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# Avoiding Desk Rejection of a Manuscript

## Avoiding Desk Rejection of a Manuscript

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### INTRODUCTION

I know authors are discouraged when they submit a manuscript to a journal and receive a very quick rejection letter. This is known as desk rejection of manuscripts—the rejection decision is made by the editor without sending the paper out for peer review. High quality journals are inundated with manuscripts—editors receive many more manuscripts than they can publish in a given issue or volume. For example, one journal for which I am Editor-in-Chief, the *Journal of Advanced Nursing (JAN)*, receives hundreds of manuscripts annually. This year I expect to receive more than 1500 papers, but we only publish approximately 300 of these—about 15% to 20%. Clearly, the greater number of manuscripts a journal receives, the lower the proportion that can be published. Given this, I need to have a mechanism for making a quick decision. I simply can't send them all out for peer

review. This would take too long and be too much of a burden on the journal reviewers, especially for papers that have very little or no chance of being accepted or published. I must focus my efforts and the efforts of my editors and reviewers, on those papers that I think are most likely to be ultimately accepted and quite frankly, those papers that I think will benefit the journal by generating interest among readers.

So, when a manuscript is submitted, most editors of large, high-quality journals have a system for reviewing the manuscript quickly. I can't vouch for what every editor does, but I will tell you the system that I apply. Usually the first person who sees it is the editor or editor-in-chief. I essentially look at manuscripts when they are submitted for four things:

- The fit of the paper with the journal;
- Title, which should be short and descriptive;
- Abstract, which should be formatted according to the journal guidelines and the proper length; and
- A cursory review of specific content.

To repeat: fit, title, abstract, and content. I must add, at this stage of the process, this doesn't usually involve me reading the manuscript in great detail in order to make a decision.

## **FIT**

First, let's look at fit, that is how well does the editor or editor-in-chief think that a submitted manuscript will fit the journal? Fit can be rather hard to define. However all journals publish their aims and scope; some journals also publish a mission statement. Anyone who's thinking of submitting a manuscript to a specific journal

should carefully read the aims, scope, and mission. For example, the journals I edit publish articles relevant to nursing and midwifery. We publish articles based on research, practice, and also those that are important to nursing education. All articles have to be scholarly. Some journals will be more restrictive and they may be more specific. For example, if you want to publish articles on education you need to carefully check this before you submit. Clearly there are people who miss the mark by a wide margin, for example, sending in an article about physics or chemistry to a nursing journal! This happens occasionally but more common are articles that are close but still don't fit—such as medical topics, or articles on physical therapy or occupational therapy. Without a nursing or midwifery component to them, they won't be of interest. Articles don't necessarily have to be written by nurses or midwives before we will think they are acceptable but without a nurse author, they often don't have a nursing focus. Many articles are submitted that clearly fall outside the aims and scope of the journal and clearly don't fit because of the content. Some don't fit because they are not at the appropriate level—essays, for example. Some articles may be hard to judge and the editor just has to make a decision. This can be subjective but it is part of the editor's job to be decisive.

## **TITLE**

Next, I take a look at the title. I simply cannot emphasize enough how important a well-written title is to making a good impression on a busy editor or editor-in-chief. Titles tell a lot. They should clearly convey a great deal of information about the content of the article. Titles often tell me something about the author too, and what was on their mind when they were writing the article. This may be either positive or negative!

The best titles are short. Some journals give a restriction on the number of words or the number of lines in a title. My journals kindly allow 25 words which is more

generous than some journals request. Even so, you don't necessarily need to use all 25 words. You want to convey as much information as you can in as few words as possible. Don't make your title too long—try to get to the point quickly.

The title should be descriptive of the content of the article. Don't try to make literary allusions to books you have read or concepts that you want to relate. Just tell me the topic using plain English. If the article is based on a recognized technique like a randomized control trial or a systematic review, then those words should be in the title. It is acceptable to write, "A systematic review of..." or "A randomized control trial of..." Don't try to make the title too clever, long, or complicated.

