

Research paper got rejected? Here's how to handle it

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So you submitted your research to a publication, but it wasn't accepted—what do you do next? Rejection can be tricky to navigate, especially early in your medical career, but with the right mindset and a little effort, an old paper can find new life.

Follow these tips from Gail M. Sullivan, MD, editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, so you can beat rejection and make the most of your next submission:

Take a minute to accept what happened

Before you can adequately think about publishing your research again, it's important to accept and overcome old feelings. "It is best to identify your emotions and employ your best coping mechanisms," Dr. Sullivan said. "Relax with your favorite tea or coffee, vent to your friends or family, exercise, or get a hug from your kids."

Read the rejection letter

"The rejection letter should be read as carefully as instructions to cash in a winning lottery ticket," Dr. Sullivan said, noting that rejection letters often contain questions or comments on your paper that can guide future revisions. This is especially true of papers that may have been rejected after an editor's initial read. "Papers that are rejected after peer review have detailed comments about the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, as perceived by the reviewer," Dr. Sullivan said. Use this information to your advantage before your next submission.

Make sure you follow the author instructions

"In the review process for many journals, papers that do not follow the author instructions carefully in terms of format, word count, number of figures and tables, and references will be rejected immediately," Dr. Sullivan said. If you choose to deviate from the journal's instructions in future submissions, make sure you clearly explain this to the editors in a cover letter. "Sometimes journals

will review papers that do not fit the prescribed format if there is a cover letter establishing the reason” but they still may require you to revise your manuscript to fit the author instructions, so following the journal’s guidelines is your best strategy, Dr. Sullivan said.

Match your paper to the journal

Ask yourself: Did my research really fit the journal’s readers? “A common reason for internal rejection of submitted papers is a mismatch between the paper and the scope of the journal, which is closely related to the journal’s target audience,” Dr. Sullivan said. Still, if your paper wasn’t the best fit for one journal, that doesn’t mean it can’t shine in another. Before submitting your work to the next publication, review a few past issues for content and format. Pay close attention to common themes, research designs, and authors you see—these are clues about the kind of content the audience wants to read. Also, check websites that “attempt to match article title, keywords, or abstract to a particular journal,” Dr. Sullivan said. These keywords will help you make a more targeted paper.

Resubmit to the same journal, or submit to a new journal

“If the problems cited in the rejection letter refer to steps or results that you have done but, for some reason, were omitted from your paper, you may be able to resubmit your manuscript with the missing methods or data,” but it’s best to verify this with the journal office beforehand, Dr. Sullivan said.

If you don’t think your manuscript has a chance of fitting the same journal after a revision, find another publication that may be interested in it. But remember to incorporate “all appropriate changes using the feedback already provided in the initial review” as the same reviewers who previously read your manuscript may be requested to peruse your paper for the new journal. And don’t forget to revise the cover letter. “Editors laugh when they receive a cover letter addressed to another journal—yes, this happens—and it’s not the best way to announce your paper,” Dr. Sullivan said.

Volunteer at a journal

“Consider volunteering to one or more journals to review papers, both as a good citizen of the medical education world and to improve you own editing skills,” Dr. Sullivan said, noting that volunteering can offer opportunities to meet experts who can also help you advance your work.

For more on getting published, review the AMA’s top tips on publishing your research in a medical journal and additional research advice from *JAMA*.