Rejected papers in academic publishing: Turning negatives into positives to maximize paper acceptance

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Abstract: There are ample reasons why papers might get rejected by peer-reviewed journals, and the experience can be, especially for those who have had little experience, sobering. When papers get rejected a number of times, that may signal that there are problems with the paper (e.g., weak methodology or lack of robust analyses), that it is insufficiently developed, is poorly written, or that it is too topic-specific and needs to find an appropriate niche journal. In the case of a single or multiple rejections, whenever there is feedback from a journal, as well as reasons for rejection, this provides a useful signal for improving the paper before it is resubmitted to another journal. This article examines literature related to the rejection of papers in academic journals, encompassing the opinions and experiences offered by authors, as well as advice suggested by editors, allowing readers and authors who experience rejections to reflect on the possible reasons that may have led to that outcome. Many papers related to this topic were published as editorials or opinions, offering advice on how to improve aspects of a submitted paper in order to increase its chances of acceptance.

Keywords: acceptance, instructions for authors, journal scope, publishing, rejection, self-evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Generally, an author only submits a paper to a journal in the hope that it will be published. Even in cases where authors are confident about their paper, and have done due diligence in researching their target journal, perhaps being motivated by many factors (Xu et al., 2023), submission to a desired journal does not imply automatic acceptance, and there are numerous barriers to entry. Although this may be an obvious statement, because publishing is inherently a priveledge and not an automatic right, the road to achieving acceptance can sometimes be long and

arduous, and can lead to various negative emotions and perceptions towards the publishing process in response to a paper's rejection (Ali, 2021). Authors may go through different stages of the grief cycle: denial, anger, bargaining, and depression (Venketasubramanian & Hennerici, 2013), or a state of emotive misery (Han et al., 2019), which can slow or even undermine their productivity (Conn et al., 2016). Timely decision-making by editors, especially in the case of desk rejections, is crucial to avoid unnecessary delays and lost opportunities for authors (Mohanty et al., 2021; Taşkın et al., 2022; Teixeira da Silva & Dobránszki, 2017). Particularly given the growing problem of increasing delays from manuscript submission to publication,

which is contributed to by various factors, including 'journal shopping', where many authors first submit their manuscripts to the most prestigious journals. As a result, these journals often receive more submissions than they can process, which, among other things, leads to a lack of available reviewers and further delays in the peer review process (Powell, 2016).

Since the core culture of academic publishing has not changed that much in several decades, it is common to find opinion papers and editorials that have discussed this issue over several decades, with an almost repetitive set of concerns and solutions (Byrne, 2000; Das, 1971; Iwaz, 2020; Murthy & Wiggins, 2002; Nature, 2003; Smith et al., 1993). Rejection rates vary across journals, with high impact journals like *Nature* rejecting a significant majority of submitted manuscripts, with a rejection rate of approximately 92% (Nature, 2024). However, even less impactful journals often have high rejection rates, with studies showing rejection rates ranging from 20% to 50%, depending on the field and journal (Björk, 2019). Menon et al. (2022) observed highest rejection of reviews (72%), and lowest rejection for opinion papers (27%) submitted to the *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*. This means that many high-quality papers must find alternative publication venues, and this can delay the dissemination of important scientific findings, even more so if authors are not willing to publish their findings as a preprint.

Some authors may feel as if they are being punished in some way when their paper is rejected, or that their intellect has not been properly handled or given a fair chance of appreciation, although some editors claim that they 'are not sadistic monsters who thrive on the misery of others' (Billsberry, 2014). After all, the review process should not be perceived as adversarial, and should be embraced as adding value (Clarkson, 2012), provided that is actually the case. Even famed academics have faced brutal rejections at some time in their careers (Gans & Shepherd, 1994).

In this paper, two forms of editorial rejection are discussed: desk rejections (i.e., at the stage soon after submission), preventing the paper from entering peer review, and rejections following peer review (McKercher et al., 2007; Mendiola Pastrana et al., 2020; Misra & Ravindran, 2020; Nundy et al., 2022). The reasons for rejection may overlap, but the level of scrutiny would differ, and errors, lapses or issues not detected in initial superficial or technical checks might only be detected during peer review.

By examining the literature on the rejection of academic papers and incorporating insights from both authors and editors, this paper offers implicit strategies to enhance the likelihood of acceptance that arises from explicit criticisms levelled by the different agents in the publication process, leading to the reform and improvement of a resubmitted paper. The goal is to allow readers who may have experienced rejections to self-reflect on the discussion points as a way to transform the negative experience of rejection into a valuable learning opportunity, ultimately leading to higher-quality submissions and increased publication success. The literature search was conducted using databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and Scopus. The selection criteria included relevance to the topic, novelty of research, and

> **Key points**
> - Rejection is a common part of academic publishing, often causing emotional frustration for authors.
> - Manuscripts are rejected for a variety of reasons identified at the desk and peer review stages.
> - Rejection provides an opportunity for authors to improve their work and increase their chances of success in submission.
> - The variability in journal and peer review practices highlights the continuing need to raise standards in scholarly publishing.

availability of full texts. Articles published over the last 20 years (primarily) were included to ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic, although we note that this is a narrative review and not a systematic one. We have categorized the reasons for rejection mentioned in these papers, along with suggestions for their improvement, and presented them in Table 1.

