

7 Common Reasons Why Submissions are Rejected

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Based on my more than three decades of reviewing submissions for many of the top journals, such as *Science*, *Psychological Bulletin*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, I have identified 7 common reasons why manuscripts are rejected.

I need to clarify that there are different kinds of rejections. Generally speaking, very few manuscripts are accepted without any revision. In my lifetime, I have had only two papers accepted by APA journals as is, without any revision. I consider these to be lucky breaks. In the majority of cases, papers are rejected but authors are encouraged to resubmit with minor or major revisions. For all practical purposes and intents, such rejections are actually conditional acceptances, although many journals are reluctant to use the expression “conditional acceptance”. Therefore, authors should not be too discouraged and should take reviewers’ comments seriously in making revisions.

In this article, I focus on papers that are simply rejected, without the opportunity to revise and resubmit.

#1 The topic or issue is considered to be insignificant or trivial.

In such cases, the topic is already over-studied and there isn’t much more to be added, unless someone is able to debunk widely accepted findings or bring out a new interpretation that makes better sense of existing data. Occasionally, an author may be ahead of his or her time and the topic or issue of the manuscript may be considered to be far-fetched or unimportant.

#2 It is judged as inappropriate for the journal and uninteresting for its readership.

Before submission to a journal, make sure that you are familiar with the mission and objectives of the journal and its philosophical assumptions. For example, you do not submit an existential-phenomenological article to a journal that takes a very strong positivist stance. You also need to be familiar with the research of the editor as well as associate editors, so that you have some idea of the kind of articles they publish.

#3 Quality of writing is not up to professional standard.

An editor or reviewer can decide whether a manuscript is good enough to go through the review process simply by reading the abstract or the first couple paragraphs. This is unfair to authors whose first language is not English. My suggestion is that you need to pay special attention to the quality of writing in the abstract as well as the first paragraph; it will also help to invite a colleague whose first language is English to copy-edit your submission.

#4 The literature review is seriously flawed.

If the literature review is simply inadequate in its coverage, it can be readily remedied. However, the review would be considered to be seriously flawed if it is completely biased or misguided because of a lack of understanding of the topic and the issues involved. For example, an undergraduate student may submit a paper

based on a very superficial or partial knowledge of the subject; his or her literature review most likely would reflect this ignorance. One basic requirement for a good literature review is that the author is familiar with all the key players in the field, even though he or she may favour one approach over another.

5 Quality of research is not up to standard.

Most major journals require archival research with multiple studies and large samples. If you want to submit a single study, make sure that your sample size is large enough to generate sufficient power in statistical tests. Even for qualitative research, where a representative sample is less of an issue, one still needs to justify the sample employed; a convenience sample does not always mean convincing justification.

In addition to sampling, your research design is also a key area. Fatal mistakes in methodology include the lack of proper control groups, failing to minimize extraneous or confounding errors, and demand characteristics of asking leading questions. All such mistakes render the results meaningless because of lack of internal validity.

For qualitative research, it is even more difficult to safeguard the adequacy of the data and the validity of extracting relevant themes. Since the data is based on verbal report of subjective experiences, the researcher needs to take measures to ensure that the process of reducing verbal data into meaningful units and themes can be judged as both valid and reliable.

#6 Erroneous data interpretation

Inadequate interpretation, by itself, does not lead to rejection. However, serious errors in interpretation will increase the likelihood of rejection. Here are two common mistakes in data interpretation:

- (a) The researcher is so eager to support his or her theory that both data presentation and data interpretation are biased. In such cases, results not in favour of the theory are either omitted or hidden. The author will resort to “mental gymnastics” or fallacious arguments to confirm his or her hypothesis with very flimsy data. Such biased interpretation is unscientific.
- (b) The researcher makes more scientific claims and more application claims than warranted by the data. Making such exaggerated claims is ethically questionable because it misleads the scientific community as well as the general public.

#7 The submission is unlikely to make a significant contribution to the literature.

Obviously this involves a subjective judgment by the editor and reviewers, without any clear consensus as to what constitutes a significant contribution. Often it depends on one’s area of interest and value judgments. Most researchers can shrug their shoulders and dismiss research findings outside their area of interest as trivial. In spite of the subjectivity of this issue, it is still possible to make a judgment about whether the manuscript makes a significant contribution. First of all, one can ask whether the manuscript adds any new information to what we already know on a certain topic. Secondly, we can ask about the likelihood that this paper will be cited by other researchers. Finally, we can evaluate whether the paper will contribute to solving societal problems or enhancing individuals’ well-being. If the answer to all three questions is negative, most likely the submission will be rejected.