

Dealing with rejection (of papers)

Almost all my papers got rejected.

I know it is an integral part of doing science.

And yes, it happens to everyone

(except for one friend of mine to whom I suggested to remain anonymous).

It still can hurt a lot to you and your coauthors; so here are some suggestions on how to deal with the “news”.



Before you submit the paper

1. Before submitting talk with your student. Evaluate the manuscript together. **Tell your student you are proud with what was accomplished**, no matter what would be the responses. This is probably the **best time you will have for a celebration** so go ahead.
2. **Prepare students for rejection.** For students who are sending their first paper, explain the vagaries of the peer review system and the inherent stochasticity and subjectivity of the process.

When you receive the evaluation

3. **Updating your students.** Assuming you are the corresponding author and had the fortune to receive the news first, it is now your task to break the news to others. It can be nice to cushion the forwarded email with a personal word. If you or they are out of the lab you can talk on the phone to remind them this is how it often works. Sometimes your interpretation can be critical to less experienced authors who do not know that “we will only consider your resubmission if you prove...” actually means “the papers is really in just give us something to quiet down one referee...”
4. **Give yourself time** for perspective and ideas of how to carry on. Maybe you can rebuttal, maybe a different journal is actually better? Absorb the content and source of resistance to the paper and don’t focus on aggressive tones.
5. Remember, failure to get your work accepted is part of a learning process. It is like falling as part of learning to walk (rather than like death as part of, well I guess, dying). It is about taking whatever lessons can be extracted and continuing on.
6. Almost always, when the dust has settled and the paper was updated and sent somewhere else we find **in the long it is actually much clearer and better as a result of the extra iteration.**
7. When you write back to the editor, **be sure to be appreciative of the editor’s and reviewers’ time** – remember – they did this in a voluntary fashion so don’t be rude (whatever they wrote...), thank them, and make it easy for them to follow your changes.

Always good to know

8. **The scientific process is subjective even though the subject of study is objective.** We are used to thinking of things as objective, just like our objects of observation. We often erroneously translate this to a belief that the scientific process is also objective. But the questions you decide to study are subjective, the creative ideas we have are subjective and the evaluation process is subjective. So rejection of our paper does not mean it is bad in any objective manner.
9. Finally, **next time you review** someone else's paper stop and think: am I being fair in what I am requesting? Am I using double standards? Am I being kind to a person who has spent several years doing this work? If you let your students review the manuscript – read their reviews. Remember – **a review is not a time to show how clever you are, just to help another person do the best science** you think they can and suggest a place that would be relevant for that science to be published.

Useful resources:

Amusing piece on how to deal with a rejected paper

<http://jcs.biologists.org/cgi/content/full/120/8/1311>