

Anthology of the Reasons and Remedies for Manuscript Rejection from the Archives of Editors' and Reviewers' Criticisms

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Abstract: Background: Publish or Perish is an academic dictum that sensitizes scholars to publish their researches in learned journals. However, the desire to publish is one thing; to get the research published is a different kettle of fish. Sometimes, researchers are confronted by the challenge of manuscript rejection whereby, for one reason or the other, their manuscripts are rejected. In this paper, the reasons and remedies for manuscript rejection in the perspectives of editors and reviewers of the rejected manuscripts are described.

Objective: To describe the reasons and remedies for the rejection of manuscripts in the perspectives of editors and reviewers.

Methodology: A retrospective review of published papers earlier rejected by scholarly journals was conducted.

Results: In all, letters of 41 manuscripts earlier rejected were analyzed. The main reason for the rejections was poor manuscript preparation accounting for 63.4% of the cases. Of the 41 rejected manuscripts, 34 (83%), guided by the editors' or reviewers' criticisms, were revised re-submitted and eventually published.

Conclusion: This study shows that poor manuscript preparation is the most common reason for manuscripts rejection accounting for 63.4% of the cases. However, the rejected manuscripts, if revised, using the reviewers' or editors' criticisms as a guide, can be re-submitted and be published. The need for academicians, especially the inexperienced to pay close attention to manuscript preparation is hereby stressed.

Key words: Manuscript, rejection, Reasons, Remedies, Editor's comments, Reviewer's comments.

I. INTRODUCTION

Publish or Perish is an academic dictum that goes beyond mere rhetoric. It is a statement that sensitizes academicians not only to research but also to communicate the research findings to the world. However, studies have shown that the publication of research works is not a bread and butter affair. As remarked by Ish and Rehan-UI-Haq (2018), all

researchers want their work published; unfortunately, this is easier said than done. Over the years, manuscript rejection has been a major obstacle to manuscript publication. The frequency of rejection however varies between authors, journals and specialties. In their study, Hall and Wiclox (2007) reported that only 101 (27%) of the 371 original articles submitted to *epidemiology journal* in 2002 were published. From the *Ann Intern Med* (a general medical journal), came the report that 350 manuscripts were rejected during 1993 and 1994 (Ray and Davidoff, 2000). Earnshaw et al (2017) noted that 917 papers were rejected from *Clinical otolaryngology* between 2011 and 2013. Also, 405 (44%) of the manuscript submitted for publication in *Occupational and environmental medicine* were rejected within the reviewed period (Nemery, 2001). The rejection rate of *Indian journal of orthopaedics* in the last 5 years as at the time of report ranged from 57% to 86% (Ish Kumar and Rehan-UI-Haq, 2018) and since 2005, the rejection rate for unsolicited manuscripts submitted to *CHEST* has ranged from 87 – 91% (Woolley and Barron, 2009).

Sometimes, the basis for the rejection is conflict of interest exhibited by the submission-acceptance process. As often is the case, authors want their manuscripts published while journals tend to reject manuscripts that do not meet the expected standard. According to Wijnhoven and Denjong (2010), originality of research, clinical importance and usefulness of the findings, methodological quality, and supposed interest of the readership of the journal are important criteria for manuscript acceptance. In other word, manuscripts that do not meet these criteria risk being rejected. While rejection based on poor quality manuscript is incontrovertible, there are instances when manuscripts are publishable yet nailed by the manuscript rejection. Indeed, a manuscript rejected by one journal may be published by another journal with impact factor higher than the journal that

initially rejected the manuscript. In the words of Wijnhoven and Denjong (2010); “Manuscripts rejected by the British Journal of Surgery are not always of inferior quality and may well be published in other high-quality journals”.

Manuscript rejection is a hurting and a disappointing experience especially when it is repeated several times (Fathelrahman, 2015). The phenomenon may frustrate beginners stepping on the first rung of academic ladder. It may permanently ‘delete’ research ideas from their mind and deny others of sipping the literary liquor brewed by these young scholars. Although, individual’s writing ability may steadily improve with subsequent rejections, authors need not become rejection ‘veterans’ before they acquire the skills of writing good manuscripts. By simply learning from the mistakes of others, authors can be saved from the tale of woes associated with manuscript rejection. “Much of what I’ve learned about publishing comes from submitting papers to journals, incorporating reviewer comments, workshopping papers and having conversations with colleagues and mentors”, stated Victoria Reyes (2017). Thus, in the perspective of authors of rejected manuscripts, this study was conducted to describe the reasons and remedies for manuscript rejection with a view to provide a back on which others can ride in their publishing voyage. After all, “He who feels it, knows it”.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Study Setting: This was an 8-year (January 2012 – December 2019), retrospective study conducted at the tertiary institutions in Ekiti State, South Western Nigeria. The institutions provide specialist care for the host and neighboring communities.