UNDERSTANDING REASONS FOR REJECTION

Understanding the multifaceted reasons behind the rejection of academic manuscripts is paramount for authors who strive to refine their submission strategies. Table 1 highlights several key reasons for manuscript rejection across academic disciplines, focusing on issues related to research scope, literature review, manuscript clarity, methodology, results presentation, and ethical compliance. Table 1 reveals that the most common reasons for manuscript rejection can be grouped into three key categories, supported by data across various studies.

First, research-related issues are the predominant cause of rejection. These include poor conceptualization, weak methodologies, and contradictions in the study's internal logic, where the evidence fails to support the conclusions. For instance, 85.8% of rejections in *Headache* (Hesterman et al., 2018) and 82.7% in *Contemporary Accounting Research* (Clarkson, 2012) were due to problems with the research question or methodology.

Second, a lack of reader-focus is a significant cause of rejection. Many papers fail to align with the specific journal's audience or the broader disciplinary expectations. This issue accounted for 30% of rejections in the *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* (Delport, 2021) and 42.9% in the *Journal of the American Academy of PAs* (Reed et al., 2022). Misalignment with the journal's scope or poor adherence to its guidelines can also lead to rejection.

Third, insufficient contribution to the field, or failing to present something new or different, is another major factor. For example, 60.3% of rejections in hospitality and tourism journals (McKercher et al., 2007) and 54.5% in *Indian Paediatrics* (Gupta et al., 2013) were due to a lack of novelty or significant theoretical contribution.

TABLE 1 Reasons for rejections and suggestions for improvement.

Category	Reasons for rejection	Examples of statistics of reasons for rejection[a]	Suggestions for improvement	References citing each category of rejection reason
Research question and scope	• Weak research question • Lack of novelty and a significant theoretical contribution to the field	• 82.7% of reasons for rejection in *Contemporary Accounting Research* in 2004–2010 (Clarkson, 2012) • 77% of reasons for rejection in 100 peer reviewers' reports for the *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* (Delport, 2021) • 54.5% of reasons for rejection in the *Indian Paediatrics* in 2002 (Gupta et al., 2013) • 25.2% of reasons for rejection in the *Headache* in 2014–2016 (Hesterman et al., 2018) • 60.3% of reasons for rejection in 35 hospitality and tourism journals in 2000–2005 (McKercher et al., 2007) • 3.6% of reasons for rejection in the *Journal of the American Academy of PAs* in Oct 2015–Dec 2018 (Reed et al., 2022) • 60% of rejections reasons in the *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* in 1990 (Smith, 1993) • 41% of reasons for rejection in the *Turkish Journal of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* in Jan 2016–Jun 2022 (Yank et al., 2023)	• Be familiar with extant research and key unanswered questions • Clearly articulate research question	Ahlstrom (2012), Billsberry (2014), Celik et al. (2014), Chernick (2008), Civil and Kao (2014), Clarkson (2012), Correia (2020), Delport (2021), Dogra (2011), Eassom (n/d), Edmans (2023), Fischer et al. (2017), Greiff and Ziegler (2017), Griffiths and Norman (2016), Gupta et al. (2013), Harris, (2016), Hesterman et al. (2018), Jackson and Bradbury-Jones (2020), Khadilkar (2018), Kool et al. (2016), Lamb and Mai (2015), McKercher et al. (2007), Mendes-da-Silva (2020), Mendiola Pastrana et al. (2020), Menon et al. (2022), Molassiotis et al. (2019), Morton (2020), Norman (2014), Offutt (2014), Paul (2024), Pierson (2004), Reed et al. (2022), Smith et al. (1993), Starkschall (2011), Stewart (2002), Yank et al. (2023)
Literature review	• Failing to situate the paper in past literature • Incomplete literature search • Lack of references • Outdated literature review	• 64.2% of reasons for rejection in *Contemporary Accounting Research* in 2004–2010 (Clarkson, 2012) • 84% of reasons for rejection in 100 peer reviewers' reports for the *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* (Delport, 2021) • 32.3% of reasons for rejection in *Headache* in 2014–2016 (Hesterman et al., 2018) • 50.9% of reasons for rejection in 35 hospitality and tourism journals in 2000–2005 (McKercher et al., 2007) • 75% of reasons for rejection in the *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* in 1990 (Smith et al. 1993)	• Conduct thorough literature review • Situate paper within existing literature • Clearly show contributions to the field	Ahlstrom et al (2013), Ahlstrom (2012), Ali (2021), Billsberry (2014), Bradbury (2012), Celik et al. (2014), Clarkson (2012), Delport (2021), Edmans (2023), Fischer et al. (2017), Griffiths and Norman (2016), Hesterman et al. (2018), Jackson and Bradbury-Jones (2020), McKercher et al. (2007), Mendiola Pastrana et al. (2020), Molassiotis et al. (2019), Morton (2020), Murthy and Wiggins (2002), Norman (2014), Offutt (2014), Paul (2024), Pierson (2004), Roberts (2018), Smith et al. (1993), Stolowy (2017), Sun and Linton (2014), Wu et al. (2024), Wyness et al. (2009)

