

How to Cope with Manuscript Rejection

Surviving manuscript rejection can be a challenging undertaking, particularly due to the strong visceral attachment researchers typically have with their work. Of course, thoroughly reading reviewer comments is key to a manuscript's acceptance—but that can mean wading through pages of critical feedback that is sometimes harsh and seemingly relentless. Lenore Arab, PhD, MSc, professor of Epidemiology and Nutrition and a former editor of *Public Health Nutrition*, urges researchers and authors to embrace this kind of feedback. "This is not a popularity contest," she says, "Do not take it personally, but do respond scientifically—acknowledging weaknesses, strengths, alternative approaches or the lack of them. It is important to remember that we all have a common goal in science."

Arab, along with Cheryl Lovelady, PhD, RD, professor of Nutrition at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, and a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Human Lactation*, and Julie O'Sullivan Maillet, PhD, RD, former ADA president and member of the *Journal's* Board of Editors, offer insight on how to successfully process reviewer feedback as well as how to avoid the more common pitfalls that can lead to manuscript rejection.

How do you suggest authors—especially new authors—approach reviewer comments that they feel are particularly harsh or critical?

Arab: There is nothing more valuable to a scientist than critical feedback. Harsh comments are another issue—we as editors need to keep reviewers [focused on] honest and helpful responses. And as tedious as it sounds, it behooves the authors to make a numbered point-by-point re-

sponse to the critique. The easier you make it for the editor and reviewers to assess how comprehensive your response is, the better your chance is of getting published.

Lovelady: When your manuscript is rejected it seems like all of the reviewers' comments are particularly harsh or critical! As an author, I read these comments immediately, then put them away for a few days so that I can cool down. A few days later, I take out the comments and read them again when I am calmer and more open to constructive criticism. I keep reminding myself that these comments are meant to improve the manuscript—which they are. I address the comments in the order that they are written by each reviewer. I retype the comment and then state what I did to address the comment. For example, if the reviewer suggested that I add results to the table and take them out of the text, I state that I did this as recommended. Or if I do not want to follow the suggestion, I write why I thought it was better for the results to remain in the text and not the table. If you can justify why you do not want to make the change, then most reviewers accept that.

O'Sullivan Maillet: Reviewers are people with opinions, and generally they are valuable, but sometimes the reviewer misinterprets what you have written. When I receive comments, I glance over them all and try to see the big picture and then I leave for a couple of days, to get over my emotional response to the comments. Then I systematically read the comments again, and start to agree or disagree. Finally, I start addressing every comment with respect that the person has invested time in me to make my manuscript better. I correct everything I agree with and then where I disagree, I try to figure out how to better word or argue the point or add to limitations. Critical comments are good, but sometimes when a comment feels harsh or mean I just address it factually.

In general terms, describe the peer-review process. Is there a checklist that reviewers typically refer to?

Arab: Oh yes, there is a checklist. It differs from journal to journal; but, in general, reviewers consider relevance, impact, and originality and then they address the substantive issues regarding each of the sections (methods, results, discussion). Usually two substantive experts and one statistical reviewer examine and critique the paper independently. The editor makes the call. In some cases the author has a chance to resubmit a revision, which often goes to all reviewers to see if their concerns are satisfied. The editor makes the final decision to publish or not.

Lovelady: Some journals do supply the reviewers with a checklist, but most do not. Some journals ask that you list possible reviewers. By all means—do this! But make sure it is someone that has published in your area of research and is not simply a friend, former mentor, or colleague. A peer-reviewer should be someone in your area of research; I only review manuscripts that report results of studies in areas of research of which I am very familiar.

O'Sullivan Maillet: The peer-review process requires that two or more individuals review your manuscript. They may have content or method expertise or both. Generally a reviewer is a dedicated professional who is giving back to the profession. She or he is also usually busy and expects a quality paper. Sloppiness and lack of attention to detail may cause the reviewer to be more critical. The peer reviewers generally have a checklist, similar to the guidelines for authors. As an author you can compare your article to the guidelines.

Discuss some of the more common manuscript pitfalls that you've encountered—errors that are perhaps more typical of a manuscript that is ultimately rejected.

