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Essay on the importance of rejection to academic careers

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In my career, I've published a great many articles and books. What most of my colleagues don't know is that I've had lots of rejections too — hundreds of them.

Rejections are a dirty secret among academics. Publication successes are cause for celebration, or at least a proud listing on C.V.s and departmental lists. Failures — rejected papers and unsuccessful grant and promotion applications — are usually hidden and sometimes a source of shame. The result is that many scholars, especially junior ones, have unrealistic expectations. For this reason Donald Hall, in his book *The Academic Self*, [1] recommends that experienced academics tell more about their failures, as encouragement to others not to give up.

In my experience, rejections are nothing to be afraid of. The bigger problem is being afraid to try.

I started off in physics and had the good fortune of having supervisors and mentors who, after having a paper rejected, would just submit it somewhere else. I developed trust in my judgment about the value and quality of my work. This provided a buffer against rejection when I started submitting papers in fields where I had no formal training.

Sometimes I was lucky and was accepted immediately. However, many of my most important papers were rejected by one or more journals.

In the 1980s I wrote a paper about a particular case of alleged plagiarism by an academic. I sent it to education and social-issue journals and received one rejection after another. One editor told me he wanted to publish it, but received legal advice not to. Finally, the editor of the 10th journal I tried said I could revise and resubmit. The revisions amounted to almost a complete rewrite of the paper, but it was published.

My first book was rejected by 30 publishers. Along the way, there were some promising prospects. Three publishers sent the full manuscript to readers who recommended publication, but then the publishers said no anyway. I've talked to colleagues who have had an even longer road to book publication.

Now that I've had decades of experience, you might think getting published would become easier, but this hasn't been so. Recently, I have had two papers that set records for rejections. One has been rejected 15 times.

Is there any pattern to the rejections? Perhaps the rejected submissions really were of poor quality, or maybe they were too unorthodox or daring. However, looking over the papers repeatedly rejected compared to those accepted by the first journal I tried, I can't see any consistent pattern. Rejection seems almost a random occurrence.

I'm a steady and conscientious researcher, and the quality of my work doesn't vary a lot. Before submitting papers, I always send drafts to colleagues for comment, so the submitted version has been well-scrutinized and polished before editors and referees ever see it. After a rejection, I examine the readers' comments for ideas to improve the paper before trying another journal. It can be a long road.

Only recently did I discover research showing that, for success in careers, persistence in the face of failure is as important as intelligence. Matthew Syed, a table tennis champion whose book *Bounce* is a popular treatment of research on expert performance, gives the example of elite figure skaters. Those who regularly attempt jumps beyond their ability have the most falls during practice, whereas those who don't push their limits don't fall as often, but at the cost of not achieving their potential.

Persistence in seeking publication in a journal has two main steps. The first — the hardest for many — is initially submitting a paper. The second step occurs after a rejection: persistence is a matter of considering the comments from the editor and referees, making changes if desired, finding another journal and sending off the paper. It's quite straightforward, requiring work to be sure, but seldom an intellectual challenge.

The biggest difficulty is psychological. I know some top scholars who refuse to submit papers to journals because they can't handle referees' comments and rejections.

I know many junior scholars who are terrified of rejection and are caught in a syndrome of counterproductive perfectionism and low output. The problem is feeling rejection of a submission as a personal failure. That indeed is hard to stomach.

My approach is to treat the submission process as a game of strategy. It's about convincing editors and referees that a paper is worthwhile in order to gain access to a credible platform. Submitting a paper to a journal is my move. I wait for the journal's move, and continue accordingly.

The key here is to distinguish the paper from myself. The paper is my work, not me. If it is rejected, I don't consider this a personal failing. In playing a game of tennis, it would be silly to give up after losing a point or even a match. The key is to keep practicing and keep playing.

Even so, it can be discouraging to put a lot of work into a piece of work and receive dismissive comments. So I take a few days or weeks to digest the disappointment and plan my next move.

Jeff Schmidt, author of *Disciplined Minds*, suggested a useful way to reframe a rejection. When I told him that one of my papers had been rejected by several top science journals, he told me the loss was theirs — they had missed out on a valuable contribution.

Persistence is not about hitting your head against a brick wall when there is no chance of breaking through. It is about developing a capacity to judge your own work, making a considered judgment about what to do next, and then actually doing it. Most of all it is about being willing to fail, learning from the experience, and trying again.

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