

How to appeal well



Appealing against an editor’s negative decision is likely to be more fruitful when considering the basis of the editorial assessment and offering ways forward.

In scientific publishing, negative decisions are commonplace. Less so are appeals to such rejections, particularly before peer review. The appeal process is typically perceived to be a waste of time by authors, because the reality is that most appeals do not lead to the reversal of the initial decision (the opposite would imply that the journal’s editorial process would be in jeopardy), and because the process often delays the eventual publication of the manuscript. Appeals are also unwelcome by journal editors – such requests for reconsideration of a manuscript add to their workload and are often perceived as a challenge to their decision-making.

Yet conscientious editors do welcome the right sort of appeals: those that suggest paths forward to address the main criticisms (from any reviewers and the editor), in alignment with the journal’s editorial criteria and aims, and those with well-constructed arguments that make the editor realize that they made a mistake and are missing out on a suitable manuscript – or, in fact, an exceptional one. Thus, what does it mean to appeal well? Here, we aim to provide answers. Or, at least, a useful guide.

Foremost, discerning authors know when it is worth appealing an editorial decision. Does the study really ‘belong’ in the journal when the type and scope of the findings and the strength, breadth and depth of the evidence is compared with similar studies that the journal has recently published? This question and similar general considerations (Box 1) are worth thinking about before appealing an outright rejection. A report of a prototype of a diagnostic device for use with clinical samples is unlikely to belong to a clinical journal or to a journal that focuses on methods for biologists. And if the device is derivative and performs similarly to other devices, or the evidence for its validation or benchmarking is weak, it may not belong to a highly selective journal. Hence, an appeal to the ‘wrong’ journal – irrespective of how well crafted the appeal is – is not likely to succeed. In an ideal

BOX 1

A sample of general questions to ponder over when considering whether to appeal an outright editorial rejection of a manuscript

Which recently published studies are most relevant to the work, and why?

Has the same problem been addressed by other approaches?

Why do you feel the advance is a substantial step forward rather than incremental?

What are the near-term implications of the work?

Which main challenges lie in the way of these implications?

What are the study’s main limitations? Do they arise from the assumptions made, or from the methods, models or data acquired or used?

world, each manuscript would be submitted to the most fitting journal, yet pervasive academic incentives and unclear journal scopes can prompt authors to misaim when selecting the journal to submit their manuscript to.

An appropriately directed appeal request should focus on the basis of the assessment that led to the journal’s decision (this is especially crucial when the decision came with reviewer reports). However, the editor may not have provided any meaningful reasons for the rejection, or the rationale may be unclear, confusing or even misguided. How should authors interpret such cases? Being familiar with the journal’s editorial process or the editor’s customary level of feedback will help (*Nat. Biomed. Eng.* **6**, 677–678; 2022). A decision e-mail for an outright rejection before peer review that does not mention any specifics about the study may indicate that the work is a poor fit to the journal (in fact, *Nature Biomedical Engineering* and many other journals rapidly screen out the least suitable manuscripts); if the rationale is unclear or confusing, it may suggest that the editor is overburdened or that they missed or misinterpreted the main points of the study (perhaps because of inadequate background knowledge, or as a result of an insufficiently clear manuscript); if the feedback is misguided, appealing the decision would be most appropriate. A relevant consideration is that

most editors believe that providing explicit rationale supporting the decision invites more appeals. In practice, we have found this to be a causal fallacy – rejecting perfectly suitable papers and long decision-turnaround times (which may raise the authors’ expectations of success) with no specific feedback (which might be perceived as the editor not having spent enough time reading the manuscript) are more likely to increase appeal rates. (In years 2020–2023, *Nature Biomedical Engineering* received appeals for reconsideration for 3.5–5% of the research manuscripts that we declined without review.)

When a negative decision provides information about the editorial criteria and the arguments for rejection, appealing well means addressing those points head on. Was the main reason referring to precedents in the main findings or in the methodology, or to the likelihood that the findings are of interest to a sufficiently wide range of specialists? You could refer to the most relevant precedents, and explain how the study builds on these and how the methodology may be unique or used to uncover further insight; and you could provide examples of how the findings or the questions they raise will help advance work being carried out in other fields of research. Were the arguments hinting at insufficient depth or breadth of the evidence? If feasible, you could suggest that additional analyses,

datasets or insight could be added to the manuscript (or, better, provide the editor an updated manuscript incorporating them). Did the decision e-mail allude to misalignment with the journal's main aims? Propose one or a few realistic ways to adapt the emphasis of the story and the evidence to align them with the expectations of the journal's editors and audience. In fact, suggesting ways forward that would make the manuscript more suitable for the journal – particularly when appealing

a negative decision after peer review – may make the appeal more fruitful. Even when unsuccessful, the response may come with editorial insight that proves useful when crafting future manuscripts.

It is easier to convey what not to do: ask for a re-read of the manuscript; pursue back-and-forth discussion as an appeal-in-disguise; write verbose appeal e-mails; appeal to authority; or criticize the editor's skills, diligence or understanding of the research field.

Submitting manuscripts and appealing decisions can be done for free, but your co-authors' time and editorial time are neither free nor disposable. In matters of opinion, fairness may be in the mind of the beholder (*Nat. Biomed. Eng.* **7**, 1055–1056; 2023), yet discerning authors do have greater success when appealing. Appeal well.

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