What Should I do if My Paper is Rejected?
Posted by Jerry Fagerberg | Published October 14, 2020

Getting a paper turned down is a part of the everyday life of professional scientists, but that doesn't mean it doesn't sting when editors or referees don't see what you see in your paper. In times of rejection, it helps to look to those who've gone through it. At our recent Cell Symposia: Hallmarks of Cancer meeting in Seattle, Cell Mentor asked Joan Massagué (Sloan Kettering Institute), Lalita Shevde-Samant (University of Alabama at Birmingham), Simone Anfossi (MD Anderson), and Didem Ilter (Weill Cornell) for their best advice on moving forward after a paper has been rejected.

Joan Massagué
Executive Director, GMTEC, Sloan Kettering Institute

If your paper is rejected because of technical shortcomings or the evidence is not complete enough, your best option is to go back to the bench and do it. After all, it's your piece of work, and you want to to be as good as possible.

If the paper is technically fine but the level of novelty is judged, fairly or not, not to be enough for that journal, if you can't convince them, you're better off going to another journal. If you think that the paper was not understood by the editor or the referees, and you cannot convince them, that too is a good reason to go to the next journal.

Lalita Shevde-Samant
Professor, University of Alabama at Birmingham

If your paper is rejected, well, you swallow your pride and embrace the opinions of the reviewer. These reviewers are peer reviewers, which means they are your peers. That's what makes them peer reviewers. So they are just as competent, just as accomplished, and just as opinionated as you are about your science. So you respect their opinion.

I would suggest going through each comment, one by one. Critically. Analyze it. Again, set aside your ego issues. There's no ego here. Just go through it with a fine-tooth comb, look at every comment. Understand if there is anything in there that is unsaid, perhaps, maybe some directions they want you to take. Some reviewers are pretty direct and will tell you, 'Hey, you need to do this experiment, and only then can you make the comment you want to make conclusively.' So, go through it and see if you can address it.

Sometimes, based on the scope of the journal, it may not be worth your while to sit and do all of those experiments. Sometimes you go back, try to have a dialog with the editor who's reviewed

your manuscript or reviewed the comments of the peer reviewers, and see if you can reason out a happy medium that the journal would be willing to accept.

In all reality, it's science. It's peer science. You go through it, see what you can do, and then decide if you want to move on with those comments or go to another channel.

The important thing is the first step you need to take is to go over the all the comments from the reviewer and see which is a sense of the weakness of the paper. And so this happy to address better, what is the missing part of the paper, and also, it's important maybe to consider to consider other journal that are more suitable for your research. It's more targeted.

Simone Anfossi
Instructor, University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center

The first step you need to take is to go over the all the comments from the reviewer and see which have a sense of the weakness of the paper. This will help you address better what is the missing part of the paper Also, it's important to consider to consider another journal that's more suitable for your research, that's more targeted.

Didem Ilter
Postdoctoral Associate, Weill Cornell Medicine

Take a breath, because you don't want to make any rash decisions that are going to be emotional. Then, definitely study the comments to come up with a good plan to address the majority of the comments, if not all, and then contact the editor to see whether resubmission would be a possibility. If not, I would still try to look into your plans, to make your story better with a couple of the new experiments before looking for an alternative journal.