

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

What rejection really means

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Dear Sir,

Much of academic life revolves around the need to have one's research published in respected scientific journals. Apart from the dissemination of results and ideas, publication has a major influence on one's reputation, opportunities for future tenure and, in New Zealand, the much dreaded performance-based research fund (PBRF) that may open or close doors for future projects. In the 'publish or perish' world of science, dealing with rejection is inevitable.

Unfortunately, not all rejections are equal. While polite and thoughtful criticism of one's work may be easier to deal with, some reviewers lace their critique with unnecessarily destructive comments. Perhaps taking advantage of the power imbalance and anonymity of the peer-review process, these reviewers (akin to the so-called 'internet trolls') appear to take pleasure in upsetting other researchers. Learning that a reviewer's personality may be projected into their feedback is an important lesson, which enables us to see past spiteful comments.

Fortunately, such 'trolls' constitute a minority of the research community. Nonetheless, even with relatively benign criticisms, a rejection is always unpleasant. With experience, one realizes that dealing with rejection (and occasional destructive feedback) is an inevitable part of life in academia. Most scientists develop a 'thicker skin' with time and become less affected by rejection. However, for those starting a research

career, rejection can be a painful experience. Thus, it is important to ask the question: what does rejection really mean?

Leonard Mlodinow in his enlightening book, *The drunkard's walk: how randomness rules our lives*, provides three great examples that rejection in the literary world means very little: John Grisham's first novel *A time to kill* was rejected by 26 publishers; Dr Seuss's first novel *And to think that I saw it on Mulberry Street* was rejected by 27 publishers; and J.K. Rowling's first *Harry Potter* manuscript was rejected by nine publishers. In particular, one wonders how nine publishers could fail to foresee the enormous success of the *Harry Potter* books (I'm sure they are still losing sleep over their lost fortune!). Therefore, at least in the literary world, repeated failure seems to have little to do with quality, ability or later success.

Obviously there is a considerable difference between the literary and scientific worlds. Scientific publications are guided by certain principles and guidelines, so that their quality should be objectively assessed. However, in reality, a considerable measure of subjective judgement goes into the assessment of manuscripts during the peer-review process. In our own experience, we have seen articles nearly published in the world's top journals, but finally rejected and published in much smaller journals. The decisions that led to rejection in these high-ranking journals were subjective and

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unrelated to the scientific quality of the manuscripts. This is an issue commonly faced by researchers.

Thus, in our opinion, in the absence of scientific flaws, there is a considerable degree of subjectivity affecting a journal's decision to accept or reject a manuscript for publication. This is particularly the case when decisions are made on the perceived 'relevance' or 'novelty' of the study. To counter this problem, journals such as *PLOS ONE* and Nature's *Scientific Reports* have a policy of evaluating manuscripts purely on scientific merit and not on their perceived 'relevance' or 'novelty'. We believe that their comparatively higher rates of acceptance illustrate the large role that subjective assessment has in decisions of rejection from the many traditional journals that consider subjective aspects beyond scientific rigour.

When receiving a decision of rejection, one should attempt to address all relevant criticisms and then move on to another suitable journal without being personally affected by the negative

(and in some cases destructive) comments. Millions of adults and children throughout the world are doubtlessly extremely grateful that John Grisham, J.K. Rowling and Dr Seuss did not give up before they got their first books published. Similarly, the scientific community may also benefit from the publication of studies that have been rejected by more prestigious journals. We have a responsibility to discuss these concepts with those initiating a career in science, to help them understand that rejection is inevitable and not necessarily an indictment of their work. Further, while the criticisms of reviewers may be insightful, rejection may also reflect the subjective opinions of reviewers and journal editors. This may help to take the sting off an unpleasant experience, and aid early career researchers to respond positively to the rejection of their treasured manuscript.

Yours sincerely,
JGB Derraik and BB Albert