Responding to Journal Decisions


It is time to strategize how you are going to respond to the editor's letter and reviewer's comments on your work. Let's go through this process step by step.

Task 1: Reading the Workbook

On the first day of your writing week, you should read the workbook up to this page and answer all the questions posed in the workbook up to this point.

Task 2: Evaluating and Responding to the Journal Decision

Read the review and put it away for several days. What seems shocking and rude on the first day may seem much more manageable by the third day. Getting some distance on the comments is useful for strategizing on how you are going to respond. Once you have done that, make sure you are clear on what decision you have received. You will have to proceed differently depending on whether the journal has rejected your article or asked you to revise and resubmit it.

Responding to a Journal's Decision to Reject

Let's say that your article gets savaged and rejected. First, remember that almost all scholars have had their work rejected at one point or another -between 85-90 percent of prominent authors admit to having their work rejected (Gans and Shepherd 1994). Second, allow yourself to feel angry and depressed. You are only human!
Third, after allowing yourself to feel down for a week or two, revisit the letter and its recommendations, if there are any. It is time to make a decision about how you are going to proceed. Your options upon rejection are (1) to abandon the article, (2) to send the article without a single change to another journal, (3) to revise the article and send it to another journal, or (4) to protest or appeal the decision and try to resubmit the article to the rejecting journal. Let's go through these choices.

Should I abandon the article?

Studies conducted several decades ago on the publication experiences of those in the physical and social sciences found that one-third of the authors who had an article rejected, abandoned not only the article but also the entire line of research on which it was based (Garvey, Lin, and Tomita 1972). Don't let that be you! If your article is rejected the first time you send it to a journal, you should definitely send it to a second journal. About 85 percent of scholars now send their rejected articles to another journal (Rotton, Foos, Van Meek 1995). If three or more journals have rejected the article, it may be time to think about giving up on it, but remember the story that started this chapter. Further, a political science professor recently told a student of mine that an article of his had been rejected eight times before being published. The main reason to abandon an article is if reviewers raise objections to your methodology, theoretical approach, or argument so serious that you believe, upon long reflection, that they are unsolvable. Another reason is if the peer reviewers regularly agree on what is wrong with the article. Research shows that peer reviewers tend to agree with each other when an article is poor, but then to disagree when an article is strong. In other words, if you are getting split reviews, that's a good sign.

Should I resubmit the article elsewhere without revising it?

Some scholars insist that they never revise an article until it has been rejected by three different journals. As one author put it, "Once it's clear the editor is not interested, I'm not that interested in what the reviewers had to say [because] Some reviewer may argue strongly that you change x to y, another may argue equally strongly that you change y to x. Authors should be wary of being drawn into this morass until they find an interested editor. When that happens, then you pay extremely close attention to the reviewers' comments" (Welch 2006). Given the subjectivity of reviewing, this is not a bad plan. In the humanities, such scholars prepare three envelopes, each to different journals, so that if the article comes back from the first or second journal, they can send it right back out that day. If these authors get three rejections, only then do they sit down and really read the
reviewers' comments, see whether there is any agreement among them, and then revise accordingly. One study shows that about half of rejected articles that were resubmitted to other journals were not revised (Yankauer 1985). However, and this is important, revising an article increases the chances of a second journal accepting it (Bakanic, McPhail, and Simon 1987).

Should I revise and resubmit the article elsewhere?

Most scholars try to use the recommendations to revise the article each time it is rejected so that they can send an improved article to the next journal. You can't go wrong with this practice, so long as you don't spend too much time on revising and you only respond to critiques with which you agree. You should take care of any factual errors or real mistakes. The purpose of peer review is to provide you with sound recommendations for improving your article; you might as well use them.

Although three-quarters of authors felt that peer reviewers had some recommendations that were based on "whim, bias, or personal preference," about as many authors also felt that the process of peer review improved their articles (Bradley 1981). It seems that authors must live with two contradictory truths: peer review is a subjective, biased process rife with problems AND peer review is a process that definitely improves articles. The editors' review of the reviewers' reports can be particularly helpful in deciding how to proceed.

