Three strikes and a blog: What to do with papers that are continually rejected

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Getting your work published can be a frustrating process. Massive delays in publication and continual rejection may be all too common experiences but **James Hartley** *argues this is no reason to let your scholarly work remain unseen. Blogs offer a great way to continue the momentum of your research and to find new audiences for work that may not appeal to the strict remit of academic publishers.*

In the game of baseball, as I understand it, if you make three attempts at hitting the ball and miss each time, you are out. Here I ask, can the same analogy be applied to writing academic papers? After three unsuccessful strikes at publication should you give up?

My answer is a resounding NO. The reasons for rejection are many, varied and painful – as we all know. But there is some evidence that if we persevere we may eventually get published. Indeed, Juan Campanario (1995) provides accounts of how papers that were initially rejected later become famous. In this blog I tell the stories of three sets of papers that fell at the rejection barrier and what I did next.

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Listen to the technical advice and try again

In this first story I wrote a paper, with my colleague Lucy Betts, on how the layout of a Likert-type scale could affect the scores obtained on it. It took several attempts with various journals to get it published, but eventually we did. The reasons for rejection were usually technical – we had not used the right statistics, etc. We followed this up by a second similar paper showing the same findings in quite a different situation. Here again this paper was rejected several times before being accepted. Again the criticisms were mainly technical – one reviewer wrote *after a period of 6 months* that because we had not mentioned that Likert scales produced ordinal as opposed to interval data, he/she refused to read any further than the first paragraph. Meanwhile we wrote a blog on the difficulties of constructing Likert-type scales…

In a third but again similar paper, we scotched this technical argument by showing that different previous researchers had either ignored this problem, or taken different but special steps to obviate it – and we explained why we had chosen to use one of these methods in our paper. Game set and match you might think, but no, we only managed to get this paper published eventually in a postgraduate journal.

Finally we wrote a fourth composite paper – where we put the results of all the three papers together showing that basically the same result had occurred in three very different situations, and that this was, therefore, quite an important finding. A referee rejected this one on the grounds that as the studies were all different it was not reasonable to draw this conclusion… Finally, to our surprise, we were eventually able to publish this fourth paper as Hartley and Betts ("There's more than meets the eye when constructing and interpreting Likert-type scales" *Chinese Journal of Psychology, 55,* 2, 113-121.) – after several further submissions!

Expand your horizons and reach out to wider fields

In story 2, I wrote a paper presenting the findings from a survey on how 93 retired academics in the UK continued to write academic papers and contribute to research. I sent this paper to a higher education journal. The editor sat on

it for over a month before deciding not to send it out to referees. He asked me if I could write something else on the topic instead (and I declined).

I sent a revised version of the manuscript to a very different journal on research in academic writing. Two months later I got the referees' and the editor's report. Both of the referees recommend 'accept with minor revisions' but the editor over-rode these comments and asked for a major revision and a re-submission. The editor wrote several pages showing how the paper did not do what he wanted me to do, and his report was very thorough.

Nonetheless, I declined to follow the editor's suggestions to write what he wanted rather than what I wanted, and I re-submitted the paper to another educational journal. This time, again, the paper was rejected on the grounds that – although it was very interesting – it mainly just reported the results of a questionnaire.

I resolved this problem of three rejections by writing a blog on the topic. The problem with blogs, of course, is that they are widely read but not highly cited. Hence authors continue to put up with the massive delays of publication (see Mike Eisen's The glacial change of scientific publishing 6 September, 2012). But maybe if the blog is good enough, even a blog might be highly cited?

Recast the work as a blog and let it be read

I wrote a paper about how most of the participants in studies in social psychology journals were undergraduate students – mainly in their first-year and given credit for participating. I submitted this to an appropriate journal where it was roundly rejected. I then recast it as a blog – see: Experimental social psychology relies too heavily on samples of undergraduate psychology students where it received over 2,500 hits in the first few weeks of being posted. So the answer to my opening question is: (i) keep on trying and/or (ii) write a blog about it!

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

James Hartley is Research Professor in the School of Psychology at Keele University, UK