The Unfair Burden of Rejection on Researchers: Transitioning from Editors as Gatekeepers to Facilitators of Knowledge Production

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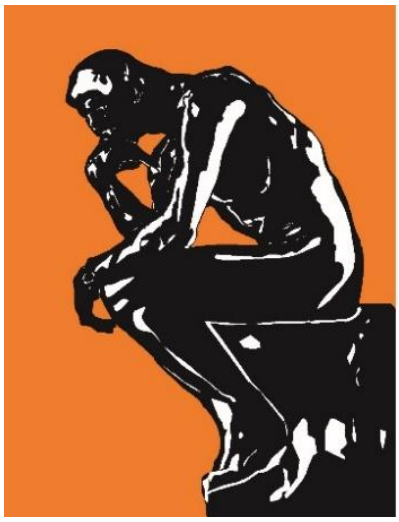

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> "Awards are something everyone admires. But the most prestigious awards are rare. Usually, people have to "create" their own standards to achieve them."
>
> In "Highest Honor"; *Wild Wise Weird* (2024)

Abstract

- As gatekeepers, editors and reviewers play a central role in identifying reliable and valuable scientific works for preservation and dissemination, contributing to subsequent knowledge production and public use.
- Despite its benefits, the rejection mechanism often carries significant emotional and career consequences for researchers.
- The analysis of 304 rejection letters since 2022 indicates that over 97% of rejections were attributed solely to authors' shortcomings or the journal's rigorous evaluation standards, while less than 3% cited journal-side limitations.
- This pattern suggests a prevailing tendency where journals position themselves as the standard of quality, implicitly framing rejected research as inherently unqualified and placing an undue burden on authors—the primary producers of knowledge.
- Given the fallibility of journals, we propose a shift from viewing them as gatekeepers to recognizing them as facilitators of knowledge production. This transition would require embracing intellectual humility, thereby alleviating the rejection-induced burdens on researchers and fostering a more constructive scholarly environment.

Keywords: desk rejection; editor's responsibility; Granular Interaction Thinking Theory (GITT); mental health; knowledge production

Rejection, journal's responsibility, and consequences on researchers

Academic journals are often seen as key gatekeepers in the dissemination of scientific knowledge, with editors and reviewers playing a central role in evaluating the quality of submissions, distributing professional rewards, and shaping future research (Siler et al., 2015). Through the editorial process and peer review, journals determine which research is published and which is rejected. This responsibility demands that rejection decisions be made fairly, transparently, and in the best interest of scientific progress. However, when a paper is rejected, the focus is almost always on the shortcomings of the research itself rather than on the limitations within the journal. Given that the rejection process can significantly impact authors' mental health and career, this article examines the responsibility of journals in rejection decisions stemming from their own limitations by drawing on our 304 recorded rejection letters since 2022. Based on the Granular Interaction Thinking Theory (GITT) perspective on the rejection mechanism (Vuong & Nguyen, 2024a, 2024c), we also provide insights into the issue and its broader implications.

Granular interaction thinking, a theory inspired by quantum mechanics and information theory (Hertog, 2023; Rovelli, 2018; Shannon, 1948), views knowledge production as a dynamic, probabilistic, multi-stage process that requires contributions from many individuals

(Vuong & Nguyen, 2024b). In this view, each scientific work can be seen as a "quantum" of information that is produced through the interactions between new observations, theoretical formulations, and useful knowledge accumulated in previous states of knowledge production. Given that the scientific community can only process finite information, there is inherent entropy (i.e., uncertainty) in which ideas should be stored, disseminated, and used to advance science. Without any prioritization or filtering mechanism, if every submitted paper were published, the entropy of the knowledge system would be maximal—useful and flawed information would be mixed indistinguishably, making it very hard for researchers and the public to identify reliable and valuable knowledge. In such a scenario, the probability of identifying reliable and valuable scientific works for subsequent knowledge production would be highly uncertain (Vuong & Nguyen, 2024b).

Journals help mitigate this problem by acting as information quality filters. By subjecting manuscripts to editorial screening and peer review, journals increase the likelihood that credible, relevant, and high-quality research enters the circulation of scientific literature. In GITT's terms, the editorial screening and peer review processes help reduce entropy in the knowledge pool, allowing subsequent researchers (the next "state" of knowledge production) to find and build upon reliable and useful scientific works more easily. From this perspective, journals carry the responsibility of being "gatekeepers" of knowledge quality, striving to transmit valuable information from the current state of science (State 1) to the next (State 2) with minimal noise (Vuong & Nguyen, 2024b).