TABLE 1 Continued

Category	Reasons for rejection	Examples of statistics of reasons for rejection[a]	Suggestions for improvement	References citing each category of rejection reason
		• 30.6% of reasons for rejection in *European Accounting Review* in 2016 (Stolowy, 2017) • 31% of reasons for rejection in *Clinical and Experimental Ophthalmology* in 2008 (Wyness et al., 2009)		
Manuscript structure and clarity	• Poor or confusing introductions • Poor language and style • Poorly written manuscript • Excessive length • Incorrect formatting • Non-academic style of writing • Quality of figures not suitable for publication	• 67.9% of reasons for rejection in *Contemporary Accounting Research* in 2004–2010 (Clarkson, 2012) • 59% of reasons for rejection in 100 peer reviewers' reports for the *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* (Delport, 2021) • 24.2% of reasons for rejection in *Indian Paediatrics* in 2002 (Gupta et al., 2013) • 58.4% of reasons for rejection in 35 hospitality and tourism journals in 2000–2005 (McKercher et al., 2007) • 17.9% of reasons for rejection in the *Journal of the American Academy of PAs* in Oct 2015–Dec 2018 (Reed et al., 2022) • 21.7% of reasons for rejection in *European Accounting Review* in 2016 (Stolowy, 2017) • 20% of reasons for rejection in *Headache* in 2014–2016 (Hesterman et al., 2018) • 45% of reasons for rejection in the *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* in 1990 (Smith et al. 1993) • 9% of reasons for rejection in *Clinical and Experimental Ophthalmology* in 2008 (Wyness et al., 2009) • 29% of reasons for rejection in the *Turkish Journal of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* in Jan 2016– Jun 2022 (Yanık et al., 2023)	• Provide clear and concise introductions • Use engaging and modern style • Follow journal's formatting guidelines • Ensure manuscript is concise	Ahlstrom et al. (2013), Ali (2021), Asif et al. (2020), Billsberry (2014), Bradbury (2012), Byrne (2000), Chernick (2008), Chung et al. (2019), Civil and Kao (2014), Clarkson (2012), Correia (2020), Delport (2021), Dogra (2011), Eassom (n/d), Edmans (2023), Greiff and Ziegler (2017), Griffiths and Norman (2016), Gupta et al. (2013), Harris (2016), Hesterman et al. (2018), Jackson and Bradbury-Jones (2020), Kim et al. (2019), Kool et al. (2016), Lamb and Mai (2015), McKercher et al. (2007), Mendes-da-Silva (2020), Mendiola Pastrana et al. (2020), Menon et al. (2022) Molassiotis et al. (2019), Morton (2020), Offutt (2014), Paul (2024), Pierson (2004), Reed et al. (2022) Smith et al. (1993), Starkschall (2011), Stolowy (2017), Sullivan (2015), Sun and Linton (2014), Wu et al. (2024), Wyness et al. (2009) and Yanık et al. (2023)
Methodology	• Poor study design • Inadequate or improper methodology • Lack of evaluation in innovation papers	• 71% of reasons for rejection according to a survey of editors-in-chief of medical journals, peer reviewers for the *Journal of the*	• Provide detailed methods section • Use robust data analysis • Include comparative studies and replications	Ali (2021), Billsberry (2014), Byrne (2000), Celik et al. (2014), Chung et al. (2019), Civil and Kao (2014), Clarkson (2012), Correia (2020),

TABLE 1 Continued

Category	Reasons for rejection	Examples of statistics of reasons for rejection[a]	Suggestions for improvement	References citing each category of rejection reason
	• Design errors	American Medical Association, and 25 Nobel laureates in physiology or medicine in 1985–1995 (Byrne, 2000) • 54.3% of reasons for rejection in *Contemporary Accounting Research* in 2004–2010 (Clarkson, 2012) • 28.2% of reasons for rejection in *Indian Paediatrics* in 2002 (Gupta et al., 2013) • 85.8% of reasons for rejection in *Headache* in 2014–2016 (Hesterman et al., 2018) • 74.3% of reasons for rejection in 35 hospitality and tourism journals in 2000–2005 (McKercher et al., 2007) • 55.4% of reasons for rejection in the *Journal of the American Academy of PAs* in Oct 2015–Dec 2018 (Reed et al., 2022) • 85% of reasons for rejection in the *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* in 1990 (Smith et al. 1993) • 10.2% of reasons for rejection in *European Accounting Review* in 2016 (Stolowy, 2017) • 26% of reasons for rejection in *Clinical and Experimental Ophthalmology* in 2008 (Wyness et al., 2009) • 44% of reasons for rejection in the *Turkish Journal of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* in Jan 2016–Jun 2022 (Yanik et al., 2023)		Dogra (2011), Greiff and Ziegler (2017), Griffiths and Norman (2016), Gupta et al. (2013), Harris (2016), Hesterman et al. (2018), Jackson and Bradbury-Jones (2020), Khadilkar (2018), Kim et al. (2019), Kool et al. (2016), Lamb and Mai (2015), McKercher et al. (2007), Mendes-da-Silva (2020), Mendiola Pastrana et al. (2020), Menon et al. (2022), Molassiotis et al. (2019), Morton (2020), Murthy and Wiggins (2002), Norman (2014), Paul (2024), Pierson (2004), Reed et al. (2022), Roberts (2018), Smith et al. (1993), Starkschall (2011), Stolowy (2017), Sullivan (2015), Wu et al. (2024), Wyness et al. (2009), Yanik et al. (2023)
Results and data analysis	• Inadequate presentation of results • Poor statistical analysis • Failure to present results clearly and systematically • Misinterpreted or erroneous data	• 69% of reasons for rejection in 100 peer reviewers' reports for the *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* (Delport, 2021) • 25.4% of reasons for rejection in *Indian Paediatrics* in 2002 (Gupta et al., 2013) • 53.5% of reasons for rejection in *Headache* in 2014–2016 (Hesterman et al., 2018)	• Restate each hypothesis and present results clearly • Use tables to summarize results • Avoid overly complex analyses	Ahlstrom et al. (2013), Ali (2021), Bradbury (2012), Byrne (2000), Celik et al. (2014), Chernick (2008), Chung et al. (2019), Civil and Kao (2014), Correia (2020), Delport (2021), Dogra (2011), Eassom (n/d), Edmans (2023), Fischer et al. (2017), Greiff and Ziegler (2017), Griffiths and Norman (2016), Gupta et al. (2013), Hesterman et al. (2018), Kim et al. (2019), Kool et al. (2016), Lamb and Mai (2015), McKercher

