Desk-Rejects: 10 Top Tips to Avoid the Cull

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One of my greatest sorrows as editor is that so many manuscripts we receive are rejected at the first hurdle. About half of all submissions that come in are immediately “desk rejected” by me or one of the associate editors. Contrary to popular belief, editors do not like rejecting submissions. We are not sadistic monsters who thrive on the misery of others. Instead, we tend to be sympathetic souls who give up their time because we want to help people develop their manuscripts to publishable standards. We love reading new and interesting ideas, and we live in fear of “White Page Fever,” the terrible dread that one day there will be nothing to print. Our main concern is to find papers to publish, and the fact that half of our submissions so miss the mark that they cannot even be sent out for review means that a huge pool of talent is misdirecting its efforts.

There is already a lot of advice available on how to prepare an interesting manuscript. Our website supplies guidance on our requirements and what we are looking for. We regularly present at conferences and workshops, and the associate editors and I are always happy to give advice on email or over the phone. Despite all of this, as just mentioned, we still desk reject half of the submissions that come in. This advice clearly is not connecting with many authors. In reflecting on why this might be, I find myself thinking that telling people what to do might come across as both patronizing and a little abstract. So I think it is time to change tack and make it easier for those determined to receive a rapid negative decision. Describing the real reasons why papers are instantly rejected might be a stickier way of getting the message over. So, based on our immediate rejection decisions over the past 2 years, here are my Top 10 Tips to ensure that your beloved manuscript is returned to you post-haste. I hope you find these useful.

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Top 10 Tips

1. Domain

The easiest and quickest way to get your manuscript instantly rejected is to write about something that the journal does not publish. Recently, I have desk-rejected papers on prison policy in Texas, a review of the spirituality literature, and a study of headteachers in primary schools. Ironically, I usually find these more interesting to read than the standard fare that comes in, perhaps because they are change from the norm, but I have no option but to reject them immediately. There is a lot of guidance on our website on the type of subjects on which we would like to receive papers: http://www.uk.sagepub.com/journals-ProdDesc.nav?ct_p=announcements&prodId=Journal200931&crossRegion=antiPod#tabview=aimsAndScope. Please refer to this guidance. There is no point sending in material that lies outside our scope.

2. Contribution

Perhaps the commonest reason I cite for desk-rejecting manuscripts is that they offer insufficient contribution. Behind this phrase lurk a number of different problems. Most obviously, a manuscript weak on contribution is not doing anything sufficiently new and innovative. We operate from a premise that knowledge builds on knowledge, so simply repeating what others have done before is a surefire way of receiving a desk-reject decision. Every year, I receive a manuscript advocating the use of Twelve Angry Men, or Twelve O’Clock High, or Citizen Kane for the teaching of conflict, persuasion, negotiation, or leadership. There are established literatures on these films, not just in general, but in their use in management education contexts. If you do not show your awareness of previous writing on a subject and how your paper builds on it, the outcome will be inevitable and swift.

Weak contribution is manifested in other ways. Our core area is in the domains of Organizational Behavior and Management. Outside this, there lies Human Resource Management and Strategic Management, and further from the core are the other business domains such as Marketing, Finance, and Entrepreneurship. We will publish papers located in all these fields, but the rule of thumb is that the further that a manuscript is from the core, the more it has to have relevance for the core. So, for example, in 2012 Cynthia Krom published a finance-related paper about the use of the online game Farmville to teach management accounting in the journal. Normally, a finance focus would have invalidated this manuscript, but the paper talks richly about the use of online games in teaching management-related subjects giving it increased contribution outside the specific domain of Management Accounting.
3. Length

Just like space on commercial aircraft, the pages of an academic journal are a valuable commodity for which there is intense competition. We are limited in how much we can print each year, and there are more than 200 submissions a year fighting for it. As a result, generally speaking, we allocate words to the contribution that we anticipate those papers will generate. When we publish longer pieces, it tends to be because we think they will be of greater interest to readers, and this will lead to greater impact such as use in teaching or in generating citations, which is a surrogate measure for capturing engagement with readers. Moreover, different types of manuscript—that is, empirical, essay, domain review, instructional innovation, resource review—have traditions and expectations regarding length. Going outside of these conventions raises concerns about the quality of the writing, often makes manuscripts turgid, and can hide the argument or message. We have published clear guidelines on length: http://www.uk.sagepub.com/journalsProdDesc.nav?ct_p=announcements&prodId=Journal200931&crossRegion=antiPod#tabview=manuscriptSubmission. If you do not adhere to these, your manuscript will be returned to you as an outright reject or for shortening.