At *JAN*, and in common with some other journals—but not all, you have to check—I don't like to see countries mentioned in the title. You have to state in the abstract in which country the work was carried out. This information will also be included in the main part of the manuscript. But in the title, this is irrelevant information. If your article is based on a national survey, then might be a case for including the country in the title. However, putting countries in the title makes the article very restrictive and of interest to only a very few people. At *JAN*, we have found that articles with countries in the title tend not to be cited, regardless of the content. When an article is not cited, it makes me think they also didn't read it.

If your study is qualitative, I prefer not to see quotes from the research in the title. Again I want to see the title tell what kind of study it was and what it was about. I also don't like to see questions in titles. Make the title a statement of what has been done and not a question for the reader to answer.

One of the things not to do in the title—as we say in English, don't shoot yourself in the foot—is to include words that diminish the value of your study. For example, don't say "small" or "local," or name one hospital or one city. This reduces interest

in your article. Your study may well be in one hospital (or city or country) but that doesn't mean to say that's it not of interest and has value to others. But as soon as you flag the title with any of these diminishing words, it may lessen the interest of the editor or editor-in-chief. Let me reiterate: the titles should be short and to the point. Include the method that states exactly what was done. Don't include countries or words that devalue your study.

## **ABSTRACT**

Next on my list is the abstract. There isn't really a great deal to say about the abstract but three things are essential. First, it must convey the essence of the article, concisely and precisely. If the abstract doesn't tell me what the article is about, I may not read any further. Second, the abstract must be in the format requested by the journal. Third, the abstract should also be the length specified for the journal. These three things are very easy for an editor to check at the time of submission. So, for example, if an abstract is formatted with subheadings, and those headings are ordered: Aims, Background, Design, Methods, Results, Conclusions, then the abstract should be ordered precisely like that. If what is requested begins with Background, then Aims, and the design is included in the Methods section and doesn't have a separate heading, then that's what you need to write. I am referring here to my journals; all journals have their own specifications. Some journals only want a narrative abstract, without headings. Whatever the case, if the abstract isn't written precisely according to the guidelines, then it is very likely to be rejected immediately. You may think this is very unfair or rather harsh; however it's a clear indication to the editor or editor-in-chief that you haven't read the guidelines for the journal. If you had read the guidelines or looked at a specific example of the type of paper you want to publish then you would have seen how the abstract should be formatted. I am afraid that I have very little patience for this and usually reject the article at source. It would

have to be an exceptionally desirable article for me to ask you to make adjustments to the abstract and re-submit.

## CONTENT

Now, I have come to the content of the manuscript. As I have alluded to earlier, I don't usually read the manuscript in detail. I have a very quick look and will skim through to look for some specific points. Some of these are quite superficial, in fact, a great deal of what I have said relates to superficial points—and that is an important concept for you to grasp. I don't have a great deal of time to look at your manuscript. You want to make your paper look appealing as quickly and as simply as you possibly can.

Even so, I do have a look at the content. First, looking at the main body of the manuscript, one of the first things I check is the referencing system. I don't look for every full stop and comma to be correct, but for example in *JAN*, I expect to see a Harvard type (author-date; similar to APA) system of references. If I see, instead, a Vancouver type system (numeric; similar to AMA), this will almost certainly lead to an immediate reject. I know there are software programs that can quickly convert from one system to another—but if someone submits a manuscript to me with the wrong referencing system, again it's another clear indication that they have not read the guidance for the journal. I'm afraid the manuscript will almost certainly be rejected.

Beyond that there are some key features of certain kinds of articles that I expect to see. If an article claims to be a randomized control trial I expect to see two things: a CONSORT checklist and a CONSORT flow chart. On the checklist, I expect to see that the trial was registered. If I don't see a CONSORT checklist, the paper will be rejected immediately. If there is a CONSORT checklist and there isn't evidence of registration according to the AllTrials campaign, to which we have

signed up, then again the paper will be rejected. It simply cannot be published. Likewise, for papers purporting to be systematic reviews, I expect to see a PRISMA checklist and PRISMA flowchart. If these are missing, then again it's a clear indication that the guidance hasn't been read and it wasn't followed. If human subjects were part of the study, I need to see evidence of ethical review and oversight; for articles originating in the United States, Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) have this responsibility. These boards or committees may have different names in other countries, but the bottom line is that without indication of ethical review by an outside third party, the manuscript will be rejected.