TABLE 1 Continued

Category	Reasons for rejection	Examples of statistics of reasons for rejection[a]	Suggestions for improvement	References citing each category of rejection reason
		• 42.1% of reasons for rejection in 35 hospitality and tourism journals in 2000–2005 (McKercher et al., 2007) • 26% of reasons for rejection in *Clinical and Experimental Ophthalmology* in 2008 (Wyness et al., 2009) • 38% of reasons for rejection in the *Turkish Journal of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* in Jan 2016–Jun 2022 (Yanik et al., 2023)		et al. (2007), Mendes-da-Silva (2020), Mendiola Pastrana et al. (2020), Menon et al. (2022), Molassiotis et al. (2019) Morton (2020) Paul (2024) Pierson (2004) Sullivan (2015) Wu et al. (2024), Wyness et al. (2009) Yanik et al. (2023)
Discussion and conclusions	• Unwarranted conclusions • Conclusions not supported by data • Insufficient discussion • Fail to articulate contributions to theory, empirical evidence, and practice	• 42.3% of reasons for rejection in *Contemporary Accounting Research* in 2004–2010 (Clarkson, 2012) • 64.5% of reasons for rejection in *Headache* in 2014–2016 (Hesterman et al., 2018) • 70% of reasons for rejection in the *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* in 1990 (Smith et al., 1993) • 40% of reasons for rejection in the *Turkish Journal of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* in Jan 2016–Jun 2022 (Yanik et al., 2023)	• Clearly articulate theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions • Discuss limitations and directions for future research	Ahlstrom et al. (2013), Ali (2021), Bradbury (2012), Byrne (2000), Clarkson (2012), Correia (2020), Eassom (n/d), Fischer et al., 2017, Griffiths and Norman (2016), Hesterman et al. (2018), McKercher et al. (2007), Mendiola Pastrana et al. (2020), Menon et al. (2022), Molassiotis et al. (2019), Morton (2020), Murthy and Wiggins (2002), Norman (2014), Smith (1993), Wu et al. (2024), Yanik et al. (2023)
Ethical and procedural compliance	• Plagiarism • Self-plagiarism • Infringement of ethical principles • Simultaneous submission to another journal • Unclear an institutional review board approval • A conflict of interest statement missing • Informed consent of subjects not taken • "Salami slicing" of data	• 8% of reasons for rejection in 100 peer reviewers' reports for the *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* (Delport, 2021) • 21.3% of reasons for rejection in *Headache* in 2014–2016 (Hesterman et al., 2018) • 0.8% of reasons for rejection in 35 hospitality and tourism journals in 2000–2005 (McKercher et al., 2007) • 6.4% of reasons for rejection in *European Accounting Review* in 2016 (Stolowy, 2017) • 2% of reasons for rejection in *Clinical and Experimental Ophthalmology* in 2008 (Wyness et al., 2009)	• Ensure originality and proper citations • Adhere to ethical guidelines • Submit to one journal at a time • Maintain anonymity in review	Ali (2021), Asif et al. (2020), Billsberry (2014), Celik et al. (2014), Chernick (2008), Civil and Kao (2014), Correia (2020), Delport (2021), Dogra (2011), Eassom (n/d), Hesterman et al. (2018), Greiff and Ziegler (2017), Jackson and Bradbury-Jones (2020), Khadilkar (2018), Kim et al. (2019), McKercher et al. (2007), Mendes-da-Silva (2020), Mendiola Pastrana et al. (2020), Menon et al. (2022), Molassiotis et al. (2019), Morton (2020), Norman (2014), Offutt (2014), Paul (2024), Stolowy (2017), Wu et al. (2024), Wyness et al. (2009)

