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Reducing the chance of manuscript rejection: Tips from editors

Significance:

All academics receive desk rejections from journals at some point in their careers. While this is never entirely avoidable, one can try to reduce this occurrence. We share insights from the *South African Journal of Science* (SAJS) to help authors avoid common mistakes that lead to desk rejection, such as misalignment with journal scope, lack of novelty, and ethical issues. Careful attention to these aspects can reduce the chance of a frustrating and avoidable rejection and should become a routine part of the author's pre-submission screening.

Introduction

Publication is an essential component of sharing knowledge and ideas in the academic world¹, and allows researchers to present their work, contribute to their field of study, and engage with other experts². Through the process of peer review, the quality and accuracy of the research is tested and strengthened.³ Publishing peer-reviewed papers allows researchers to build their reputation, share new discoveries, and support education.⁴ Colleges and universities often evaluate and promote academic staff based on the number and quality of their publications⁵, and some institutions also require postgraduate students to provide evidence of having submitted or published a journal article before they can graduate⁶. However, the essence of scientific research and publication is the production of knowledge, and the wide distribution and constructive exchange of the generated knowledge to improve our understanding of the world.⁷

For most researchers, having a manuscript accepted by a journal induces feelings of accomplishment, relief and pride.⁸ By contrast, having a manuscript rejected can be frustrating and disheartening, especially for early-career researchers.⁹ The majority of manuscripts do not make it past the initial editorial check, and are desk rejected.³ According to Boughey⁶, many postgraduate students do not receive adequate guidance in submitting manuscripts, which places an added burden on journal editors and reviewers and potentially increases desk rejection rates. Only a small fraction of manuscripts is rejected after peer review, either following the first round of peer review, or after the authors have attempted to improve their manuscript based on review comments. Although disappointing, a rejection provides valuable insights. Suggestions from reviewers aid in enhancing the clarity of the work, and criticisms provide directions for improvement.³ Recent studies indicate that rejection rates in academic journals can range from 30% to 90%, influenced by factors such as the number of submissions, the prestige of the journal and its scope and target audience.¹⁰

Although this article focuses on the *South African Journal of Science* (SAJS), the aim is to give general advice that can help authors improve their chances of publishing in any academic journal. Authors should note that the peer review process is in itself not a perfect system but is still the most accepted way of reviewing and publishing research work in the scientific community. Understanding how the system works helps in making it less confusing and improves the chances of a manuscript being accepted. In our role as associate editors of SAJS, and with insight into the rejection data, we identified some common reasons for manuscript rejection and provide guidelines for authors on how to improve their submissions and thereby increase their chances of acceptance. Given the rigorous standards of the SAJS, and its importance in the African scientific community, authors submitting to the journal would benefit from understanding why manuscripts often get desk rejected and knowing how to improve their chances of acceptance. The overall goal of this Commentary is to raise awareness of the expectations of academic journal editors and how authors can align their work with these standards.

Common reasons for manuscript rejection

The Journal's requirement for original and relevant high-quality research to be published necessitates that each submission undergoes stringent scrutiny, and failure to meet these standards leads to many submissions being desk rejected, that is, rejected without review. The most common reason for this rejection is that manuscripts do not meet the scope and focus of the Journal. For the SAJS, manuscripts should not only be original, novel research, but also relevant to and for Africa. Novelty can mean using new methods, applying old ideas in different situations, or collecting new information to answer questions that have not yet been answered. Manuscripts from elsewhere on the African continent are considered only if their results are relevant more generally to Africa or have specific implications for South Africa. Similarly, in the case of more specialised calls linked to special issues, submitting research that does not align with the special issue focus will lead to rejection.

Reworked students' dissertations often do not meet the specific structure and style required by journals, making them unsuitable for publication without significant changes. Another frequent reason for rejection is not following the submission guidelines, including the word limits, referencing style and formatting guidelines. We emphasise the necessity for concise introductions and discussions, and limiting references to the most pertinent. The SAJS, in particular, has a very wide audience, and the writing style needs to be accessible across a range of disciplines. Some journals, including the SAJS, offer the opportunity to rectify these technical issues and resubmit, but you will have a less frustrating experience if you adhere to these guidelines carefully before submitting.