In case you are wondering, a guaranteed way of being desk-rejected is to declare a different length to the actual length of your paper, or to try to dodge the word limit by single- or one and a half-spacing your paper, or using a 10-point font. Yes, all of this happens, and when it does, it just causes us to look more closely and with a jaundiced eye. So it is a nice extra touch if you want the quick reject!

4. Underdeveloped Manuscripts

If you really want a quick rejection, just send in an abstract or a few pages containing some notes. Or write it as if it were a book chapter or a section from a textbook. Or write with one-sentence paragraphs, unexplained diagrams, missing tables, endless bullet point lists, poor grammar, spelling mistakes, and so on and so forth. The sad reality is that the review process is designed to hone manuscripts that are close to publication into publishable papers. Papers need to look and feel like finished papers when they come in.

5. Language

Language is one of the subtler reasons why people are desk-rejected. Gone are the days when you were required to write in the third person as if you were a dehumanized form of being. “I” now means you as a single author.
“We” means you as two or more authors. The “royal we,” meaning “we as the body of knowledge,” is now defunct and comes across somewhat outmodishly. If you fall foul of this new convention, your paper is unlikely to be rejected; instead you are likely to be asked to convert it into the first person.

A more crucial problem concerns the manner in which you discuss previous writing on a subject. A common mistake is to write in declarative language. Declarative language is a style of writing where you “tell” the reader things and report that things have happened. So, a declarative writer might tell the readers who has conducted studies on a particular subject, or simply report a finding without any explanation of how such a finding was arrived at, or tell the readers their research question without explaining how it has been arrived at. In effect, it is an unsubstantiated form of writing where the reader has to take on trust that the writers know what they are talking about, and it does very little to help the reader understand the study. Overuse of declarative language is a surefire way of achieving a desk-reject decision. If you wish to avoid this fate, adopt explanatory language. As the name suggests, this is language where you explain things to the reader. I often suggest that writers think of their reader as an intelligent teenager, someone who understands language well but who does not know anything about the subject. Such a person should be able to read and understand a paper published in our journal. To ensure this, the writer needs to explain simply, clearly, and fully anything that the reader needs to know in order to understand the flow of the argument. So, instead of reporting that Wright and Gilmore (2011) advocated the use of threshold concepts in management education settings, you would explain what threshold concepts are and their reasons for advocating their adoption. This approach allows the reader to follow your logic and be drawn to your conclusions. Moreover, it conveys a strong sense that you understand the topic on which you are writing, which improves the persuasiveness of your piece.

6. Relevance/JME References

There is a common misnomer about referencing papers previously published in the Journal of Management Education (JME). It is thought, incorrectly, that people must cite previously published work in the journal to be included in it. That is not the case. It is perfectly possible to be JME citation–free and make it through the review system. However, there is a different dynamic in play when JME citation–free papers arrive. I always look at the list of references to see what has been referenced as it helps me get a sense of the literature that has been covered. When there is an absence of, or very few, JME citations, I find myself reviewing the manuscript adding extra scrutiny to two
elements: Is the paper relevant to our readers? Does the paper adopt our conventions and approach? In short, I make extra sure that the author seems to understand us. So, not citing *JME* articles will not get your paper immediately rejected, but it will bring greater scrutiny to it.

7. Methods and Method Description

As management education is maturing as a discipline, its “Wild West” character is a thing of the past. The rigor expected in other domains is now also expected in management education. In empirical papers, this means that authors need to include (a) a literature review that offers a complete overview of the subject matter and an explanation of why the study is important, (b) an explanation of the methods used that would allow someone to replicate the study, (c) an appropriate analysis of the data that does more than describe the data, and (d) an explanation of how the findings of the study have moved the literature forward. Although mistakes in all four categories can result in papers being rejected, it is partial explanations of methods that are perhaps the commonest error I am seeing.

8. Evaluation

A big reason why many instructional innovation papers are rejected is because the authors do not offer any evidence that the new way of teaching is effective. This has been an enduring problem in the management education literature, and it is not an easy one to solve. My predecessor, Jane Schmidt-Wilk (2010), wrote an excellent article on this issue that you would be well advised to ignore if you want to be instantly rejected. The problem is that it is incredibly difficult to demonstrate that your new way of teaching a subject is: (a) effective, (b) more effective than alternative ways of teaching the subject, and (c) replicable in other classrooms with other teachers. In her article, Jane offered some solutions, and authors writing teaching innovations need to heed her advice.