TABLE 1 Continued

Category	Reasons for rejection	Examples of statistics of reasons for rejection[a]	Suggestions for improvement	References citing each category of rejection reason
Journal-specific issues	• Non-adherence to journal's instructions • Inappropriate journal selection • Topic outside of journal aims and scope	• 30% of reasons for rejection in 100 peer reviewers' reports for the *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* (Delport, 2021) • 25.4% of reasons for rejection in *Indian Paediatrics* in 2002 (Gupta et al., 2013) • 16.1% of reasons for rejection in 35 hospitality and tourism journals in 2000–2005 (McKercher et al., 2007) • 42.9% of reasons for rejection in the *Journal of the American Academy of PAs* in Oct 2015–Dec 2018 (Reed et al., 2022) • 25% of rejections reasons in the *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* in 1990 (Smith, 1993) • 12% of reasons for rejection in *European Accounting Review* in 2016 (Stolowy, 2017) • 55% of reasons for rejection in 30 transport journals in Oct 2020 to Dec 2022 (Wu et al., 2024) • 13% of reasons for rejection in the *Turkish Journal of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* in Jan 2016–Jun 2022 (Yanik et al., 2023)	• Follow journal's specific guidelines • Ensure manuscript aligns with journal's scope by reviewing guidelines and previous publications	Ahlstrom et al. (2013), Ali (2021), Asif et al. (2020), Billsberry (2014), Bradbury (2012), Celik et al. (2014), Chernick (2008), Chung et al. (2019), Civil and Kao (2014), Correia (2020), Delport (2021), Dogra (2011), Eassom (n/d), Edmans (2023), Fischer et al. (2017), Greiff and Ziegler (2017), Griffiths and Norman (2016), Gupta et al. (2013), Harris (2016), Jackson and Bradbury-Jones (2020), Khadilkar (2018), Kim et al. (2019), Kool et al. (2016), Lamb and Mai (2015), McKercher et al. (2007), Mendes-da-Silva (2020), Mendiola Pastrana et al. (2020), Menon et al. (2022), Molassiotis et al. (2019), Morton (2020), Murthy and Wiggins (2002), Offutt (2014), Reed et al., 2022, Smith (1993), Starkschall (2011), Stolowy (2017), Sullivan (2015), Wu et al. (2024), Yanik et al. (2023)

[a] The totals of different reasons for rejection within this column for any one example study might exceed 100% because papers in the indicated journals may have been rejected for multiple reasons.

Below, we discuss these points in more detail.

Rejections can be broadly categorized into two primary types: desk rejections and rejections following peer review. Although these categories often share overlapping causes, the levels of scrutiny and the stages at which they occur differ considerably.

Desk rejections

Desk rejections occur at the initial phase of the manuscript evaluation process and are typically conducted by the editor or a deputy editor. It is crucial for authors to know that the processing of their paper, during editorial handling and peer review, is fair and unbiased, and that it has been properly assessed prior to rejection, so editors play a central role in ensuring the integrity of these processes (Resnik & Elmore, 2016). Editors also authenticate claims, setting "standards of scientific rigor" in a field of research (Bedeian et al., 2009). Several editors have voiced their opinions and reasons for desk rejecting papers, often based on their own journals' experiences, and to serve as advice for prospective authors who might consider submitting to their journals. In a tongue-in-cheek 'appraisal' of desk rejections, Greiff and Ziegler (2017) explained the benefits arising from a desk rejection, and what precisely a researcher would have to do in order to 'earn' it.

The purpose of this initial assessment is to determine whether the paper fits within the journal's scope. Papers that fail to conform to the journal's policies or style are often rejected (Asif et al., 2020; Bradbury, 2012; Correia, 2020). During this stage, the paper also undergoes a technical review, which includes an examination of text similarity and potential plagiarism. This review is usually performed by technical staff or editorial managers who might not have an academic background, nor is one essential to perform routine checks. If instances of text similarity, potential plagiarism, and other ethical concerns are flagged, these will often lead to an immediate desk rejection (Edmans, 2023; Griffiths & Norman, 2016; Gupta et al., 2013). If a paper is easily accepted, despite the presence of errors or flaws, this not only reflects poorly on the authors but also on the editors, and by association, the journal and publisher (Besancenot et al., 2014). This is because editors and reviewers that pride themselves in the quality and standards of their journal should adopt the philosophy 'that a study should be rejected unless there is sufficient evidence to the contrary' (Clarkson, 2012). In this context, 'sufficient evidence' refers to a convincing demonstration of the research's scientific value, adherence to standards, and accuracy. How that value is assessed through peer review, as well as the merits and demerits of this process, is an important, related but separate topic that is not within the scope of this paper.

Bradbury (2012), assessing 66 reviews associated with 33 manuscripts from the perspective of an editor of a Wiley title (*Accounting & Finance*), noted that a portion of papers were rejected due to the lack of formatting related to journal and referencing style. Failure to follow journal style is often cited as a reason for desk rejections (Chernick, 2008; Dogra, 2011; Greiff & Ziegler, 2017). However, it has also been argued that such rejections may be unfair and wasteful of time and energy because they do not reflect the intrinsic academic or scientific nature of a paper, and are fairly superficial aspects that can be easily adjusted and corrected at the final stage of the publication process, once a paper has passed peer review and been accepted for publication (Teixeira da Silva, 2020). Such aspects can induce negative reactions in authors (Hartley & Cabanac, 2017). Inappropriate length of a manuscript and, in some cases, its attachments (large data sets, non-textual material, etc.), due to space limitations for publication in journals that are not published exclusively online, may also lead to desk rejections (Mayernik, 2007).

Some non-native English speakers also feel that there is a language quality barrier to entry, and thus the risk of both desk rejection and rejection at later stages, is higher for them than for native English speakers because they are at a linguistic disadvantage, given that English is the primary language of scientific communication and publishing (Asif et al., 2020). In addition to this English-related linguistic barrier, other linguistics-related limitations (erroneous grammar or spelling; lack of vocabulary; fear of erring) may reduce non-native English speakers' confidence in scientific paper writing (Alkhuzaee et al., 2019). Other challenges these authors, especially students, may face include a lack of ideas, lack of interest or motivation, insufficient curricular support (e.g., scientific writing courses) complexity and rigidity of scientific writing, lack of access to information, and 'the need to resort to' plagiarism (Alkhuzaee et al., 2019). These issues can be addressed by ensuring that universities have writing programs to guide graduate and undergraduate students and researchers into better writing practices (Gardner et al., 2018).