B. Study design and data Acquisition: Letters of manuscript rejection were sources of the data acquired for this study. The data were acquired from the editors’ or reviewers’ comments or criticisms. All the rejected manuscripts were original articles. The term ‘Levels 1 and 2’ were used to designate the rejected and subsequently published versions of the rejected manuscripts respectively. The differences between the levels 1 and 2 manuscripts were noted using the reviewer’s comments in the initial rejection letter as the common denominator. Also, the journals that initially rejected the manuscripts and those that eventually published the rejected manuscripts were tagged ‘Primary’ and ‘Secondary’ journals respectively. The frequency of rejection-resubmission per manuscript and the time interval between the first rejection and eventual publication of each manuscript were also noted. The status of the journals that rejected and subsequently published,

respectively, the levels 1 and 2 manuscripts was determined using PUBMED, SCIMAGO ranking and or impact factors. The citation milestones of the level 2 manuscripts were extracted from the Research Gate platform. The reasons and by deduction remedies for the initial rejections using the editors’ and reviewers’ comments/criticisms as a guide were collated and analyzed. Although, some of the reasons cut across the various rejected manuscripts, only the main or specific reasons for the rejection of each manuscript were extracted.

C. Exclusion criteria: Excluded were rejected manuscripts with non-specific reasons for the rejection.

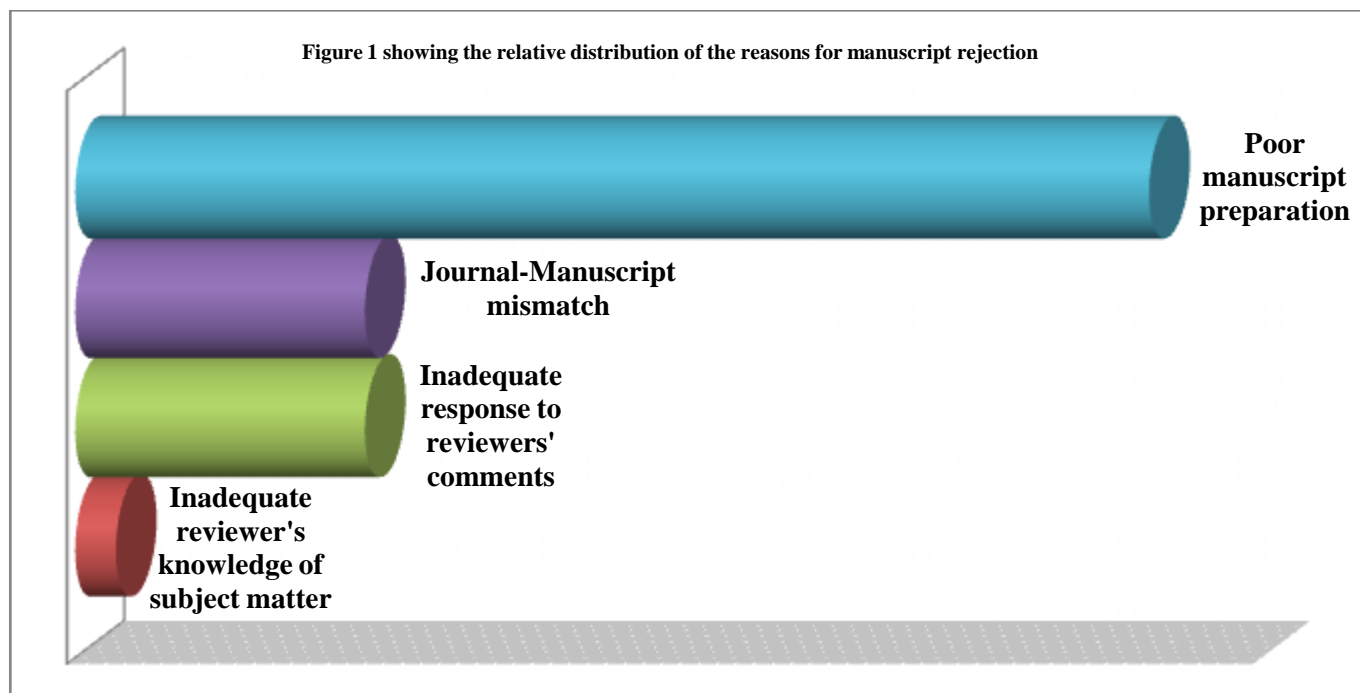
D. Data analysis: Simple descriptive statistics was performed using SPSS Version 14.

