

Editorial Rejection

No one ever relishes receiving a rejection note from a journal. I have had quite a few myself over the years and I know the feeling it engenders. The initial response might be one of dismay and a fleeting thought that there has been some personal animus operating or even reviewer incompetence. If you are the senior author, you feel very much for the sensibilities of younger co-authors for whom the paper in question might have been their first foray into publication. Then later, on looking at the paper, one realises that it perhaps could have been better constructed and a little more exciting than it was. My PhD supervisor used to recommend that papers once drafted should be put away in a desk drawer for at least a week and then re-read. Then they should be looked at afresh and rewritten to clarify the text. It is then that one realises after all one did not make the paper as interesting as it could have been and maybe even the title was dull! On reflection, the abstract had little data in it and there were too many figures, the *Conclusions* repeated the *Results and Discussion* (indeed the *Discussion* reiterated the *Results*) so that the point of the paper was lost in a morass of words.

Well, it is true that reviewers do not always hold the same opinion of a manuscript. It is not completely unknown for three reviewers to offer the conflicting conclusions: accept, revise and reject. The editors' job is of course to make the final judgement and sometimes even editors get it wrong. Which is where the point of this editorial becomes clearer: it is about the system this journal introduced some time ago, in common with many others, namely, rejection of a paper after receipt without it being sent for review. *Nature* and *Science*, to name but two journals, have employed this system for longer than one can remember. Many might find it harsh but there have been very few challenges by authors to decisions made by myself and fellow editors to such decisions. There is one merit in the process, that of speed of course as these decisions will be made very soon after a paper appears on the editors' computers. Papers so rejected have not been reviewed in detail by the Editors-in-Chief, so as the rubric of the letter authors receive states, rejection "does not necessarily reflect on the quality of your paper." Some papers are clearly not best suited for *IJP* and their rejection at the first hurdle is easy to understand. The system, however, is meant to protect peer review from overload. Expert reviewers are simply overburdened by the number of requests they receive to assess papers. On occasion

we have to request the help of perhaps seven reviewers before we receive a single report on a paper.

Ultimately the rapid review process protects the quality of the journal and the integrity of the system. This journal receives many more papers to review than it can ever publish.

Editors have a duty to attempt to shape the journals for which they are responsible. Rejection without review allows the editors a legitimate way of choosing the papers for review that are deemed to be more innovative or interesting or simply to stem a flood of papers on a well worn topic and those that look likely to fail when reviewed by peers.

In my own case, for the sake of transparency of the process I adopt, I scrutinise first the titles of papers which have been submitted, look at the abstracts and the letters of submission. The accompanying letters, in spite of the notes of guidance to authors, rarely state why the journal should be interested in publishing the work in question. So if authors wish to increase their chances of their work surviving the first hurdle, the topic of research must be succinctly described in both the title and abstract and the letter of submission *must* state clearly what the paper offers that is new. The title should be arresting but truthful: it is in fact easy to see through a title which offers a "New Oral Delivery System for Insulin" when the paper in fact simply describes the incorporation of insulin into a delivery system which has not even been subjected to the rigours of *in vivo* experiment. The abstract must contain hard data, key data.

Papers which describe another method of preparing (say) PLGA nanoparticles will possibly find it difficult to seduce the Editors. Papers describing bioequivalence studies of formulations available only in selected countries have little relevance to an international audience and are best published elsewhere, for example, in national journals. These studies often do not shed light on mechanisms, and it is a mechanistic and molecular approach to pharmaceutics which ultimately the *International Journal of Pharmaceutics* wishes to promote. There are of course exceptions to these few exemplars, but it is up to the authors to make a convincing case for publication. We, for our part, will seek to provide the best reviewers for your work.

One way for *IJP* to be able to publish more of what is submitted would be possible if authors also took care to ensure that their work was written in a succinct manner. Apart from the question of enhanced readability (when did any of us last read a paper

from the first word in the title to the last point of the bibliography?) a 20% reduction in length would, all things being equal, allow IJP to disseminate more articles on more topics. We will be rewriting the notes for guidance shortly. In the meantime, as a guide:

1. Make the title interesting; succinct and do not exaggerate.
2. Make the abstract informative with key data, but not over-long.
3. Keep the number of figures to the essential to convey the message and illustrate trends: there is no need to display every result ever obtained, although integrity demands that we discuss outliers that do not “fit” our preconceptions or theory.
4. Do not discuss every point in figures—let the figures with their legends speak for themselves.
5. Do not repeat preparation methods *in extenso* where there is a prior publication which does so.
6. Ensure that the balance between *Results* and *Discussion* is appropriate.
7. Keep the paper as short as possible, remembering that Watson and Crick’s iconic paper on the double helix occupied just a fraction over one page of *Nature*.

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