Related to the language-related limitations of authors noted above, such cases might be declining in the light of the rise in use of artificial intelligence (AI)-driven large language models, whose undeclared use poses a separate set of ethical challenges to editors. This new and rising risk, namely the heavy or excessive reliance of authors with poor research skill-sets, language ability or knowledge base on AI tools, either to derive text, ideas, knowledge, to edit text, write parts of a paper, or to perform other skill-sets that they do not inherently possess (Kendall & Teixeira da Silva, 2024). Under current publishing ethics standards, an even greater risk is their dishonest failure to declare the use of such AI tools or other third party services, amplified by the inability of reviewers and editors who are unable to distinguish or detect AI-derived tasks or text, thereby committing an ethical infraction (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2024).

There are instances where desk rejections may be tardy, taking weeks or months to achieve, and these can harm authors who are generally under pressure to prove their productivity to their employers or funders, usually within a tight time frame (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2018). In extreme cases, are authors 'victims' of editorial mishandling or managerial incompetence of the journal, especially where there is a clear flaw in the smooth functioning of journal's screening and processing efficiency?

Rejections following peer review

Assuming that a paper passes the first firewall and set of screening procedures and enters peer review, this is not a guarantee that it will be accepted, which only takes place after (hopefully) rigorous peer review (Bedeian et al., 2009; Chung et al., 2019). To compound the difficulty in having a paper published, editors might rely on "referees of little or no academic standing [, which] can lend a decidedly negative bias to the review process" (Bedeian et al., 2009). In other words, authors' personal weaknesses or professional limitations notwithstanding, the involvement of abusive, incompetent or underqualified peer reviewers during the peer review process (Oviedo-García, 2024) can lower the chance of acceptance even further. Alternatively, at the other end of the competence-incompetence scale, due to the same professional weaknesses, peer reviewers or editors might not be sufficiently strict on authors, perhaps out of kindness, personal bias, or established traditions in certain disciplines or regions, such as the problem of insider bias in peer review in Turkish university journals described by Tutuncu (2023), allowing flawed or erroneous research to enter the publication stream (D'Andrea & O'Dwyer, 2017; Mulligan, 2005; Vasconcelos, 2023). Both scenarios negatively affect the integrity of the publication process, and weigh on the ability of a paper to be accepted or rejected. Needless to say that authors have no reason to rejoice when they or journals cut corners of quality control, or miss essential aspects. In this day and age of post-publication peer review, those errors or flaws might be detected and called out, leading to the need to correct—in extreme cases retract—a paper (Parker et al., 2022).

Several authors, in their positions as editors, or having had editorial experience, have expressed similar reasons why authors have experienced rejections to their journals (Griffiths & Norman, 2016; Gupta et al., 2013; Hall & Wilcox, 2007; Harris, 2016; Hesterman et al., 2018; Howard & Stout, 2006; Khadilkar, 2018; Mendes-da-Silva, 2020; Molassiotis et al., 2019; Morton, 2020; Offutt, 2014; Paul, 2024; Roberts, 2018; Stewart, 2002; Stolowy, 2017; Sullivan, 2015; Sun & Linton, 2014; Wu et al., 2024; Wyness et al., 2009; Yanık et al., 2023).

Among the reasons listed by Bradbury (2012) for a paper's rejection, either desk rejected or following peer review, included poor or unclear language, a lack of novelty or new contribution to the existing literature (the latter accounting for 80% of rejections from the *Accounting and Finance*), the lack of a directional hypothesis, or problems with data or analyses. Sometimes, authors merely go on a 'fishing expedition' with an insufficiently developed theoretical base, directional hypotheses, and weak expectations (Bradbury, 2012). Billsberry (2014) claimed that 50% of submitted papers were desk rejected in a SAGE title (*Journal of Management Education*), mainly due to weak domain (i.e., being out of scope), weak or insufficiently novel contribution, contraventions of length related to different manuscript types, underdeveloped and unpolished ideas, excessive use of declarative language, lack of relevance of cited literature, lack of replicable

methods and inappropriate data analyses, lack of innovation, lack of anonymity, or incorrect formatting. Ahlstrom (2012) noted, from an editor's perspective of a Springer Nature title (*Asia Pacific Journal of Management*), and in addition to some of the reasons listed by Bradbury (2012), that the failure to place the paper and its content within a historical literary context, could lead to rejection. Delport (2021), the editor-in-chief of a Wiley title (*Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa*), furthered these reasons by adding that 'unsubstantiated claims or conclusions' may contribute to a paper's rejection. Even about a decade after Bradbury's paper, similar reasons for rejection continued to be listed (Ali, 2021).