III. RESULTS

In all, letters accompanying 41 rejected manuscripts were analyzed. Of the 41 manuscripts, 32 (78%), 7 (17.1%) and 2 (4.9%) were submitted to and rejected by medical, humanity and arts journals respectively. The frequency of rejection per manuscript ranged between 1 – 4 times with 13 (31.7%) of them being rejected more than once. The rate of rejection was high with high-impact factor journals. The main reasons for the initial rejection were as follows: Poor manuscript preparation (63.4%), discordance between the scope of the journal and theme of the manuscripts (17.1%), failure of the authors to respond appropriately to the reviewer’s comments (17.1%) and reviewer’s lack of in-depth knowledge of the subject matter (2.4%) Figure 1. The reasons that constituted poor manuscript preparation are shown in Table 1. Of the 41 rejected manuscripts, 34 (83%) were subsequently published having revised the manuscripts using the reviewers’ or editors’ comments/criticisms as guides.

Table 1 showing components of poor manuscript preparation in this study

S/N	Components	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
1	Ambiguous introduction	2	7.7
2	Error in methodology	9	34.6
3	Incomplete presentation of results	5	19.2
4	Poor discussion or data analysis	6	23.1
5	Inadequate references	1	3.9
6	Language block	3	11.5
	Total	26	100



IV. DISCUSSION

"I'm pleased to inform you that your manuscript is suitable for publication in our journal....." "I'm sorry; your manuscript is not suitable for publication in our journal....." These are the two sides of the same coin of editorial decision on manuscripts submitted for publication in learned journals. Publish or Perish is an academic dictum that warns academicians against complacency in research and publications. However, to research is one thing; to get the research published is sometimes a daunting task. This study which attempted to describe the reasons and remedies for manuscript rejection reviewed 41 rejected manuscripts with 13 (31.7%) of them being rejected multiple times. Of the 41 rejected manuscripts, 34 (83%), using the editors' or reviewers' criticisms as a guide were revised, re-submitted and eventually published by secondary journals. About half (47.1%) of the manuscripts were published in high-impact journals compared with the primary journals that initially rejected the manuscripts. This is concordant with the evidence from Fathelrahman (2015) that not all rejected manuscripts are of poor quality but discordant with that of Earnshaw et al where only 8% of the papers earlier rejected were subsequently published in journals with an impact factor higher than the rejecting journals. Although, the basis for such discrepancies could not be ascertained, the better outcome in the present study could be due to a difference in the authors' ability to improve upon their writing ability with subsequent rejections. However, a major reason for the initial rejection of manuscript in the present study was poor manuscript preparation. This accounted for 63.4 % of the rejected manuscripts in this series. Poor manuscript preparation is a qualitative error in the preparation of manuscripts. The

condition ranges from ambiguous manuscript's introductory segment to a language block.

Ambiguous introductory segment

This accounted for 7.7% of the components of poor manuscript preparation in this series. Generally, every manuscript begins with an introductory segment. The introduction is the first part of a structured manuscript. The segment provides insight into what is expected in the quality of subsequent segments of the manuscript. As the saying goes; "Appearance shows the manner". As noted in the present study, ambiguous introduction can create, in the mind of reviewers, impression of a poor quality manuscript. Here is what a reviewer said of an introduction to one the rejected manuscripts in this study:

"The authors seem to imply the importance of their study with this statement, "any study to reduce or prevent injuries to these vital structures is justifiable." (Lines 17-18) However, there is nothing in the paper that shows that the authors can achieve this aim through the study, in terms of reduction or prevention of injuries. Injuries of these vital structures are very much dependent on the mode of suicide as chosen by the patient and this study would not be able to sway their decision otherwise".

The above quote shows that the author seems to imply that injuries to head and neck can be reduced or prevented through the study. However, this wasn't actually what the author meant by the statement hence indicative of ambiguous write-up. It was this ambiguity that led to the reviewer's criticism of the manuscript with eventual rejection. In another case, the reviewer stated of the introduction as follows:

“Jumping to conclusions: the authors states that x, y, z have been shown, without actually discussing anything”.

Again, this was a misunderstanding of the facts of the matter consequent upon ambiguity in the introduction to the manuscript. These findings stress the need for authors to be clear and unambiguous in writing the introduction to a manuscript. The introduction must show that the author is well-grounded and well-embedded in the existing theories of the subject matter. It must give an overview of the purpose of the study, what is currently known about the research, the research question, existing problem and solution that is achievable through the current research. All these must be stated in unequivocal terms.

