

Writing an Effective Appeal Letter to a Journal Editor

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It would be surprising to learn of a scientist whose work had not been rejected by an academic journal at some point in their career. Some of the most famous scientists have been honored and given awards for work that was initially rejected. In a 2013 interview with [The Guardian](#), Peter Higgs describes how an initial attempt to publish his findings regarding the particle he predicted, now known as the “Higgs boson,” was rejected. However, after making an appeal and revising his paper to give more specifics on the particle, it was accepted, leading to his sharing a Nobel Prize for the concept with François Englert.

The Higgs boson story had a happy ending; however, most appeals are not successful. Therefore, serious consideration must be given before writing to journal editors to appeal the case. Before appealing, authors must be sure that they have a strong case

for their academic research or that a larger issue is at stake (e.g., systemic bias or discrimination). Only one thing can be gained—publication, however, much may be lost, including time and reputation.

Writing an Effective Appeal

There are five basic themes to writing an effective appeal letter:

1. Leave emotions out of it
2. Stick to the facts
3. Make a point-by-point rebuttal
4. Take time to re-explain key points
5. Above all, be respectful

Emotions

Before writing an appeal letter, wait and let your emotional response dissipate before firing back a reply. Scientists are typically driven by logic, but a rejection letter can stir up much anger, resentment, and hurt feelings, especially when so much time and effort has gone into the work submitted.

Related: Disappointed on your manuscript getting rejected? [Check out this post on how to deal with journal rejection now!](#)

Indulging in the natural instinct to strike back harshly will only result in the appeal being quickly rejected and the author's reputation being spoiled. It is, therefore, recommended to wait 24-72 hours before responding.

Facts

In keeping with the above advice, authors should stick to the facts in their appeal letters. Journal editors will appreciate a rational response to the rejection. Authors should try to determine the specific reasons for the rejection and refute them with evidence. Referring to the similarity of past articles in the journal, thereby implying that this one should be accepted also is not a valid rationale. Remarking that other well-known scientists have reviewed and approved the work is also not a valid rationale.

Point-by-Point Rebuttal

The idea is to gain as much information from the journal editor regarding the specifics of why the work was rejected. Then the author can make a point-by-point rebuttal, offering to bring new data to the research where necessary. The journal editor will want to see a specific plan by which the work is strengthened and shortcomings are addressed.

Key Points

Although reviewers may sometimes do a poor job in understanding the key points of a research article, it is always the duty of the author to make those points clear to the reader. Reviewers, like authors, are human. They make mistakes, they rush to meet deadlines, they have bad moods on occasion, and the author must account for this when writing. Therefore, in the appeal letter, it is important to re-explain the key points of the work, especially if there appears to be some misunderstanding.

Be Respectful

Nobody would like to be insulted or have his or her company or employees insulted, especially when being asked to reconsider a serious decision. An author's reputation could be ruined by one bad letter to the editor. No good can come from insulting the reviewers or making false claims against them, or from making disparaging remarks about other articles published in the journal, or from using inappropriate language. If the author respects the journal enough to want his or her work published therein, he or she should reflect that in the language of the appeal letter.

The Case for Not Making Your Case

The world of [academic publishing](#) and academic journals is changing considerably with the growth of Open Access Publishing. New methods and opportunities to publish are continually evolving. In a [piece for his blog](#), Stephen Heard makes a case for *not* appealing when your article has been rejected.

But it seems to me that for an appeal to be a good idea (from the author's point of view), at least four things have to be true all at once:

1. *There must be a genuine, objective wrong*
2. *It must be a sizeable wrong*
3. *There must be significant value in being published in the particular journal*
4. *The handling of the appeal must be (about) as fast as review at a new journal*

Dr. Heard believes that, rather than risk one's reputation and waste valuable time, it may be just as fruitful, and less taxing on the author, to simply submit the work to another journal. Another journal may accept the work and an appeal may give the impression that the author is difficult to work with. In addition, the reasons for rejection may be justified—more work may be required. Other factors may be at play; for example, the subject of the research may simply not be a good fit for the journal at this time—subjectivity cannot be reasoned away.

Journal Policies for an Appeal Letter

If an author's work is rejected, it is a good idea to see if the journal has an appeal policy. This will provide specific guidelines for the appeal letter. Two good examples can be found for [Edorium Journals](#) and the *British Medical Journal*. Appealing the rejection of academic research is like appealing the rejection of most other things—if the author chooses to commit the time and is willing to risk reputation, then success is most likely to result from keeping emotions calm, being respectful, and sticking to the facts.

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