is better and probably less stressful to 'redress' the manuscript and submit to another journal after incorporating the legitimate comments. All rejections are not bad, and may actually benefit from the critics to improve the writing. Giving up the manuscript altogether and not proceeding with further submission and publication is rare. This may happen when there is a problem with

the method section itself, which cannot be undone, to support the findings upon which the discussion can be improved.⁶

Research writing and publication is a continuous lifelong learning process. Similar to professional excellence, writing skill gets better with time. Publication is an important part of professional life in the scientific community and 'publish or perish' is a continuous pressure in the academic career. For a good scientific writing, the clarity and accuracy are must. Journal editors work hard beyond the role of simple gatekeepers and play an important role in mediating between reviewers, authors and the community as a whole to meet the expectations of scholarly publications.^{7,8}

Desk-rejection is a difficult decision to make which requires the editors to quickly decide on a good judgment with clear, careful evaluation of the work before the peer review process. Such a decision is stressful because unfair, unsubstantiated rejections not only disadvantages the authors but the whole academics.⁹ Journals have specific criteria based on which the editors make decisions on a DR. This is based on an intention for a positive effect on the contributing authors. There may be variations, but one of the processes is a two-stage scrutiny. In this process, the submission is assigned to an associate editor (AE) with a broad expertise. The AE writes a concept note why the paper does not require a review. This is then evaluated by the chief editor again, who usually reads the manuscript to make a final decision with a positive and prompt feedback. In general, DR is a process to 'weed out' the poor-fit manuscripts and to render the remaining manuscripts with an increased likelihood of surviving the review process.¹⁰

With an increasing 'publish or perish' phenomenon, many journals are overwhelmed with submissions, and there may be insufficient amount of attention for each and every submission, including the selection of external referees for the review process. Authors, on the other side of the desk, may not properly appreciate just how overwhelmed

editors and reviewers are, most of whom work voluntarily. This does not mean it is easy on the part of the editor to make a decision of a DR. More so for the authors, this experience may initially be a bit of a struggle to come to terms with the decision. However, a quick decision, without having to wait and waste weeks and months, allows the author to save valuable time, and plan further to 'redress' it for the next submission. This benefits authors by delivering a rapid decision based on the judgement that such a manuscript will not survive the peer review process. Rejection that takes weeks or even months not only dampens the spirit of writing, it also has consequences given the quick turnover of literature.¹¹ Whatever may be the reason for the DR, it is not advisable to have a 'knee-jerk' reaction to it. One of the best strategies, and advisable, is to put it aside, and sleep it off for a night or two, then start with a fresh mind to analyze what to do with it. Analyzing the reasons for rejection is important, for example, 1) was it on the technical ground - missing information or files, incomplete or wrong formatting, figures of insufficient resolution; 2) out of aims and scope of the journal - not matching journal's subject area, manuscript type, or work i.e. basic research vs. applied; 3) significance - whether it addresses a major area, or just a small step in an area still in developing; 4) the standard of writing - vague and distracted from the science etc. In today's publishing world where journals strive for impact factor and address a certain readership, it's worthwhile going for a somewhat less heavyweight journal i.e. with lower impact factor, or better still to a field-specific journal. As there is a wider access of information on the web, and publications are easily available, probably what matters most is the 'visibility' of the work, i.e. how many people read it and cite it.¹²

In conclusion, journals need good manuscripts and editors are looking to accept, not to reject papers. Preparing manuscripts adequately with a good-fit to the journal's requirements by carefully reading and following the author

guidelines is the most important step in avoiding the desk-rejection.

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