Apparent error in methodology

This was another cause of poor manuscript preparation and a contributor to manuscript rejection. The methodology of a research is what determines the outcome of the research. Therefore, error in the methodology will translate into ‘error’ in the overall outcome of the research. As found, error (apparent or real) in methodology is never viewed with kindness by the reviewer and often leads to rejection. This is evident from the following reviewer’s comment in one of the rejected manuscripts in the present study:

Methodology Lacking virtually everything that is expected from a methodology section in an academic paper; too short, too incomprehensive, too disconnected, too unmotivated”.*

A look at these criticisms shows that the reviewer did not condemn the real research methodology but the presentation of the methodology. The descriptive words: *too short, too incomprehensive, too disconnected, too unmotivated* were all referring to the write-ups and not the protocols. As known, reviewers are not witnesses to the research methodology hence they rely on the author’s presentation for its authenticity, validity and reliability. Where the author fails to transmit the research methodology accurately in ‘black and white’, the manuscript stands the risk of being rejected. As noted from the reviewer’s comment, the methodology section of a manuscript must not only be comprehensive, it must also be comprehensible, logical and motivating. It must answer the following questions: What? How? When? and Where? That is, what was performed, how it was performed, when it was performed (duration) and where it was performed (study setting). Answers to these questions must be reliable, valid and reproducible. “Authors must focus more on how their method was used to meet their objective and less on mechanics”, remarked Enago Academy (2019).

Incomplete presentation of results

A major component of poor manuscript preparation, the incomplete presentation of results, could result from oversight, fatigue or stress. The following remark was noted in a reviewer’s criticisms of one of the results in the present study:

“Can the authors give some examples of what they meant by presenting complaints that are not related to the means (other than hearing loss in diazepam overdose)?”

In the said result, the statement “*presenting complaints that are not related to the means*” was used by the author to draw attention to some symptoms that patients used as ‘red herrings’. However, the author failed to list those symptoms such as headaches that were used by the patients to divert the attention of the health care givers away from attempted suicidal ingestion of corrosives. Although negligible, this error, as far as the reviewer is concerned, was strong enough to cause rejection. The reviewer expected the author to go beyond mere stating of ‘*presenting complaints that are not related to the means of attempted suicide*’ to list at least some of those symptoms. Therefore, authors must not overlook issues that seem trivial yet ‘weighty’ as to cause the reviewer to apply the ‘sledge hammer’ on the manuscript.

Defective discussion or analysis of data

The discussion provides the detailed explanation of the meaning of the results of every study. It helps the reviewers as well as the target readers, without being part of the study, to understand the outcome and values of the study. This can be likened to a junior doctor relaying to a senior colleague on the phone, the condition of a patient brought in an emergency. The junior doctor must give accurate account, on the phone, of the clinical symptoms and signs and results of any ancillary investigations for the senior colleague to understand the patient’s condition even in absentia. However, if the doctor fails to give a graphic picture of the patient’s condition for reasons that may range from stress to inexperience, in no way can the senior doctor offer any help. In a rejected manuscript in this study, the reviewer’s has this to say:

“Data analysis, (a) these are merely listings in form of tables, (b) they mostly do not connect back to the overall topic of the paper and (d) they lack coherence as well as discussion and analysis”.

From the above, it is obvious that discussion can fail to explain the meaning of the results as expected thereby precipitating rejection of the manuscript. To avoid such pitfall, the discussion must be detailed, coherent and expressed with logical deductions. One way to achieve this is to let someone who is experienced and neutral to the study read the final draft of the manuscript. Also, by regular consultation of other publications, authors may well be connected to the mainstream of writing the discussion to research works.

Language block

Language block is the term adopted to describe inability of authors to recall appropriate word, phrase or text for a particular concept and context. This leads to poor writing of the manuscript. Invariably, the author is portrayed as someone who is not adept in the language of scientific writing. Below is a gentle way of portraying an author as inexperienced in the

language of scientific writing as deduced from the editor's comment.

"If you feel that your paper could benefit from English language polishing, you may wish to consider having your paper professionally edited for English language by a service such as Wiley's".

Language block is particularly common among authors whose primary language is not English language. One way to reduce the incidence of language block in manuscript writing is to allow a 'resting phase' for the author to refresh and garner more mental strength. By the time the draft is picked up from where it was hung, the writing will flow. Of course, for joint authorship, every author, even in a multicenter study, must read and correct the final draft of the manuscript. For single authorship, the final draft may be sent to someone who is experienced in manuscript publishing to proof-read. Alternatively, the manuscript may be sent to journals that place less emphasis on language proficiency. Of course, such journal is not likely to be a high-rated journal. Other option is to employ the service of professional editors such as the Wiley's as recommended by the editor that rejected a manuscript on the basis of the above-mentioned comment.