Even when a paper is revised following peer review, it may be rejected, the most common reasons being failure to address peers' comments or flaws with the paper detected during peer review but not during initial technical and other screening (Chung et al., 2020; Delport, 2021), inaccurate data, incorrect statistical analyses or errors in experimental design (Balyakina & Kriventsova, 2020; Chernick, 2008; Farjo et al., 2015; Stratton & Neil, 2005), the absence of established standards, for example for peer reviews or meta-analyses (Grossetta Nardini et al., 2019), failure to interpret the results correctly (Civil & Kao, 2014), hype (overinterpretation of the results) and overly amplified results that are not supported or substantiated by the data (Bordage, 2001), subjectivity, redundancy or repeated findings, lack of ethical approvals, or misconduct (Celik et al., 2014; McKercher et al., 2007), or the lack of novelty and mismatch with journal scope (Coudounaris, 2019). Dividing the reasons for rejection in a nursing journal into three categories (substance, science, and style), Jackson and Bradbury-Jones (2020) list the top 10 reasons for rejecting papers as: (1) lack of thematic relevance; (2) lack of international relevance; (3) poor reporting and lack of adherence to guidelines; 4) lack of novelty; (5) integrity concerns; (6) poorly described literature reviews; (7) lack of randomization in clinical trials; (8) poor analyses; (9) poorly written text; (10) failure of authors to respond to feedback. Several articles offer variations around similar reasons for rejection (Kim et al., 2019; Kool et al., 2016; Pierson, 2004), while others indicate how journals emphasize some factors more than others, for example the lack of novelty is a major reason for rejection in ACS's *Environmental Science & Technology* (Lowry et al., 2020). One extraordinary editorial lists 105 reasons why a paper could be rejected (Linton, 2012), although it would have been helpful for authors to know what weighting those factors had in triggering a rejection, if any single reason could induce a rejection, or whether multiple reasons would need to be met simultaneously in order to receive a rejection. Finally, by not paying attention to these aspects may reduce the reproducibility of a study and its findings (Bomzon & Tobin, 2021).

Even preprints can and should be rejected, thus ensuring that they, and their authors, are held up to as equally high ethical standards as their peer-reviewed counterparts (Teixeira da Silva, 2022a). What this wide array of studies indicates is that while there are common threads of reasons for why papers might be desk rejected or rejected following peer review, there is editorial independence when making those assessments

(Bhui et al., 2024). In the existing publishing ecosystem, journals that apply poor quality control co-populate a landscape with journals that employ rigorous measures, and in that very same landscape, authors are vying to publish in any of these two categories of journals.

CAN A REJECTION BE TURNED INTO A LEARNING EXPERIENCE?

The last piece of advice offered by Stewart (2002) sets the tone for this section: 'learn from and build on rejection' (p. 6). Authors who have experienced one or more desk rejections, or even rejections following peer review, should seek inner strength to keep fighting, to overcome that initial disappointment, and to seek a suitable venue, with receptive editors, until their work has been published, provided that they are not peddling false information or fraud, as a way to validate their intellectual investment and draw some return, even if their initial expectations might not be met (Donovan, 2007; Fahed et al., 2020). Since publishing is observed as a privilege and not as an intrinsic right, success can only be achieved, and should only be rewarded, when tangible improvements have been made. Some authors may be overly self-assertive, and sometimes unsure of how to make additional improvements, if they feel that their paper represents the pinnacle of their efforts (van Loon & van Loon, 2023). Therefore, following a moment of rest and reflection, self-appreciation, alongside a critical and realistic outlook, vis-à-vis the existing journals and the realistic chance of having one's intellect considered there, will go a long way in mentally preparing a would-be author for submission to a target journal, and reduce time wasted on unrealistic submissions or expectations (Fischer et al., 2017).

Sharma and Ogle (2021) focused on topics that are often implicitly understood, but not often stated explicitly in the literature on this topic, such as the need to seek a clear career path, assess one's strengths realistically, read extensively, interact with peers to gauge their experiences, pay attention to details, and appreciate that all process take time, as aspects to guide students towards a more defined career in science writing and publishing, thereby blunting the risks of rejection. However, many of those arguments are motivational, focusing on barriers to overcome the disappointment of rejection. In some cases, when authors meet with multiple rejections, there is no shame in giving up or admitting defeat, since not everything can or should be published, although the preprint option may have irreversibly altered this way of thinking.

At a more practical level, in order to convert lemons into lemonade (Kovach, 2014), it is tricky to know precisely how much information or detail a paper should contain when submitting to a journal for the first time (Garcia et al., 2019), a sense of perception that can improve as one gains experience over years, following ample desk and peer review rejections. For this reason, it is not uncommon to find papers that offer very basic advice on how to write and structure a scientific paper, as the first line of defence against rejection (Good & Pullins, 2024; Kern &

Bonneau, 2003; LaPlaca et al., 2018; Naylor & Munoz-Viveros, 2005; Tomaska, 2007; Wortman-Wunder & Wefes, 2020). We do not offer exhaustive lists of what to do or not do, since those details have been amply detailed in the listed studies. Peer reviewers also play a part in blunting the negativity associated with a rejection, and should seek to offer a positive but realistic outlook, while politely pointing out the paper's weaknesses or limitations (Fang, 2008; Hertzer, 2017). However, when it comes to quality control and how good advice should be heeded and acted upon, the old-age adages 'you can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink' and 'falling on deaf ears' come to mind. Good advice will not be useful for those who do not seek to improve, or who do not follow editors' and peer reviewers' advice following a rejection, failing to improve their papers prior to resubmission elsewhere.