Should I resubmit my article to a better journal?

Deciding which journal to resend your article to is another important decision. A question students frequently ask me is: Should I send my rejected but revised article to a better journal that the one that rejected it or a worse one?

According to several studies, scholars traditionally send their rejected articles to less prestigious journals. But other studies show that many scholars send their rejected articles to equivalent journals and some send them to better journals. I think it depends on how you feel about your revision. If you got excellent comments the first time around and
have substantially strengthened the article without revising it, you may want to pick an equivalent journal, or a lower tiered one.

Your resubmission strategy depends on your initial strategy, as well. Some authors start off by sending the article to a tough, disciplinary journal known for rejecting articles but giving useful reviewers' reports that they can use to improve their article. If this process leads to the article getting into the first, highly-ranked journal, all the better; if it doesn't, such authors feel that the first journal's reviewers' reports are improving their chances of getting into their second choice. Given the subjectivity of reviewing, I'm not sure this is a brilliant strategy. Reviewers at disciplinary journals may ask for the kinds of changes that would not improve your chances at an interdisciplinary journal. As Robert Heinlein said years ago, "don't rewrite unless someone who can buy it tells you to" (Pournelle and Pournelle 1996). If the journal is not going to "buy" it, why revise for them? But there is some evidence for this start-at-the-top strategy: studies suggest that a high percentage of article rejected by prestigious journals are published elsewhere. For instance, 72 percent of the articles rejected by the American Journal of Public Health were subsequently published in other journals (Koch-Weser and Yankauer 1993)

Other authors start by sending their article to their second-choice journals first and if their article is not accepted there, but they get useful reviewers' reports that lead them to make a strong revision, they then move up the chain and send the improved article to a better journal. (Yes, you are under no obligation to send your work to the journal that led to that improvement. You have not signed any agreement.)

What's the upshot? If you revise and resubmit your article to another journal, you increase your chances of getting published. Several studies suggest that at least 20 percent of published articles were first rejected by another journal. An older study found that about 1 percent of published articles were rejected by four or more journals before being accepted (Garvey, Lin, and Tomita 1972). As the librarian Ann C. Weller concludes in her review of this research, "studies have shown that indeed, a good percentage of rejected manuscripts do become a part of the published literature" (Weller 2001, 70).

Should I protest the decision?
Sometimes, even after allowing yourself time and space, you perceive the reviewers' or editors' comments as cruel, unfair, or outrageous. In these situations, is it worthwhile or effective to complain to the journal editors (the very people who delivered the decision)? On the one hand, everyone has the right to speak truth to power and if you want to exercise that right, go ahead. All editors have received one or two rants from authors about their decisions or their reviewers' reports - yours won't be the first or the last. Just make sure that your protest letter does not commit the same sins that inspired it: Do not be insulting. Since we often lose impartiality in such situations, let someone edit your protest letter before you send it.

On the other hand, the plain truth is that writing such letters won't change anything. Recently, an interviewer asked a well-published faculty member if he ever protested journal decisions. The author answered with one word, "Yes." The interviewer then asked if protesting ever worked. The author again answered with one word, "No" (Welch 2006, 2). Journal editors are well aware that the process is flawed; thus, they tend to think that the real problem is authors' expectation that it be otherwise:

People have a great many fantasies about peer review, and one of the most powerful is that it is a highly objective, reliable, and consistent process. If I ask people to rank painters like Titian, Tintoretto, Bellini, Carpaccio, and Veronese, I would never expect them to come up with the same order. A scientific study submitted to a medical journal may not be as complex a work as a Tintoretto altarpiece, but it is complex. Inevitably people will take different views on its strengths, weaknesses, and importance. (Smith 2006)

