



Deanna Haunsperger

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What Do I Do When My Paper or Grant Is Rejected?

Julia E. Bergner

It can be a frustrating experience: you've worked for months or years to write a paper that you're proud of, only to have it rejected when you submit it to a journal. Does this mean that all is lost? Similarly, what about when you come up with great ideas for a grant proposal only to have it not funded? These experiences can be some of the most frustrating parts of being a mathematician, yet ones most of us have to face. Thus, it is important to learn how to deal with rejection and move forward without despairing about your worth as a mathematician.

An unsurprising first reaction to the rejection of a paper can be disappointment and even anger. Upon receiving such news, I am sure that I've been misunderstood or that the paper has been sent to an inordinately picky referee. Are these things true? Perhaps, sometimes. But I also know from experience that I am not thinking straight in that moment, and I need time before I can respond more appropriately. For a collaborative project, venting with a coauthor about the mutual disappointment can be helpful, too.

So, how can you get a more productive view of what happened? A rejection of a paper often still comes with a referee report, which can provide a useful source of constructive feedback. Even if not, there are usually still at least a few sentences from the editor about why the paper was rejected. As with reading any referee report, positive or negative, I often find it helpful to read through those comments, but not work on addressing them right away. A criticism I might initially find annoying I might later acknowledge to be a good point that I had not considered, or I might realize that the source of a misunderstanding was poor exposition

on my part. For example, I once felt that one of my papers had been rejected because the referee had completely misunderstood the point of the paper. But when I looked back at how I'd written it, I had not sufficiently explained what I was trying to do, and what I saw as the main theorem had not been emphasized. So of course the referee had missed the point! I revised both the introduction to the paper and the build-up to and statement of the main theorem. I resubmitted the paper to a similarly ranked journal, and it was accepted.

Many journals now employ a "quick opinion" system, in which someone is asked for an assessment of the suitability of the paper for the journal without doing a thorough review. If this opinion is favorable, then the paper goes to a referee for a more detailed review. The advantage of this system is that if your paper is not deemed suitable, you get that response quickly and can move on to trying elsewhere. It can be incredibly frustrating to submit a paper, not hear back for a year, and then get no more useful feedback than that the paper is fine but just not up to the standards of that journal. The disadvantage of this system, on the other hand, is that your paper can be rejected without being looked at carefully. In this system, again, it is all the more important to have the goals and main results of the paper stated clearly.

Here are some recommendations for following up on the rejection of a paper. Read any referee reports or comments that you received about the paper. Especially if you are upset, let it go until you can think more rationally about it. Then, go back and read the feedback again. If the paper just wasn't up to the standards for the journal, try to identify another one that might be a better fit. If you received more detailed comments, take them seriously and revise the paper accordingly, as seems appropriate. Be sure to consider any suggestions made by this referee before submitting to another journal, just in case the same person is asked to review the same paper again. All is not lost in this case; a referee who thought that a paper was not suitable for the previous journal might think that you made a more appropriate choice this time.

Above all, do not give up. Your paper might need to be improved in some way, whether in content or in writing style, but it is still likely that it is publishable if the results are correct. Good papers go unpublished because authors get discouraged and quit trying, which is unfortunate.

Perhaps you have heard that if all your papers get accepted to the first place you send them, then you aren't being ambitious enough in choosing journals. After my first several papers were all accepted to the first place I tried, I took this advice to heart. I quickly got several rejections! Nonetheless, over the years I have had papers accepted in journals I might not have expected. It is, admittedly, much harder to take such risks when you are applying for jobs or being considered for a promotion in the near future and want the paper accepted quickly.

Julia Bergner is a professor of mathematics at the University of Virginia. Her email address is jeb2md@virginia.edu.

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Handling the rejection of a grant proposal can be even more frustrating, simply because often there are limited options for where to apply. It can be easy to feel that if you got rejected for an NSF grant, for example, that there is no point in applying again for fear of the same result. If you apply again to the same NSF program, is it likely that you will be rejected again?

Maybe, but maybe not. There are a lot of factors involved in deciding who gets awarded grants. Panelists evaluating the proposals differ from year to year and hence may take different views of your project ideas. The pool of proposals can also vary wildly from year to year. In a given year, there might be an unusually high number of very strong proposals, for example, but the following round could be different.

Some of the same advice that applies to rejected papers applies here: read any reviews that you get on the proposal and, after some time delay, assess what might be helpful for future proposals. On one of my first attempts at applying for an NSF grant, I had two main themes for projects. My reviewers agreed that one of the projects was much more interesting and promising than the other. The following year, I chose to develop that direction in more detail. In another unsuccessful proposal, a reviewer objected that the project seemed only to be an incremental development of my previous work. In a subsequent proposal, I was more clear about the differences in the new work and how new techniques were needed.

If you apply for a grant multiple times and continue to be rejected, does it make sense to keep applying? This question is, naturally, a delicate one. I would suggest not giving up after only one or even two rejections. Consider if there are themes that emerge from the feedback that you receive from those different attempts and whether you can improve upon them. Share a draft of your proposal with someone who has been successful getting the same kind of grant and is likely to have reviewed other proposals, and ask for an honest assessment of it. Realistically, getting grants can simply be difficult. Most mathematicians do not have grants, and even many highly respected researchers have had grant proposals turned down.

In any of these situations, it is important to keep some perspective in mind. Most of us have had papers or proposals rejected at one time or another. Thus, while rejections can be disappointing, they are part of the experience of being a mathematician.



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“We Regret to Inform You...”: What to Do If Your Paper or Grant Is Rejected

Karen Lange

An email from the journal you submitted to months ago appears in your inbox. Awash with hopeful anxiety, your heart drops as you read the opening line—your paper has been rejected. Receiving a negative decision on a paper you’ve worked hard on for months or even years is disappointing, but how do you productively move forward upon receiving such news? Here I outline some strategies that have helped me make the most out of a rejection, whether of a paper or a grant proposal.

Getting to a Receptive Place

You won’t be able to productively assess the feedback you’ve received until you can view it with an open mind. If you are feeling defeated by the news (or some comment in a referee report particularly chafes), it’s worth taking a short time to process your feelings. Remind yourself that the rejection is not of *you* but of the *submission* and that rejection is a normal (and expected!) part of the peer review process. (If you are never rejected, perhaps you are not aiming at fancy enough journals or applying for large enough grants!) Venting to an academic friend who can remind you of these facts can be beneficial.

Understanding the Decision-Maker’s Perspective

Once you are in a more receptive place, you can begin assessing any feedback you’ve received along with the rejection. As best you can, view your mission as understanding the perspective of the editor, referee(s), and fellow researchers. The express purpose of peer review is to decide whether

Karen Lange is an associate professor of mathematics at Wellesley College. Her email address is karen.lange@wellesley.edu.

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