Inadequate references

Although, the number of manuscripts affected by this factor is infinitesimal, its recognition by the reviewer shows that it is strong enough to cause manuscript rejection. This is affirmed by the following reviewer's comment in the present study:

"Very few references to existing research are provided leaving doubts about how well-informed, well-embedded and objective this piece of research is"

It is however noteworthy that some journals do restrict the number of references per manuscript. Also important to note is that the number of references that can be cited would depend on the existing volume of works that have been published on the subject matter. Nevertheless, it is important to cite enough references as this could improve the writing ability and academic prowess of the author. More importantly, citing enough references is a proof that the author is well-informed and well-grounded in the subject matter. To ensure that enough references are cited, it is always good to move close to the number of references specified by the journal. Failure to do this may as well be considered an invitation to the sword of Damocles upon the manuscript.

Journal-Manuscript mismatch

Journal-manuscript mismatch is an avoidable cause of manuscript rejection. In the viewpoint of the editors, once a manuscript fails to meet the scope of the journal, it should suffer outright rejection. This was the fate of some manuscripts in this study. As the study shows, 7 (17.1%) of the manuscripts were rejected by the editorial management without passing beyond the preliminary stage of manuscript

processing. In one of the rejected manuscripts, a simple denial went thus:

"Your manuscript does not fit any of the article types we publish".

Such decision is like the 'supreme court' verdict against which no one can appeal. Previous studies have observed that submission to wrong journal is a mismatch and an important cause of manuscript rejection without undergoing peer reviewing. According to Javed (2010); "The Editor-in-Chief always looks at the scope of the research study with respect to that of the journal before deciding whether to send it for reviewing". Also noted by Eassom (2018) is that: "If the paper won't be of interest or value to the journal's audience, it's unlikely to be accepted". Although, turning down manuscripts could be an indirect way of rejecting the manuscript for reasons other than the Journal-Manuscript mismatch, in most cases the editors meant what they say. However, if in doubt, the author must go back and peruse the journal scope. If truly the manuscript was sent to the right journal, then, there are probably other reasons for the rejection and such manuscript should not be sent verbatim to other journals. Instead, it should be thoroughly revised before sending to other journals.

Inadequate response to reviewers' criticisms

This is responsible for multiple rejections of any manuscript. If authors fail to respond to the reviewer's criticisms in the revised versions, the manuscripts risk being rejected several times. Failure to respond to the reviewers' criticisms could be due to ambiguity in the reviewer's criticism or failure of the author to understand how to respond to the criticism. Once the author is unable to revise the manuscript in line with the reviewers' comments or criticisms, then a golden opportunity for manuscript acceptance might be lost. This was noted by Waaga's (2017), in a remark, that failure to respond to the comments at resubmission is a lost opportunity. As a way to surmount the challenge of ambiguity in the reviewer's comment or lack of understanding of how to respond to the reviewers' comments, the author may seek the opinions of experienced authors who may be able to decode the contents of the ambiguous comments. Also, literatures on how to respond to reviewer's comment are handy at providing useful information about response to reviewer's comments.

Inadequate reviewer's knowledge of the subject matter

This factor was noted as an important obstacle to manuscript acceptance in the present study. Sometimes, the editor sends the manuscript to a reviewer who has no knowledge of the subject matter. In such circumstance, in no way can the reviewer give an objective review and may therefore reject the manuscript. A case in the present study stated as follows:

"I am reviewing this article without any knowledge of Yorùbá....."

The reviewing of manuscript without knowledge of the subject matter was noted by Javed (2010) when he stated:

“Sometimes, as an oversight the manuscript may be sent to a reviewer who may not be an expert in the field of the subject under review”.

It is noteworthy that this may not be stated in the rejection letter hence the author may not be privy to the fundamental reason for the rejection. Thus, to minimize the risk of manuscript being sent to a reviewer that has no knowledge of the subject matter, the author may consider sending the manuscript to journal that request for suggested names of reviewers

V. CONCLUSION

This study shows that poor manuscript preparation is the most common reason for manuscripts rejection accounting for 63.4% of the cases. However, the rejected manuscripts, if revised, using the reviewers’ or editors’ criticisms as a guide, can be re-submitted and be published. The need for academicians, especially the inexperienced to pay close attention to manuscript preparation is hereby stressed.

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