

Cambridge Core blog



Dealing with rejection: Advice from an editor

R. Michael Alvarez (<http://blog.journals.cambridge.org/author/mikealvarez/>)

24 July 2017

Last update: 28/07/17 11:53

It happens to all academic researchers, all of the time. We have to deal with rejection – our papers get rejected for publication by journals.

In my experience as an author, only a couple of my papers have received a positive decision from the first journal the paper I submitted it to. That's a rare event, and if it happens to you, celebrate the occasion!

Typically, my papers have been submitted to at least two journals before they get a favorable decision. I dislike criticism as much as anyone else, but I've learned to have a thick skin, and to use the criticism to my advantage. All scholars need to tolerate negative comments from reviewers, and negative decisions from journal editors, and learn to use that criticism to improve the quality of their work.

Thus, scholars need to learn how to deal with rejection as part of the peer-review process. From my perch as a co-editor of *Political Analysis* (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/political-analysis>), and based on my own experience as an author, I have four suggestions about how to deal with rejection in the peer-review process.

First, reviewers are not stupid.

In fact, most reviewers provide reasonable advice and commentary. The problem is that authors (myself included) don't like to hear critical assessments of their writing, their research, and their contribution to the literature. So resist that urge to immediately say "the reviewers are idiots" when you get negative reviews. Instead, take a close look at what they said about your paper.

As an author, you have to keep in mind that reviewers are being asked (generally) to provide a public service. Usually they are not compensated for their time, and more to the point, they have a lot of other demands for their attention. They don't have an infinite amount of time to try to figure your paper out – instead, if they can't make heads or tails of your argument, if they don't understand your analysis, or they can't figure out the exact contribution of your work, the fault usually lies with the author, not the reviewer.

In other words, if you think that the reviewers (and the journal editor) have missed the point of your paper, that's most likely your fault. You simply didn't communicate well your argument, your results, and your contribution. As an author, it's hard to admit that you didn't frame, write, and explain your point in a paper adequately. But in general, if you think the reviewers didn't get it, that's a sign that you didn't do your job as an author.

Second, don't flame the editor and reviewers.

Sometimes authors feel the need to respond to journal editors when they get "bad" reviews, or they think that the editor has missed the point of their paper. Keep in mind that editors (like reviewers) have limited time, and also keep in mind that they probably don't need to publish your paper for their journal to continue to be successful. Sending that nasty email response to the editor doesn't help your cause, so keep it to yourself.

Third, appeals usually don't work.

Our editorial policy at *Political Analysis* is that we don't consider appeals of our decisions, unless there was a procedural problem in the review process. And based on my conversations with other journal editors, most have similar approaches to author appeals. So it's not a great idea to appeal a decision, once an editor has made a decision it's generally final.

In my experience as an author, rarely have I appealed negative decisions. The one situation I remember best occurred early in my career. We thought that the reviewers of a paper that we had submitted to a major journal didn't understand our analysis (which is true, they didn't get it, and they wrote negative reviews based on misunderstandings of our work). We wrote a lengthy appeal, sent it to the editor, and they denied the appeal. We then revised the paper heavily, submitted it to another journal, and were successful there. The lesson – we didn't explain our work well, and we needed to revise the paper so as to make our analysis clear for reviewers and readers. The mistakes of the reviewers gave us clear evidence of how we needed to revise and improve our paper.

Fourth, take the reviews seriously.

In many cases in the past, as a reviewer for other journals, I've received a paper to review that seems familiar. I'll look at my records and realize that I recently reviewed that same paper for another journal. In a distressingly large proportion of these cases, the author has done nothing to respond to my past

review. My reaction? I contact the editor, tell them I've recently reviewed the paper for another journal, and offer to send along that review.

I've seen the same thing happen repeatedly at *Political Analysis*, when reviewers will contact me and complain that they already reviewed the paper for another journal, and that the authors haven't done anything to respond to their past concerns. When that happens, it usually doesn't bode well for the rest of the review process for the paper in question.

My advice? Even if your paper has been rejected for publication, take the reviews seriously. Use them to revise your paper before you submit it to another journal. Those reviewers took the time to read and to comment on your work. The least that you can do in return is glean what you can from those reviews. And keep in mind that it's likely that you'll get "repeat" reviewers for your work; you want to show them that you've taken their comments in the past seriously, and that your work is improving as a result.

Dealing with rejection is hard. After spending many hours producing a paper, it's often very difficult to get negative feedback, and to stomach the harsh criticism is part of the peer-review process. But that's how science works; take advantage of the criticism to improve the quality of your work, and get it back into the review process at another journal as quickly as you can revise it.

R. Michael Alvarez, co-editor *Political Analysis*
(<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/political-analysis>)