Most importantly, however, is that protesting has very low returns. Writing a protest letter takes up valuable time that you could spend sending your work to another, more receptive journal. Why try to improve the universe and its fairness quotient when you can focus on getting published? Further, if you send a protest to the journal editor, you may feel awkward submitting work to that journal in future, and you don't want to feel awkward submitting work to any journal.
Fortunately, the desire to protest journal decisions tends to wane as you get more experience with submitting articles. You come to understand that plenty of articles are successfully published that have received harsh treatment at the hands of others and you learn to move on. So, if you feel like protesting your first or second journal decision, resist the impulse. You don't know enough yet about how it all works. Get some more experience under your belt.

If it is any comfort, in eleven years as an editor reading reports by reviewers I knew, I began to sense that there was a correlation between niceness and productivity. I can't prove it, but it seemed to me that the kinder and more constructive reviewers were more likely to be productive writers themselves. The harsher and less helpful reviewers were more likely to be unproductive writers. We give others the messages we give ourselves.

Are silence and ineffective protest your only options? No. Another option, if you ever deign to submit work to the journal again, is to mention in your cover letter that you thought you received an "unhelpful" review (use that exact word, not anything stronger) the previous time and would prefer, if possible, to have a different reviewer this time. I'm not sure I recommend this tactic, but some editors will respect this request.

What you definitely should not do is insist that you know who the unkind reviewer was and that that person has a personal vendetta against you. Some authors find it difficult to refrain from trying to guess who the reviewers are. All I can say is that your chances of being right are low. In my years as an editor, I have never had an author guess correctly. And I have seen more than one relationship fail because the author was wrongly convinced about the identity of a negative reviewer. Don't waste time on this game.

Should I appeal the decision?

Some large disciplinary journals have formal appeal processes, with independent boards. Many scholars have recommended over the years that more journals institute better appeal processes and provide authors and reviewers with more chances to dialog -but this sea change does not seem to be coming any time soon (Epstein 1995). A study of author appeals to American Sociological Review found that only 13 percent of appeals were
successful (Simon, Bakanic, and McPhail 1986). Your chances of publication are higher, I think, if you move on to another journal.

Should I ask for additional reviewers?

You can sometimes convince an editor who has rejected your article to send it to new reviewers. Only the most dispassionate of appeals, based on evidence not rhetoric, will win the day. For instance, a professor in one of my courses explained how he converted a journal editor's decision to reject an article into a request for a revision. When this author got the editor's negative decision with the reviewers' reports, he wrote to the editor commenting that both reviewers had paid no attention to the content of his article but only to its methodology. The author thought he could solve the methodological problems they identified, so he wrote to the editor and asked, "if I revise the article as the reviewers suggest, would you be able to send it to new reviewers who would comment on the content?" The editor responded that he would do so if the author truly addressed the first reviewers' comments. The professor revised, the editor agreed that the methodological problems had been solved and sent the revision to two new reviewers. They liked the article and it was published. An important key to his author's success was the very professional tone that he maintained throughout, never insulting the reviewers, accepting that their concerns were valid, and being willing to go through a second review process. Persistence was key.

On very rare occasions, editors may change their decision. At our interdisciplinary journal, we once gave a negative decision to an author with whose subject matter we were not familiar and who received one favorable report and one very negative report. The author responded to the negative reviewer's report with an eight-page, single-spaced defense. The tone of the defense was never insulting, but very focused, providing a swath of data to disprove the reviewer's objections and laying out how the author's and the reviewer's differences reflected a much larger debate going on in the field. The author insisted that the reviewer had not given the article a fair hearing. Since we liked controversial work and found the defense convincing, we asked the author to include much of that defense in the article itself and we published it. So, although protests can't carry the day, professional responses directly addressing the reviewers' critiques sometimes can.

Of course, I don't recommend that you spend time writing eight-page defenses, especially to journals that have sent unkind or unhelpful remarks. If you receive a definitive rejection, it is best to move on to the next journal.