

COMMON REASONS WHY ACADEMIC PAPERS ARE REJECTED BY JOURNAL EDITORS

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This paper focuses on the common reasons why academic papers are rejected by journal editors. A paper may be rejected by a journal editor before it has even been sent out for review for the following reasons:

- the paper is not relevant to that journal's readers (i.e. it doesn't fit the scope of the journal);
- the paper does not make a contribution to new knowledge in the discipline or the application of knowledge;
- the paper does not meet established ethical standards;
- the paper is poorly written; or
- the paper has not been prepared according to the journal's guidelines for presentation.

The above reasons may also be given by journal reviewers as reasons for rejecting a paper once it has gone through the review process. The reasons for a paper being rejected once it has been reviewed fall mainly into two categories: (1) problems with the research; and (2) problems with the writing/presentation of the paper.

PROBLEMS WITH RESEARCH

A paper may be rejected because of problems with the research on which it is based. Such problems may include the following:

- the paper describes a poorly conducted study;
- the research conducted was inadequate;
- the literature review is inadequate;
- the paper has methodological problems;
- the sample is problematic (i.e. too small in size, self-selected etc.)
- the statistics are inadequate;
- the data have been interpreted poorly;
- the analysis is weak; or
- the paper duplicates other work/does not report on anything new.

In the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, it is suggested that authors/researchers ask themselves whether the research on which they wish to

base a paper is “sufficiently important and free from flaws to justify publication”? (2001, p. 4)

The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* also provides a useful checklist that authors can use to evaluate the content of their papers and to decide whether their research is likely to warrant publication:

- “Is the research question significant, and is the work original and important?”
- Have the instruments been demonstrated to have satisfactory reliability and validity?
- Are the outcome measures clearly related to the variables with which the investigation is concerned?
- Does the research design fully and unambiguously test the hypothesis?
- Are the participants representative of the population to which generalizations are made?
- Did the researcher observe ethical standards in the treatment of participants..?
- Is the research at an advanced enough stage to make the publication of results meaningful?” (2001, p. 6)

PROBLEMS WITH WRITING/PRESENTATION

A paper may be rejected because of problems with its presentation. Such problems may include the following:

- the paper is poorly written;
- the author guidelines have not been followed;
- the paper is too technical/contains too much jargon;
- the paper is over the journal’s word limit; or
- the paper has been carelessly prepared (e.g. it has inconsistencies or spelling or grammatical errors). If an author has been careless in writing/presenting a paper, the journal editor may suspect that the author has also been careless in conducting the research on which the paper is based.

OTHER PROBLEMS

A paper may be rejected for other general reasons, such as:

- the content of the paper may not be timely (i.e. it might be out of date);
- the journal may not have space for the paper (i.e. there may be an overriding need to maintain a balance of articles in the journal);
- the paper cannot compete with the high quality of other papers submitted to the journal. This may be the case with papers submitted to high-ranking journals and is not necessarily a reflection on the quality of the paper. Due to space shortages, journal editors often need to make difficult decisions regarding whether a paper will/will not be published, even if the reviewers have recommended that it is suitable for publication;
- the journal may have recently published another paper on the subject and does not wish to revisit the area; and
- publication bias (the editor/reviewers may have subjective reasons for rejecting a paper).

CONCLUSION

Most of the above problems can be avoided if the research on which a paper is to be based is conducted competently and the resulting paper is well written (see “Preparing Articles for Publication in Peer-Reviewed Journals” for advice on writing papers). The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* provides the following advice on what editors and reviewers look for in papers:

“The goal of the APA primary journals is to publish useful original information that is accurate and clear. For this reason, editors and reviewers look for a manuscript that

- makes an original, valid, and significant contribution to an area of psychology appropriate to the journal to which it is submitted;
- conveys its message clearly and as briefly as its content permits; and
- is in a form that follows the style prescribed in the *Publication Manual*.”

(p. 361 APA)

Although the APA editors were referring specifically to psychology journals, the content of the quote is applicable to papers in any field; that is, a paper should make an original contribution to the relevant field of research and be clearly and concisely written in accordance with the intended journal’s style guidelines.

REFERENCES

American Psychological Association, *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 5th edn, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001.

Weller AC, *Editorial Peer Review: Its Strengths and Weaknesses*, Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc., 2002.