I'm often asked what kind of papers are most likely to be accepted or what topics are of particular interest. However, editors of academic journals tend not to think that way. Quite frankly the papers that are most likely to get published are those that follow the journal guidance closely. Those are the points I have made so far: fit, short titles, well-written abstract that is formatted correctly, and the main part of the manuscript meeting the standards of the journal.

Sometimes papers do follow all these points and they still get rejected. This has to do with the content. It is difficult to give hard and fast guidelines on this, but papers are rejected even if they fit the guidance but don't meet the editor's approval or don't interest me enough. That doesn't mean that manuscript will not be publishable somewhere else or in the future, it just means for that specific journal, or that specific editor or editor-in-chief, the paper just hasn't crossed the line of acceptability. This is a matter of judgment; it is not a scientific process. I don't want to be too specific here but manuscripts that repeat full studies without producing any reasonable new information and which have been replicated without any real justification really don't appeal to *JAN*. Replication of course is laudable, but yet another study that tells me, for example, that adolescents don't like having diabetes or stroke affects sexual function—well, I know these things. As I say, these

manuscripts may well be publishable somewhere else. But the competition for space in top quality journals can lead to rejection of these manuscripts upon submission. On the other hand, the topics themselves are not uninteresting and studies that show new insights or even studies of interventions of help to alleviate these problems, of course could be of interest. It is very hard to point specifically to the kind of content or articles that I desk reject or put forward for review. Again, I emphasize that this is not a scientific process and it is a matter of judgment.

My advice if your article is rejected at once, then quickly review and revise and send it somewhere else. Of course you will have to check the guidance for the new journal. You may want to consider if a “red flag” fatal flaw (such as no IRB review) was present. We normally say in our rejection letters that we will not enter into correspondence about articles that have been desk rejected and I adhere very strongly to that. I really don't have time to discuss articles I reject at this stage as I have just far too many articles to process. So, I really advise you not to waste your time and the editor's time asking why your article didn't go forward, or worse, trying to present a case asking the editor to reverse their decision.

## **CONCLUSION**

To reiterate, desk rejection, or rejection at source, is the process of rejecting a manuscript without peer review. The features of an article that are important on submission are the overall fit of the manuscript to the aims and scope of the journal; the title, which should be short and descriptive; the abstract, which should follow whatever guidance that the journal provides; and content that follows the guidance of the journal (eg, referencing system) as well as external conventions, such as CONSORT and PRISMA. It is a fact that top-tier journals in nursing are very competitive and receive hundreds of manuscripts and can only publish a small portion, usually less than 50%, of what they receive. You can do your part to present your paper so that it will pass muster with the editor or editor-in-chief. If

that happens, then it will go on for peer review, where it will receive a more thorough evaluation for potential publication.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roger Watson, PhD, RN, FAAN, FRCN, is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Advanced Nursing* and Editor of *Nursing Open* and an editorial board member of the *WikiJournal of Medicine*. He has honorary and visiting positions in China, Hong Kong, and Australia. He is Professor of Nursing, University of Hull, UK. He is also a member of the Authors-in-Residence for *Nurse Author & Editor*. Contact Roger by email: [r.watson@hull.ac.uk](mailto:r.watson@hull.ac.uk) and follow him on Twitter: @rwatson1955. His ORCID is [orcid.org/000-0001-8040-7625](https://orcid.org/000-0001-8040-7625).

NB: This article was adapted from a podcast presented by the Enago Academy. You can listen to the original podcast here: <https://www.enago.com/academy/how-to-avoid-desk-rejections-of-your-manuscript/>

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