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References: 1. Casey PH, Kelleher KJ, Spencer HJ, Barrett B. *Pediatr Res.* 1997;91A. Abstract 531. 2. Morales E, Craig LD, MacLean WC Jr. *J Am Diet Assoc.* 1991;91:1233-1238. 3. Ramstack M, Listernick R. *JPEN.* 1991;15:89-92. 4. Food and Nutrition Board. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2002. 5. Food and Nutrition Board. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1997. 6. Food and Nutrition Board. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1998. 7. Food and Nutrition Board. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000. 8. Gibson GR, Roberfroid MB. *J Nutr.* 1995;125:1401-1412. 9. Ross Products Division, Abbott Laboratories, Columbus, Ohio, 2004-2005.



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Arab: The following are what I would consider to be fatal flaws: A study that does not answer a question or contribute to the research, a sample that is biased, and measurements that are done without rigor or have great measurement error or are potentially biased. Nonfatal flaws include poor writing skills, poorly organized structure, sloppy tables, poor statistics, intellectual arrogance (ie, too much confidence in your own study), poor job of reviewing pre-existing research in your area, and the inability to show how the science is relevant. Also, we have even often seen the title not reflecting the content of the paper—that is a very bad start.

Lovelady: The following are common pitfalls of manuscripts that are rejected:

- Methods that are not clearly outlined
- Not enough description of the sample, or the intervention, or the measurements used in the study.
- Statistical analyses are not stated clearly.
- Inaccurate referencing of other research studies. (This is a red flag—makes reviewer wonder if the research is also inaccurate!)
- Incomplete tables and figures. (Tables and figures should be able to stand on their own.)

O’Sullivan Maillet: The guidelines for authors are very detailed once you decide where to publish. I think picking the right journal is the first step, and this includes deciding on the *type* of manuscript (eg, research, short paper). In terms of the *Journal*, you select the category of article and you review similar articles. Then, hopefully with a mentor or peer, you start writing.

What are some specific guidelines for submitting a “clean” manuscript?

Arab: Basically, read and follow carefully the guidelines of the journal and stick to them exactly. Have your paper proofread and reviewed by other experts—send the journal your very best.

Lovelady: In addition to coauthors, have someone else not familiar with your research study, but in your area of research, read the manuscript for you; give them the author guidelines for the

journal to which you are submitting. Also, have your statistician read your manuscript. If she or he has been involved in the research and meets the criteria for a coauthor, then by all means, have she or he take part in the writing of the manuscript as a coauthor.

Once you submit your manuscript, do not expect the reviewers to be your editor. If there are many grammatical errors and inaccurate referencing, the manuscript will be rejected immediately.

O’Sullivan Maillet: After the first draft, compare it to the guidelines for the journal for the type of manuscript you are submitting and then edit accordingly. Then give the article to several individuals to read and ask for a critical review. A previous faculty member may be willing to help. Then address their comments and ask a few others to review. Using a statistician to review if it is a research article is a great idea.

Address the importance of outlining statistics and methodologies correctly, and provide specific feedback for how to present this material.

Arab: There are too many different statistical approaches to review these here, but you are expected to know exactly what is the most appropriate for your data, what the issues regarding multiple testing are where appropriate (most nutritional papers address multiple foods and nutrients), an appreciation for colinearity and confounding that is demonstrated in the modeling, a presentation of the appropriate number of significant digits in your tables and results (very often too many unmeasured digits are presented), and complete footnoting of tables so that they can “stand alone” and be understood independently.

O’Sullivan Maillet: The use of good statistics and methods is paramount to publishing a research article. This should be addressed long before you get to the research manuscript stage. If there are limitations to the method and statistics, the only chance of publication is to acknowledge the limitations. The quality of the methods and stats often affects where you publish.

In your estimation, what is the difference between a “good” manuscript and an “outstanding” manuscript?

Arab: An “outstanding” manuscript would be original, extremely well-organized and well-written, a pleasure to read, and logical and concise.

Lovelady: An “outstanding” manuscript is well-written and describes a well-designed, exciting research study. It is concise, clear, and follows a logistical sequence and features research that is unique and well-designed. A “good” manuscript should be close to this, with a few minor items that need to be changed to clarify the methods, results, or discussion. A “good” manuscript should be able to become a publishable manuscript if the reviewers’ comments and suggestions for improvement are appropriate and then followed by the authors.

