

## Turning Manuscript Rejection “Lemons” Into “Lemonade”

A competent and promising assistant professor had her first experience with academic rejection recently when two manuscripts were not accepted for publication and a well-scored proposal failed to meet the funding cutoff line. My response was, “Welcome to the club!” The difference between the successful and the not-as-successful lies not in who fails more, but in who displays the capacity to manage the present failure for future success. I would like to discuss the most common reasons *Research in Gerontological Nursing (RGN)* rejects research manuscripts and how the authors’ perspectives regarding their science, approaches to manuscript development, and responses to the rejection can turn that rejection “lemon” into “lemonade.” A manuscript rejected by a journal should not be resubmitted to the same journal, but may be reworked or revised into a submission for a different journal.

Using data available through our electronic review system, I analyzed submissions over a 2-year period for reasons why manuscripts were not accepted for publication prior to full peer review and after full peer review. During 2012 and 2013, 36 manuscripts were not accepted for publication by the Editor prior to full review for the following reasons: no new information/topic well covered ( $n = 13$ , 36%); flawed methodology ( $n = 9$ , 25%); insufficient or inappropriate data analysis ( $n = 6$ , 17%); topic not relevant to readership ( $n = 3$ , 8%); flawed or inadequate conceptualization ( $n = 3$ , 8%); insufficient/outdated review of literature ( $n = 1$ , 3%); and poorly written ( $n = 1$ , 3%). During the same time frame, 26 manuscripts were not accepted for publication after peer review for the following reasons: flawed methodology ( $n = 11$ , 42%); no new information/topic well covered ( $n = 5$ , 19%); flawed or inadequate conceptualization ( $n = 3$ , 11%); poorly written ( $n = 3$ , 11%); insufficient/outdated review of literature ( $n = 2$ , 8%); insufficient or inappropriate data analysis ( $n = 1$ , 4%); and flawed conclusions ( $n = 1$ , 4%).

An editor’s quick return of a manuscript that is a poor match for a particular journal gives authors an opportunity to quickly submit the manuscript to a new journal that is a better match. At *RGN*, if a topic is deemed not relevant to readers, we often return the manuscript to the author(s) within a few days following editorial review. The manuscript may still be welcome at another journal, and clear descriptions of the types of manuscripts published in each journal are readily available online. Prospective authors should choose a journal for their manuscript submission after reviewing multiple issues of several journals.

Manuscripts lacking new information do not warrant publication. Replication studies have value up to a point, but, given space constraints, publishing multiple studies with the same findings is not valuable to readers. The abstract and manuscript should be read with as objective a perspective as authors can muster to determine how the study does or does not add value to science in the field. A simple fix may involve explicitly describing the gap the current study fills in both the abstract and introductory paragraphs of the paper. Revising a manuscript as a Research Brief that presents the parts of the study that make a new contribution may be feasible. It is not ethical to publish findings that support a position the authors favor and cull findings that do not support that position. It is, however, acceptable to focus a manuscript on reporting only some of the specific aims of a study.

Conceptually flawed studies are real problems but may not be “lost causes.” These studies are sometimes described as “fishing expeditions,” in which multiple variables are correlated without a clear explanation or justification for inclusion or exclusion. Digging more deeply into the literature may help bring conceptual logic and clarity to a study. Getting studies with these types of problems revised and resubmitted may require additional data analysis of sta-

tistical models that are informed by a more parsimonious and well-justified framework.

The problem of insufficient or outdated literature is usually easily corrected. When insufficient or outdated literature is a reason for rejection, it may mean the study questions and design were not informed by the state of the science on a particular phenomenon, thus rendering the study outdated. Similarly, flawed conclusions are so easily corrected that rejecting a manuscript for this reason may be a sign of other serious conceptual or methodological weaknesses. Reviewers' comments should be read carefully and deciphered with a trusted mentor to determine whether the problems are correctable and warrant revisions and resubmission to another journal.

All studies have methodological limitations, and most methodological flaws are not fatal. Fatal flaws render the results invalid. Examples include a research design that cannot answer the research questions, faulty measurement of critically important variables, the grouping of data from disparate samples, and serious threats to internal validity, such as a biased control condition, sample selection bias, or severe attrition. If reviewers identify serious methodological problems that cannot be corrected, it would not help authors' reputations or science in the field to have the study results published. Sometimes these manuscripts can be reworked into a clinical manuscript or a Focus on Methods submission that highlights lessons learned. A quick review of the literature should be conducted to ascertain if publishing the methodological lessons learned in the study will make a new contribution to the literature or provide new insights for readers of that journal. If readers cannot learn new substantive approaches to conducting research from the authors' insights, then publication of the authors' personal lessons learned may not be warranted. The peer review of methods problems may be used as an opportunity to leverage more methodological resources for authors' colleges, institutes, or health care organizations.

Insufficient or inappropriate data analysis can often be corrected. Running complex multivariate models should not be done in a quest to show some sort of sophistication or complexity. If the questions and methods used are consistent with simple descriptive and inferential analysis, this is fine. More often, multiple univariate analyses are conducted when a multivariate approach would have been possible and would have decreased the risk of Type I error and provided more accurate representations of distributions of the data as a basis for inferences. Inexperienced researchers are often unaware of the amount of time and effort required for the analytical phase of research. When revising a manuscript,

it is natural to look for simple or quick solutions. In this instance, it may be necessary to dig deep for the tenacity and stamina required to redo the analyses.

Lack of focus and wandering away from the central aim of the paper may contribute to manuscript rejection. Manuscripts that are rejected because of poor writing may require the author(s) to partner with more experienced authors of similar studies to improve the final product. The best manuscripts often have multiple authors and have been vetted by peers. Working with an editor who can correct basic grammar, language, and organizational flow issues can help salvage a manuscript for submission to a different journal.

Reviewers can make mistakes. I can attest to the careful consideration we give each submission. We respect and understand the time and effort that have been invested in conducting a study and producing a scholarly outcome. Because we need enough high-quality publications to fill the journal, our bias, if any, is toward acceptance. Authors can contact an editor or provide responses to reviewer feedback that justify why a certain reviewer suggestion was discounted. However, manuscripts that are rejected tend to have multiple problems, and the wisest course of action is to submit to a different journal.

Feelings of disappointment following a negative response from an editor are natural. Consider this rejection a "bump in the road" rather than the "end of the road." Many journals exist in nursing, health care, and gerontology that are interested in publishing research reports and may welcome the revised manuscript. I will end this editorial with a liberating quote on failure from the novel *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* by Tom Robbins (1990): "A mediocre failure is as insufferable as a mediocre success. Embrace failure! Seek it out. Learn to love it. That may be the only way any of us will ever be free" (p. 173). Here's hoping that all of us can feel free to take risks, to innovate, and, at times, to fail.

## REFERENCE

Robbins, T. (1990). *Even cowgirls get the blues*. New York, NY: Random House.

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