However, this filtering process is not infallible (Siler et al., 2015). Rejections are not always based solely on a paper's quality; editorial and logistical constraints, strategic and policy considerations, ethical and political factors, and the capabilities and subjectivity of editors and reviewers also influence them. Editorial and logistical constraints, such as a shortage of available reviewers, high submission backlogs, and editors' lack of expertise, can limit a journal's ability to effectively process, evaluate, and disseminate knowledge to the right audience, leading to rejection. For strategic and policy decisions, some journals prioritize papers they expect to generate high citation counts, potentially sidelining rigorous but less "trendy" research. Additionally, there also exist biases toward well-known researchers or institutions, creating barriers for early-career and developing-country researchers seeking to publish their work (Kulal et al., 2025; Teplitskiy et al., 2022).

Moreover, editors and reviewers are not immune to limitations, subjectivity, or bias (Rubin et al., 2023; Smith, 2006; Srivastava et al., 2024). No matter how rigorous the guidelines, they are still human, with inherent blind spots and intellectual constraints. A study or theory that challenges the prevailing paradigm may be dismissed by those who are deeply invested in maintaining the status quo (Macdonald, 2016). Editors may unconsciously favor work that aligns with their expertise and worldview while viewing unfamiliar or unconventional ideas with skepticism. Additionally, if a manuscript criticizes the work of influential figures on the journal's editorial board or addresses politically sensitive topics, it may be rejected not due to a lack of merit, but to avoid controversy.

As a result, valuable research may be rejected—not due to major flaws, but because journals must manage limited resources, uphold their brand and prestige, and, at times, avoid publishing works that do not align with existing knowledge frameworks or the expectations of "gatekeepers."

Nevertheless, for individual researchers, journal rejections are more than just filtering mechanisms—they often carry significant emotional and career consequences. Studies have shown that many academics perceive manuscript rejection as a personal failure, experiencing negative emotions such as shame, disillusionment, and self-doubt (Woolley & Barron, 2009). Repeated rejections can erode confidence, exacerbate impostor syndrome, reduce creativity and productivity, burnout, and even lead some to consider leaving academia (Day, 2011; Hoover & Lucas, 2024; Jaremka et al., 2020). This human aspect underscores the responsibility of journals to handle rejections with care and transparency. A decision letter that lacks clear reasoning—or is unduly harsh in tone—can amplify confusion and resentment. Although the rejection process is intended to filter out specific units of information—the submitted paper—rather than evaluating the researcher's competence, knowledge, research direction, or approach, ambiguous rejection decisions create uncertainty about the reasons for non-acceptance. This uncertainty can challenge the author's self-esteem, professional identity, and career resilience (Horn, 2016; Walker, 2019).

Therefore, rejecting a manuscript due to editorial or logistical reasons without providing a clear explanation can place an unfair burden on authors by making them question the quality of their work rather than the constraints of the journal.

An undue attribution of rejection to researchers

To better understand the types of information that journals provide when making rejection decisions, we compiled and analyzed 304 rejection letters received by our team since 2022. These letters resulted from the submission of 65 manuscripts—including both research and perspective articles—to 241 different journals.

The rejection letters fell into three categories:

- Type A: Desk-rejection letters
- Type B: Rejection after peer review
- Type C: Rejection after review and revision

Among these, desk rejections (Type A) were the most prevalent, accounting for 87.5% (266 letters) of the total. For Type B and Type C rejections, editors generally base their decisions on both their assessments and reviewers' evaluations, providing clear and specific reasons for rejection. In contrast, Type A rejection letters lacked clarity, often offering vague or generalized explanations.

Among the 266 desk-rejection letters, a large proportion cited generic reasons: 40.60% (108 letters) simply stated that the manuscript did not meet the journal's criteria, while 18.8% (50 letters) mentioned the strict evaluation process and low acceptance rate of the journal as the reason for rejection. Some journals provided more specific feedback, such as the manuscript is out of scope (99 letters, accounting for 37.22%) or lacking novelty/significance (55 letters, accounting for 20.68%), yet even in these cases, the reasoning remained ambiguous—41.41% of letters citing scope mismatch failed to specify why the manuscript was out of scope, and 47.27% of letters rejecting for lack of novelty/significance did not clarify what aspects were insufficient.

In contrast to the high percentage of vague rejection letters attributing more or less the rejection decision to researchers' papers, only a small fraction of letters attributed rejections to journal-side limitations—just 2.63% cited a lack of suitable reviewers, 0.75% mentioned a high submission backlog, and only 0.38% indicated that the journal lacked the relevant expertise to assess the manuscript.