O’Sullivan Maillet: An “outstanding” manuscript is well-written, well-designed, succinct, shows where it fits into the body of literature, with all the I’s dotted and T’s crossed.

Please address the use of academic manuscript templates. Are there any programs that work better than others? Do you encourage the use of these online and/or software templates?

Arab: I never use them except for references, which require a lot of work if done by hand and reformatted for each journal. Each journal requires references to be cited in a specific way. Software, such as Reference Manager (Thomson ResearchSoft, Carlsbad, CA) or Endnote (Thomson ResearchSoft, Carlsbad, CA) can do this for you—but I think they are generally very expensive and not widely available.

O’Sullivan Maillet: We do recommend Endnote.

What future trends are you seeing in the area of scientific manuscripts and how they are submitted and reviewed?

Arab: Reviews are going online, and the review process is speeding up, fortunately. This should mean that the time it takes for the manuscript to reach publication is decreasing or will be decreasing in the future. And this is desirable, because we want science readily and rapidly available while still conforming to appropriate and rigorous peer review. The future is likely to be online journals because they are faster, are not restricted by page counts, and

can travel the world effortlessly without increasing the carbon debt.

Lovelady: Most journals now offer online submissions and shorter turnaround time for the reviewer (ie, requesting the manuscript to be reviewed in less than 3 weeks vs 6 weeks in the past.) Many are going to online publication, which results in publication of manuscripts in a much shorter time. This also results in an increase in the number of people reading the research because it is much more accessible.

In terms of content, many journals now request power calculations to justify your sample size. For example, if you did not see significant results, was it due to lack of power?

O'Sullivan Maillet: I think the profession is evolving and the research methods and statistics are becoming more critical to publication—which is great for the profession. I think we need to create the place for small pilot studies to be published, beyond the abstract for the Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo. Some

organization will fill that gap and it will make a contribution to the profession by adding to data on areas not well funded. I do not see us publishing qualitative research much and with good design this can really help us shape evolving practice. As a profession we also are lacking much literature on effective teaching to students and clients. Generally, I think the *Journal* has come a very long way in the past 20 years and look forward to seeing better research over the next 20 years.

Publish or Perish?

Has your manuscript been rejected by a scientific or academic journal? Take a deep breath, wait a few days to clear your mind, and then consider your options:

Reviewing the Rejection Letter

Read and review the rejection letter or e-mail carefully. The editor may point out problems relating to clinical usefulness or methodology; there may even be a problem with the organization of the paper or issues resulting from poor writing. Take an inventory of the criticism outlined in this letter and use it to your advantage the next time you submit a manuscript.

In addition, editors may include positive feedback on the manuscript and it is just as important to take note of these observations and build on them for future submissions. For example, the *British Medical Journal* typically gives authors a list of strengths along with each rejection letter. This list, featured on the *British Medical Journal* Web site (<http://bmj.bmjournals.com/advice/checklists.shtml>) can include the following strengths:

- covers an important subject;
- the message is original;
- it is relevant to general readers;
- we were impressed by the careful methods;
- some of the material is fascinating;
- it is well presented;
- it is an interesting read;
- it covers a topical subject; and
- it covers a neglected area.

Composing a Response

Outline a professional and courteous response to the editor responding to the criticisms in the rejection letter. Remember, your response is not a release valve for your frustration, nor is it a forum for you to fight the rejection. Rather, your response is a chance for you to make compelling arguments for the validity of your paper. If you disagree with a reviewer's feedback, it's your responsibility to defend your work, rather than simply dismiss the reviewer.

The "Soft" Rejection

Many journals will reject a manuscript but will offer the author a chance to revise and resubmit their work. Typically these situations occur when the reviewers and the editor find that the paper contains valid material, but for one reason or another, the manuscript is significantly flawed. At this point, the author has to decide whether they are willing and able to reevaluate the data and to write a revision.

Submitting to another Publication

Did the author approach the right publication for their study? Perhaps the author needs to explore publishing options outside their own citation index, for example. Authors should be realistic in determining which publications they intend to approach (eg, target the paper to the correct level of journal in your field) and be aware of the relevance/importance of their findings to the readership of these journals. It's been said that if you overvalue your work, it will likely be rejected; however, if you undervalue your work, it may be published in a journal that is perhaps less prestigious and, therefore, less visible to your peers and colleagues in the community.