

How, When, and Why You Should Appeal an Editor's Decision

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Rejection hurts. Especially when it comes to manuscripts that embody years of work.

When facing rejection, many of us don't even know that there is a formal process of appealing the decision. For those who have contemplated pleading for that precious second chance, we simply don't know where to start. Deciding when or whether you should write a rebuttal, determining what steps you should take next if you choose the rebuttal path, and writing an effective, convincing rebuttal are just some of the hurdles you'll need to tackle. Here, we consult with Cell Press editors to learn some tips and tricks and unpack some strategies for best navigating the rebuttal process.

Types of rejections and the reasons for them

Manuscript rejections fall into two main categories: desk rejections and rejections after review. A desk rejection is a decision made at the editorial level, and it means that your submitted manuscript is not sent out for review. There are an array of reasons for desk rejections, including:

A lack of conceptual novelty

How does your manuscript fit into the broader scope of the field?

The manuscript is underdeveloped or preliminary in some manner

Are the data correlative or causative?

Are they observational or mechanistic?

Do the data sufficiently support the conclusions?

A lack of physiological impact

Is the study limited to a single-cell type or in vitro system, or are there multiple orthogonal lines of evidence in relevant cell types, tissue samples, organoids, or model organisms?

The topic of the manuscript does not align with the journal's scope or goals

This can be very journal specific. For example, a methods journal that looks for novel techniques, irrespective of the specific biological advance, a manuscript in which an existing approach was modified slightly to answer a longstanding biological question would not fit within the scope.

Editorial consistency

The journal may have recently rejected similar manuscripts, although this information is not generally shared with authors.

With these underlying reasons contributing to desk rejections, it's easy to see why rebutting a desk rejection rarely leads to a successful review and acceptance of a manuscript. However, on the flip side, desk rejections can be a blessing in disguise. When the message is received quickly, it enables you to pivot and focus your efforts on a more suitable journal.

Rejections after peer review can come from a variety of reasons. Among those that may warrant a rebuttal are: an outlier review, reviewer assumptions and perspectives that lead to an inaccurate or unfair review, reviewers and editors misunderstanding the data and conclusions, and a perceived lack of conceptual advance.