9. Anonymity

Like all good journals, we insist that manuscripts are anonymized. This is not just making sure your name does not appear in a manner that identifies you as an author but also ensuring that your institution’s identity is not disclosed either. There are many reasons for this. The main one, of course, is to ensure that all manuscripts are reviewed similarly and to ensure that reviewers are not swayed by a “big name” or by some personal bias. Also, the confidentiality of
the process protects both the innocent and the guilty and allows reviewers and authors to speak freely to each other. Anonymity also prevents manuscripts appearing to be advertisements for the wonders of a particular person or institution. For this reason, we discourage self-citation, but when it is necessary, we would ask you not to draw any undue attention to it. Just include it like you have included all other references. Ironically, anonymity breaches are unlikely to get your paper desk-rejected, unless it exhibits other weaknesses. Instead, it is likely to be returned to you for editing to remove the mistake.

10. Format

Similarly, mistakes with formatting are likely to be returned to you for amending rather than being a catastrophic failure. We simply adopt the latest APA format, details of which are available in their publication manual. The most common mistakes I see relate to tables (location and format), the use of color, incorrect font sizes (12-point Times New Roman please), incorrect alignment (main text should be left aligned), spacing after paragraphs (there should be none; just indent the first line of every paragraph), margins (usually too narrow), and subsectioned abstracts (we simply use one block of text). Although not a catastrophic failure, manuscripts incorrectly formatted look “wrong” from the moment they are opened, thereby hampering your chances of successfully negotiating the review process.

So there you have it, my 10 Top Tips for getting your beloved paper rejected the moment it comes in. When thinking about this list, issues of contribution, length, and relevance to the readership are the most common problems that authors run into. The length issue is one you should know about as you write, but problems with contribution and relevance are often masked by your passion for the topic. I would recommend taking two steps to help avoid these problems. First, with reference to your study, try to complete the sentence that follows this one: “This study makes the following contribution . . .” You may even wish to write these completed sentences in the first page or two of your study. It will be a very clear indicator to editors and reviewers of your purpose. Second, search the pages of *JME* for articles on similar topics to your own. If you find some, you know you are likely to be relevant. If you do not find anything close, explain why your paper is relevant to our readership in your submission letter to the editor. These are read and have an important bearing on how your submission is received. And that brings me to my final tip for getting your manuscript instantly rejected: Do not write a submission letter. When authors cannot be bothered even to pen a new notes requesting that their paper be reviewed. . . I imagine you can work out how that sentence ends.
In This Issue

There are four articles in this issue, and obviously they all avoided the ignominious fate of being desk-rejected. In fact, they shined on initial reception and delighted reviewers and editors as they traversed their way through the review process. Collectively, there is a theme uniting these articles as they all, to some extent, focus on student performance.

The first article has been written by Kathy Lund Dean and Charles J. Fornaciari. Their interest is on course structures and routines and how these affect student performance. Their article has a strong practical edge that management educators will find instructive.

H. Kristl Davison, Vipanchi Mishra, Mark N. Bing, and Dwight D. Frink wrote the second article in this issue. They look at the enduring problem of rating the performance of students in teamwork situations, especially when loafers are present. They focus on student evaluations of their teammates and show that high and low performers in teams differ in the way they review their colleagues’ contributions.

Fred D. Ledley and Stephen S. Holt wrote the third article. In it they look at undergraduate management education and whether the inclusion of science into the curriculum might offer advantages. Perhaps surprisingly, they found that science courses formed part of the required curriculum at 80% of BusinessWeek’s “top business schools.” In analyzing these curricula, they argue that by providing a broad picture of scientific principles and their presence in everyday life, by promoting critical thinking and inductive reasoning, and by enabling understanding of scientific research, technical innovation, and product development as well as their ethical and social implications, business courses might achieve the highest standards of evidence-based science education and be grounded in rigorous principles and practices.

The final article in this issue is an in-depth review of the emotion literature and the implications for teaching the subject in a management education context. It was written by Janine L. Bowen. She looks not only at including the emotion literature inside the curriculum of management students but also at the emotion aspects of the learning process.

References