When selecting journals for submission, we primarily relied on keyword matches between our papers and the journal's aims and scope, along with recommendations from Scimago for journals in the same field. While it is acknowledged that some submissions may fall outside a journal's scope or have certain weaknesses, the claim that over 97% of rejections were solely due to authors' shortcomings or the journal's rigorous evaluation standards appears unconvincing.

Although these figures cannot lead to definitive conclusions, they suggest that journals tend to position themselves as the standard of quality, implicitly framing rejected research as inherently unqualified. This tendency inherently shifts the burden of rejection and its negative consequences onto authors. Given that editors are also subject to limitations, subjectivity, and biases, it is worth questioning whether the current rejection mechanism is functioning properly and fairly when it imposes an undue burden on authors—the individuals who are the main producers of knowledge—and considers this as a normal "healthy" process (Macdonald, 2016). Moreover, when promising papers are rejected and never resubmitted, valuable insights are lost to the scientific record. Should the authors also be held accountable for this loss of knowledge and the wasted resources resulting from such neglect? (Vuong, 2018).

The necessity of a knowledge co-production culture

Given the challenges discussed, one key recommendation is to foster a culture of co-production of knowledge in the publishing system. In this co-production culture, editors should see themselves as facilitators of knowledge generation and dissemination process—collaborating with the authors to advance humanity's understanding of the world—rather than gatekeepers of science that try to impose "prestigious" standards on researchers. As facilitators, the roles of editors should be to increase the probability of storing and disseminating reliable and useful knowledge, support authors to refine and polish newly

generated insights, and ensure that knowledge is allocated to the right people—those who can recognize and maximize its value and usefulness.

A key prerequisite for fostering a culture of co-production in scientific publishing is embracing intellectual humility in the evaluation and decision-making process (Vuong & Nguyen, 2024b). Intellectual humility requires editors not only to approach each manuscript with openness—recognizing its potential merit even if it challenges their prior beliefs or expertise—but also to be honest about their own limitations. Transparently communicating these limitations to authors (e.g., difficulty securing qualified reviewers, lack of relevant expertise, high submission backlog) is a clear demonstration of humility and professional integrity.

Rejections are certainly not pleasant, but they can be made more transparent and constructive (Vuong, 2020; Vuong & Nguyen, 2024b). Such a rejection—one that explains the decision and offers guidance—can reduce the stigma and frustration discouraging researchers from pursuing new ideas and be perceived as part of professional growth, helping researchers refine their work and navigate the publishing landscape more effectively. Thus, transparently communicating the journals' limitations in assessing scientific studies should be widely embraced and endorsed by the scientific community, as it reinforces the role of editors as true facilitators of knowledge production. By ensuring that promising scientific ideas are not prematurely dismissed and by alleviating the undue burden of rejection on authors, editors as facilitators can contribute to a more equitable and progressive scholarly ecosystem.

To foster intellectual humility, journals should emphasize in editorial training that novelty should not be conflated with a lack of quality. Editors should be encouraged to distinguish between "this result is surprising or challenges expectations" and "this result is invalid." Additionally, they should regularly ask themselves, "Am I capable of assessing these unfamiliar results or ideas?" Likewise, editors can actively seek diverse opinions, especially for papers that challenge mainstream thought. When rejecting a submission, editors can also take a more constructive approach by suggesting alternative venues where the work may be more appropriately received. Such practices help keep valuable research in circulation, increasing its chances of eventually finding a home and contributing to the broader scientific discourse.

In conclusion, while editors play a crucial role in reducing uncertainty and upholding quality in the knowledge production process, they are also subject to biases and limitations in expertise. However, based on our 304 recorded rejection letters, we found that over 97% of rejections were attributed to shortcomings on the part of the researchers. This pattern suggests that journals often position themselves as the standard of quality, implicitly framing rejected research as inherently unqualified. This practice disproportionately shifts the burden and emotional toll of rejection onto authors, discouraging them from pursuing bold, innovative ideas and, in some cases, even pushing them to leave academia.

To address this issue, we advocate for a co-production culture within the publishing system—one that reconsiders editors not as gatekeepers but as facilitators of knowledge production. By institutionalizing intellectual humility values into such a culture, journals can minimize the risk of dismissing valuable knowledge simply because it does not conform to existing paradigms. At the same time, they can help mitigate the disproportionate stress and pressure rejections impose on researchers, ultimately fostering a more equitable and dynamic scientific ecosystem.

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