Self-motivation and gaining self-appreciation of the value and merit of their work is an important step in this journey (Faff, 2015). Ahlstrom et al. (2013) indicated, while referring to eight aspects of the submission of an academic paper or of the paper itself (journal aims and scope; title; abstract; introduction; theory, hypotheses; method; results; discussion; conclusion; format), fairly obvious aspects to consider, arguing that by following advice related to these aspects, that a paper can decrease the chance of rejection, or increase the chance of acceptance.

Using a simulation of 105 journals, 25,000 researchers and 410,000 manuscripts over a 10-year period, Kovanis et al. (2016) noted how about one fifth of all submitted papers remained unpublished. Even though Smahel et al. (2014) suggested that a rejected paper be submitted to a journal where the risk of rejection is lower, the risk of this choice is lowering the bar of academic scrutiny, that is, the reasons for rejection by a journal, if not carefully addressed prior to resubmission to a new journal, might be overseen by the new journal (with a lower bar to acceptance), and this might lead to the introduction of errors (or worse) into the academic literature if they are ultimately not addressed. However, how does an academic know, a priori, the risk of rejection prior to submission? The journal could offer insight by providing rejection rates/percentages (Balyakina & Kriventsova, 2020; Lamb & Adams, 2014; Lamb & Mai, 2015), or acceptance rates (Björk, 2019), allowing authors to weigh the risks and benefits. With such background, authors can then screen journals for appropriateness, allowing them to create a short-list (Hardman & Serginson, 2017). Although in our experience, even with an 'optimal' within-scope list of target journals, many controllable factors (e.g., close attention to style, language, analytical methods, robustness of analyses, etc.) and extraneous (i.e., uncontrollable) factors might still result in desk rejections.

To buffer the risk of rejection, inexperienced students can also rely on a host of technology- and AI-based tools to assist them (Shi, 2021), but prospective authors are cautioned that the use of such tools should always be acknowledged in their papers, to avoid any ethical pitfalls due to non-disclosure.

The issue of lowering the 'quality' bar to ensure acceptance, although directly related to the acceptance or rejection of a paper, is a large and distinct phenomenon that will not be abridged in this

paper, although, with increasing instances of misconduct in academia, there is interest in appreciating what happens to rejected papers (García-Garmendia et al., 2021), i.e., where they are eventually published, as a way to appreciate if authors of papers in which misconduct, errors or scientific failures were detected during prior rejections ultimately addressed those concerns.

Millar et al. (2019) cautioned against the use of hype to over-amplify positive findings, or to state more than what the results and analyses actually show, while Norman (2014) offered a cheeky list of actions and behaviours that will surely result in a successful rejection. Bordage (2001) offered a more concrete set of characteristics that might improve the acceptance of a paper, or reduce its chance of rejection: clearly discussing a timely and relevant problem with practical or useful implications; presenting a manuscript that is well written, succinct, and clear; providing a well-designed study with a sufficiently large sample size and where possible, novel or unique analyses; including an up-to-date literature review; stating the study's limitations. Ultimately, to avoid the rejection of a paper at the submission stage (desk rejection) or after peer review, attention to basic issues, as well as to important details, are needed before and while writing a paper (Chernick, 2012). It helps to be parsimonious about word counts and to deliver the scientific message with brevity and as succinctly as possible (Davison et al., 2024).

However, no matter how much preparation and care is involved, some papers inevitably get rejected, and the best way to overcome rejection is by accepting that it is a fairly standard process that can lead to a paper's eventual acceptance, although a psychological and practical preparation is needed to overcome the negativity associated with rejection (Conn et al., 2016), even more so when years or decades of rejections begin to accumulate. Although tangentially relevant, the issue of unfair rejections will not be covered in this paper. We note that some academics advocate for giving up after facing several rejections, especially in the light of severe criticisms by peer reviewers or editors, as a solution to dealing with rejections (Kotsis & Chung, 2014; Su'a et al., 2016; Woolley & Barron, 2009). However, this is not always necessary since papers can improve with each rejection, or the reasons for rejection might involve editorial bias, or excessive selection stringency. Rather than abandoning initial investments in time and resources that have already been made, we encourage an attempt to re-work rejected papers, either by improving the writing or analyses, or expanding the content, and in some cases, lowering expectations to increase the chance of publication in lower-tier journals. While this approach may certainly take considerable time, effort and patience, there is a sense of satisfaction in eventually having a paper published that was rejected multiple times, but that improved along the way thanks to the input of dedicated peer reviewers and editors, who often work voluntarily (Aczel et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Finally, it is important to recognize that the system of publication is imperfect and even if authors strive for perfection in their papers, there may be a mismatch with the systems of quality control in a wide range of journals, ranging between lax and extremely strict. For that reason, even papers in elite vanity journals, there is never any guarantee of perfection or error-free papers (Soleimanpour et al., 2021). As a sobering part of the reality of academic publishing that has become today's state of destabilization, not only do authors have to mentally prepare themselves for needing to correct their papers, even though their papers have been through peer review, so too do editors, journals and publishers need to prepare themselves for a potentially never-ending challenge on the content that they have published, as part of the post-publication movement (Teixeira da Silva, 2022b; Yeo-Teh & Tang, 2023).

The process of facing and overcoming rejection is an integral part of an academic career. Authors should view rejection not as a final verdict on their work and scholarly value but as a valuable step in the iterative process of scientific inquiry by improving personal and professional standards. By maintaining a constructive outlook and continuously striving for improvement, researchers can navigate the complexities of academic publishing and contribute meaningfully to their fields.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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