



## Top 10 Reasons a Manuscript is Rejected

**A**FTER SEVERAL YEARS' experience as the editor of the *Journal of Professional Nursing*, I have received manuscripts that vary widely in quality. Some of these we decline to publish. Authors are often mystified about why their manuscript was rejected. Thus, I have collected a list of reasons why manuscripts are rejected with the hope that authors of potential submissions to this and other journals will find the information useful.

### Top 10 Reasons for Rejecting a Manuscript

1. *Manuscript is sent to the wrong journal.* For example, the *Journal of Professional Nursing* recently received an excellent paper. It was well written, covered an important topic in depth, and would have been useful to nurse practitioners working in a narrow subspecialty of cancer care. Because it did not address the needs or interests of educators, administrators, or researchers, it was not appropriate for the *Journal*. We necessarily interpret our readers' interests broadly, nonetheless this paper was too clinical and too specific to be of use to our audience.
2. *Content does not provide new information.* Although authors may state their position well, support it with appropriate documentation, provide a rationale, and come to appropriate conclusions, little new information is offered from what already exists in the literature.
3. *Information is too old or out of date.* A recent submission to the *Journal* reported a research study conducted several years previously. Given the changes in health care in the recent past, the results, though interesting, were not timely, especially because the paper would not be published for 6 to 9 months after submission.
4. *Topic is too narrow, reports a single, unique experience, or appeals to a narrow segment of our audience.* One paper we received would be useful to doctoral students, but few others. Other papers have reported an experience at one school that would not have broad application to others.
5. *Important contributions to the topic are missing or out-of-date references are used.* Reviewers know the literature and often are the authors of relevant references. They are not pleased to find their publications missing. In fact, an AACN position paper on the topic of one manuscript was omitted from a submission.
6. *Conversely, the author has relied too heavily on the literature.* Although journal readers need background information on the topic and certainly more so with research studies, our readers do not want to wade through lengthy background material. Sometimes the actual research and results are scant compared with the literature review. One author whose paper was rejected wanted to know the exact number of references we wanted.
7. *Manuscript was a class paper or speech.* Unbelievably, one manuscript still had the instructor's comments in the margins. Others have included a speaker's greeting to an audience and the usual incomplete sentences used in public speaking. And in editorials.
8. *Too little information about methods is given or the methodology includes serious flaws.* Reliability and validity of instruments, sampling procedures, and the results of pilot studies are either omitted or given scant attention.
9. *Paper does not make a point.* Although a topic may be covered adequately and it may be well written, no purposes, recommendations, or conclusions are stated.

10. *The top 10 reason a paper is rejected is because of poor writing.* Good writing is like art: you know it when you see it, but describing what makes it good is difficult. A quality paper states its purpose clearly, explains the importance of the topic, describes what happened, and reports the outcome. Such a paper is easy to read, the author's train of thought can be followed, and your questions are answered before you think to ask them. On the other hand, manuscripts that lack clarity and are poorly organized are rejected out of hand. Grammatical and spelling errors or incorrect punctuation, in themselves, may not be reasons for rejection but contribute to the decision if there are other weaknesses.

### Factors That Do Not Affect Acceptance

Authors often ask about other factors that affect a paper's acceptance. The author's institutional affiliation, degrees, or position has no effect on acceptance. Indeed, that information is known only to the editor.

Authors also ask if any topics are taboo or if taking a controversial position on a topic affects the editorial decision. The answer is no. A paper that supported nurse-assisted suicide, for example, has been published in the *Journal*. If a topic has various viewpoints, the *Journal* offers an opportunity for those topics to be discussed. Letters to the editor are available for opposing points of view. Columns and editorials, of course, can and do discuss controversial topics.

### Acceptance Versus Rejection

All journals are dependent on sufficient numbers of quality manuscripts; without authors journals would not exist. Our bias, if any, then is toward acceptance. In fact, the *Journal* ultimately publishes more than half of submitted manuscripts. The major reason more papers are not published is because some authors who are advised to revise their work and resubmit do not do so. In her research column in the November–December,

2001 issue of the *Journal of Professional Nursing*, Kathleen O'Connell (O'Connell, 2001) says, "Don't submit if you don't intend to resubmit." Good advice.

The other group journal editors count on are their readers (known as subscribers to the publisher). In addition to good writing, articles must cover topics of interest to readers. Their needs must be paramount in any publishing decision.

The needs of readers and the quality of the writing may be at odds. Sometimes a poorly written paper addresses a timely topic, such as violence in the workplace. The outcome of such a submission varies. If the revision is substantial, the paper likely will be rejected. If, however, the content is basically sound, I might consult with the author to do extensive editorial work on the manuscript to make it acceptable. Authors, of course, have approval of all changes before publication. In these cases, the decision to publish is based on the extent of revisions necessary compared with the value to our readers. Not always an easy decision.

The best way to ensure that a manuscript is accepted for publication is to write the best paper you can, have it critiqued thoroughly and honestly by senior colleagues, and incorporate their suggestions into your paper. If you receive recommendations from a journal to revise, do so, taking reviewers' suggestions into consideration. Authors who include in their cover letter explanations of how they incorporated the reviewers' recommendations into the revised paper or why certain recommendations are not appropriate enhance their chances at publication. For tips on improving your writing, see the editorial in the January–February, 1999 issue of the *Journal of Professional Nursing* (Sullivan, 1999).

Authors often ask about the obscure process of how a manuscript is reviewed. In the March–April editorial, we'll follow a manuscript through the review process at the *Journal of Professional Nursing*. Look for it to learn more about improving your chances at publication in the *Journal*.

ELEANOR J. SULLIVAN, PhD, RN, FAAN  
Editor

### References

O'Connell, K. (2001). Talking back to reviewers: The gentle art of resubmission. [Research Column]. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 17(6), 276.

Sullivan, E. J. (1999). Yes, Virginia, there is a right way to write. [Editorial]. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 15(1), 1-2.