

## 5 Common Reasons Manuscripts are Rejected (And What to Do About It)

In the world of journal publications, rejections are the norm rather than the exception. There are of course many identifiable reasons for a manuscript not to be published, from lack of relevance, to the size of the submissions pool, to the specific tastes of a journal's readership.

However, researchers should realize that there are many factors well within their control that can determine the fate of their manuscripts—and these don't always boil down to the *quality of the research*, but to how *well-prepared* the manuscript is for publication. Here we look at a few of the common problems of organization, content, and quality of writing that lead to deferment or rejection of manuscripts by journal publishers, as well as some advice for researchers about how to avoid these problems.

1. The problem: "*Manuscript does not adhere to the IMRD format*"

Almost all researchers are aware that the *IMRD* format (*Introduction, Methods & Materials, Results, and Discussion*) is the standard for the hard sciences. But they might not know just how often they make critical content errors in all of these sections. According to the results of one [2013 study of medical journals](#) published in African and Asian countries, more than 70% of submitted manuscripts had significant flaws in each other these sections, from erroneous and missing content to unorganized exposition.<sup>1</sup>

The solution: *Review the IMRD structure guidelines and compare*

Even if you have experience writing manuscripts and generally understand the *IMRD* structure, it is always a smart idea to review which content be included (and which should *not* be included) in each of these sections. For instance, simple errors such as including the titles of relevant studies in your abstract or of copying and pasting the methods you used in a previous study into your current paper (which is in fact self-plagiarism and a serious violation of academic ethics) can be viewed as egregious violations of manuscript standards and immediately **exclude** your manuscript from publication. Use the great many reliable sources online that explain how to complete each of the *IMRD* sections.

2. The problem: "*Introduction does not match the Discussion or other sections*"

Good scientific writing demands clarity, precision, and logical flow from one idea to the next. If you understand this notion, you will see the importance of proper organization. But in a manuscript this means more than simply laying out points in linear fashion; the content you begin with in the *Introduction* will inform the rest of your paper—in terms of context, purpose, and even scope and scale of the study—all the way to the conclusion. Many researchers will write their *Introduction* well before they draft the rest of their manuscript, and in so doing they omit essential content or insert extraneous content. The result is that the later sections might not match the claims and focuses laid out in the *Introduction*.

The solution: *Write the Introduction second to last—just before writing the conclusion*

A major reason for this mismatch is simply the natural evolution of ideas that occurs in the research and writing process and the failure to account for any changes in the *Introduction* section. A researcher may write boldly in the *Introduction* about the spectacular possibilities for

their study on heart attack prevention and then omit these claims in the *Discussion* (or vice versa). Or they may cite sources at length that are not later mentioned anywhere else in the study. For these reasons, it is recommended that you write the *Introduction* section as close to the end of your paper as possible—after you have written the majority of the *Discussion* and before you write a brief conclusion. By doing this, you will ensure that the information in all sections is consistent and that the content in later sections is sufficiently summarized at the beginning of your manuscript.

3. The problem: *“Abstract content is erroneous or there is missing information”*

Including incorrect content or omitting content in your abstract can be an even more egregious error than making this mistake in the *Introduction*. Because the abstract is the first chance for editors and publishers to really look at what your study does (and because it is often the *only* part of the manuscript they will read if they judge it as unpublishable), a mistake here can mean immediate rejection and an opportunity wasted.

The solution: *Write the abstract last*

Again, order of operations proves to be of great importance. Instead of writing the abstract first, write it *very last*, taking meticulous care that all of the information is current and that there are no inconsistencies with the other sections. It is a bit easier to comb through the abstract because it is quite short and compact. So as you spend time editing, ensure not only that all of the information is accurate and up-to-date, but that there are no errors in grammar or style.

4. The problem: *“The title doesn’t match the focus of the manuscript”*

The title is by far the most visible part of your manuscript as it appears in database searches and at the very top of your manuscript. Problems with the title can be manifold, but generally they can be broken down into two kinds of mistakes: (1) the scope or focus differs from that presented in the body; or (2) it is too long and not a good fit for the journal’s readership.

The solution: *Sharpen your title*

Think of the title as an ad slogan—it must be catchy enough to make people interested and yet accurate enough that they don’t feel like they’ve been tricked with false advertising. Similarly, your manuscript title must fit the scope of your paper and yet be short enough that it is picked up in journal database searches. It must also be “punchy” enough that fellow researchers and subscribers will be interested in clicking on it. Delete overused words and phrases that describe the study’s methods (e.g., “a four-year longitudinal study,” “the long-term implications of”) and insert key terms that are the most pertinent to your study and that researchers can easily find. It can take a bit of time to sculpt the most captivating and appropriate title, but in the end it will be well worth the effort. For detailed considerations, check out this [article on choosing the perfect title](#).

5. The problem: *“This manuscript does not meet the standards of our journal”*

This is a huge one. Right off the bat there are a hundred different reasons one can imagine for a research paper not fitting the standards of a journal. However, a correlative problem to this reasoning for rejection or deferment is that the publisher might not inform the researcher of the exact reason for the rejection: it could be that the study is not of sufficient import; or perhaps it falls outside the journal’s scope; or it may even be an issue the style and grammar norms of a given journal (for instance, perhaps your manuscript includes too many active voice sentences or personal pronouns for their tastes). In order to improve your manuscript, knowing what is wrong with it is half the battle. But how can researchers know where precisely they are failing to meet the standards of the journal?

The solution: *Always thoroughly research the journals to which you plant to submit*

If your manuscript fails to be published in a journal, it doesn’t necessarily mean the work or writing is “deficient.” It may simply be that you don’t realize what the journal is looking for. The way to remedy this (and save precious time, money, and energy) is to do as much research as possible about the journal before you even begin to draft your manuscript. Rules about structure, formatting, scope, etc. are almost always listed in detail on the journal’s website.

And if these guidelines seem to abstract to apply to your writing, simply read as many articles from that journal as possible in order to get an idea of the kind of work they publish. Take notes about the research content as well as style and formatting. The author of one [study about publishing manuscripts in “high-impact” journals](#) notes that, because “most journals demand a rigid structure and ask authors to adhere to certain conventions, “ authors must therefore “follow these instructions rigorously to avoid wasting time in endless corrections and communications with the journal editorial staff.”<sup>2</sup> It may seem like a lot of work to undertake this sort of research, but the more proactively authors act before submitting, the greater the chances will be of getting published.

For more detailed articles and videos about academic writing and journal submissions, visit our Resources page.

Sources Cited in this Article:

<sup>1</sup> Ezeala, C., Nweke, I., & Ezeala, M. (2013). “Common Errors in Manuscripts Submitted to Medical Science Journals.” *Annals of Medical and Health Sciences Research*, 3(3), 376–379. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3793443/>.

<sup>2</sup> El-Omar, Emad M. (2014) “How to publish a scientific manuscript in a high-impact journal.” *Advances in Digestive Medicine, Volume 1, Issue 4, 2014*, 105-109, ISSN 2351-9797, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aidm.2014.07.004>.