Manuscripts submitted to SAJS risk rejection if they do not make a meaningful contribution to the field of study. This could involve merely repeating existing work, or manuscripts that present work founded on weak methodological approaches, insufficient data or flawed analyses. All these issues undermine the credibility of the findings and their interpretations. If the methodology is not robust nor described in sufficient detail, reviewers may question the validity of the results and reject the manuscript. Many submissions fail to engage adequately with recent literature, methods and key discussions in the field. As publications are expected to contribute new knowledge, this lack of connection is often a reason for rejection. Furthermore, authors need to present clear, well-structured results and avoid excessive jargon. Ethical concerns, such as failing to secure or provide evidence of ethical clearance or undeclared conflicts of interest, can also lead to rejection. Even if a manuscript passes through the initial review round, failure to adequately address reviewers' comments could still result in rejection.

Editors rely on expert reviewers as the most qualified judges of the quality of a manuscript. As a result, many manuscripts are rejected when they fail to meet the rigorous standards essential for maintaining scientific integrity.

Strategies to avoid rejection

To reduce the chance of having a manuscript submitted to the SAJS rejected, authors should make sure their manuscript fits within the Journal's scope by focusing on important regional issues and adding meaningful insights to scientific discussions in the target country or continent. Demonstrating how the study is new or different is also key. This can involve finding gaps in current research, using robust and well-accepted methods, and presenting unique results or data. Careful reporting of data collection and appropriate statistical analyses help reviewers to trust the findings.

It is also important to connect the work to existing research. By showing how it fits into ongoing debates and current trends, authors demonstrate their familiarity and understanding of the field. Being honest about ethical matters and conflicts of interest helps maintain trust. Keep in mind that submitting a manuscript is a form of communication. Consider the diversity of the readership when writing your manuscript and ensure that you explain your process effectively to a non-expert. Using clear and inclusive language that is accessible to a diverse, multidisciplinary readership – including specialists, non-specialists and those for whom English is not a first language – improves a manuscript's chances of acceptance.

If your manuscript is sent out for review, you may be asked to submit suggested changes based on the reviewers' feedback before it can be accepted for publication. Responding to reviewers' feedback in a thoughtful way is crucial. Authors should address each comment, explain any changes, and politely justify why they might not follow certain suggestions. Reviewers expect authors to handle feedback seriously and make needed updates. Taking time to revise and respond in detail shows a commitment to quality research and can greatly increase the chances of acceptance. Viewing revision as a chance to grow, rather than as a personal criticism, can make the process more positive.

Looking forward – keeping your finger on the pulse

Looking ahead, it is crucial that we maintain and improve the professional standards that have served us well. The expectations of academic journals are constantly evolving, with a growing emphasis on multidisciplinary research, stronger methodological rigour, and clear presentation of ideas.¹¹ This is also strongly evident in the SAJS, which, since its inception, has been inherently interdisciplinary.¹² Research that crosses disciplinary boundaries is highly valued because it offers broader insights from various perspectives and has the potential to solve complex, real-world problems.¹³ This current research trend means that researchers must stay up to date with the latest developments in their field and in publishing standards.^{14,15} SAJS, like many regional journals, prioritises work that speaks directly to the needs, challenges and opportunities within its geographical area.^{16,17} These too are changing rapidly, requiring research that is up to date, relevant and critical. Regardless of all these developments, it is likely that the SAJS will remain a popular choice for researchers because of its interdisciplinary

nature and the space offered for Commentaries, Perspectives and Book Reviews, allowing for a range of voices to continue to contribute to important debates.¹²

Conclusion

With the growing pressure to publish, driven by career advancement needs, the rise of predatory journals, changing publishing models, and journals' efforts to maintain their reputations, manuscripts are now held to much higher quality standards than before. As a result, rejection is common in academic publishing, but it can often be avoided by upholding the above standards. By understanding the common reasons for rejection outlined in this paper, authors can take steps to improve their work and increase their chances of acceptance. It is important to ensure that your manuscript fits the journal's focus, uses appropriate methods, and presents data clearly. By ensuring relevance, appropriate methodology, clarity, ethical considerations, and alignment with evolving journal standards, authors can improve the chances of their manuscript being published. Publishing in respected journals like SAJS not only raises authors' individual profiles but also contributes meaningfully to scientific progress and dialogue. A well-prepared manuscript shows a strong understanding of both the topic and what peer reviewers expect, which is key to contributing to the academic community.

Declarations

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