Environmental Science & Technology

Comment

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Just Said No

So, the paper you submitted to *Environmental Science & Technology* was rejected? Welcome to the club. With an increase in the number of submissions of about 10% per year and a practical limitation to the number of manuscripts that can be processed, we have reached a point where over two-thirds of the manuscripts submitted to *ES&T* are being declined. To increase the likelihood that *ES&T* will publish your next paper, I would like to share my experiences about the most common reasons that manuscripts are rejected.

The first place where many manuscripts run into trouble is related to their topical fit with the journal. *ES&T* welcomes submissions on a range of environmentally relevant subjects but that does not mean that every manuscript containing the word "environment" is suitable for publication. If you peruse a few recent editions of the journal, you will quickly notice that certain topics receive more coverage. These are the subjects that hold the greatest interest to our readers, as evidenced by the large number of quality submissions received and the high frequency with which the papers are downloaded and cited. Popularity alone is not an indication of fit: as a publication of the American Chemical Society, *ES&T* is dedicated to publishing the best environmental chemistry research. For topics outside of our core areas, we expect prospective authors to articulate the reasons why their research will interest our readers. In my experience, when we decline a manuscript for reasons of poor topical fit, it is very common for the authors to have provided no explanation in the cover letter as to why they believe that the manuscript belongs in *ES&T* rather than one of the specialty journals cited in the reference section.

Assuming that we judge the topic of the research to be suitable, many manuscripts run into problems related to the quality of the presentation. Weaknesses in the presentation alone are usually not grounds for declining a manuscript, but they do make an impression on reviewers. This is not an issue exclusive to non-native speakers: many researchers from English-speaking countries struggle with presentation quality. Unfortunately, the rambling four-page introduction that fails to establish the purpose of the research, the incoherent discussion section, and the puzzling graphs with tiny fonts and inappropriate axis scales are a worldwide phenomenon. For researchers who struggle with English, working with a technical editor can reduce the likelihood that reviewers will fail to appreciate the technical merits of the research. Irrespective of your grammatical abilities, your manuscripts will always benefit from another round of editing prior to submission.

The shortcomings that are easiest for most authors to understand are those nasty technical weaknesses that reviewers reckon to be too serious to correct upon revision. Fatal flaws in logic or the methods used to interpret data are issues that all researchers strive to avoid. But try as we may, they sometimes escape our notice. After all, the need to critically evaluate research from a fresh perspective is one of the main reasons why we subject research to peer review. Of course, there are times when a reviewer misjudges the severity of a technical weakness. In my experience, about half of the situations in which a reviewer identifies something that they believe to be a severe technical flaw are not as bad as they appear. When given a chance to respond, the manuscript's authors are often able to provide a valid explanation, frequently accompanied by data that were not included in the original manuscript. If you want to avoid having your paper rejected for a technical weakness, consider asking a colleague who is familiar with the topic to critically review your manuscript before you submit it.

The final common reason that manuscripts are declined—and the one that requires the most subjective judgment on the part of *ES&T*'s editors—is insufficient novelty. We understand that all good research builds upon prior knowledge. Not every impactful paper creates a new research area, but manuscripts that offer only an incremental increase in knowledge do not belong in *ES&T*. We take this issue very seriously: technically sound manuscripts that would otherwise be publishable are frequently declined when one or more reviewers express concerns about novelty. Papers that report new data without providing important new insights into environmental processes do not meet our publication criteria. If you are uncertain about the novelty of your research, consider whether or not your findings would be surprising to the researchers who wrote the papers in the reference section. If the answer is no, the manuscript may be better suited for a more specialized journal.

I have struggled to understand the reasons why so many submissions fail to meet our expectations with respect to novelty. The easy answer would be that some researchers are incapable of coming up with original ideas. I seriously doubt that this is the explanation. More likely, researchers are responding to real or perceived pressures related to research productivity. These pressures may result in submissions that report on a small aspect of a larger, more significant contribution or in research that fails to take the risks necessary to develop an important, new topic. Minimum numbers of papers that students must publish before they graduate, requirements that assistant professors achieve a certain level of research productivity prior to tenure, and the misguided notion that grant money was well spent because lots of papers were produced are almost always detrimental to novelty. Researchers subjected to such publish or perish expectations will ultimately find venues for their work, but those papers are unlikely to show up in *ES&T*.

The reasons papers are declined by *ES&T* are no secret. By clearly articulating the importance of your research, paying attention to presentation quality, subjecting the manuscript to internal review, and waiting until you have a full story before submitting, you can significantly increase the likelihood that we will publish your research. It will also ensure that your hard work has a greater impact on our collective effort to solve the world's most pressing environmental problems.

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Notes

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