A dozen or more ways to avoid getting your paper rejected

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Abstract

Why do journal editors reject papers? Let me explain...

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1. Introduction

As an editor of two (at least I think they are) decent journals, International Review of Financial Analysis and Finance Research Letters, I have the unenviable task of rejecting for publication many academic papers. Some I reject at my level; these are what are called desk rejects. I reject others after peer review. Why?

Here is not the place to debate the issues, and they are many, around peer review. Let us accept that for the immediate and medium term future this process is how it is, and will remain, for the upper echelon of journals (and yes, that in itself is a fuzzy and inchoate classification). Peer review involves me as editor selecting some persons whom I believe to have knowledge of an area, sending them the hard work of others, and asking for their comments. Based on those, and my own perceptions, I decide to reject, ask for more work and start the cycle again, or reject.

Between editing my own journals, chairing a medium size conference, and being an associate editor in other journals, I see over a thousand academic papers per annum. Very few are pure rubbish, from a surface perspective. By that I mean most all show evidence of considerable work, of organization and marshaling of arguments, of data analysis or theoretical development, of thought and effort. People have sweated over these, and perhaps their jobs or promotion prospects depend on an acceptance. And yet we reject many, if not most.

Rejection stings. The more papers you publish, and I have 100 or more, the more used you get to rejection. But still it stings. How dare those bozos in X decline to publish my work! What sort of a fool is the editor/reviewer to ask me for A, B, C ....

The correct reaction is to take the rejection, fume and whine FOR A SHORT WHILE and then put it away. In a few days, when your emotions have cooled and the bruises begun to fade, look again. In every case there will be something you can take from the rejection a data concern to ad-
dress, a theoretical weakness to shore, a model to consider, a literature and argument to incorporate. You might not agree with them all but in the context of a discourse, and that is what a paper is, part of a communication process, you need to be aware of and address the counterarguments. If you have not made something clear, make it clear. If you have made something obscure, make it clear.

So why do editors do this? We are conscious of careers and incomes riding on our decisions to accept or reject, we know that we sometimes accept poor and reject good papers (hopefully those errors are small but they do exist), and we know that we want to tread a careful line between formative and summative judgment.

In my readings and experience, and in thinking on this I have come across a set of common factors. These, and my own perspectives, I outline below, in absolutely no order of importance. I should admit that the transgressions below I have committed, serially, multiply, and egregiously. But as a editor I can now appreciate how annoying these must have been, and perhaps still are.

1.1. Clarity

The paper needs to tell us what it is doing. It needs to be clear, and concise. One idea, one paper, a clear logical thread from introduction to conclusion. If there are a host of good ideas all crowding each other out then in the confines of the space available in a modern journal article this is going to present a problem. Without getting into salami slicing, where a bunch of papers are created from one base, each differing only minutely from each other, the rubric of One for One, one major idea per paper, is one to live by. That way you can present a tightly argued, clear, organised paper. The other ideas go in other papers. Ask yourself is this tightly coherent? Make it clear
1.2. Brevity

It is, we are told, the soul of wit. It is also rare in modern papers. There is a worrying move to long papers. I think a lot of this is around a desire to cover all bases, and to make sure that no possible angle remains unpursued. It is the Curse of Robustness Checks. Think of this - a paper finds a phenomena but it is not robust to alternative methodologies or trivial changes in some variables. In that case the main point is the fleeting nature of the phenomena, and the robustness checks are the paper. Most robustness checks can be put in an appendix, with a short paragraph in the paper that yep, the results are robust. Don’t be afraid to do this. Make it short but sweet.

1.3. Fit

It still astonishes me how often I see papers that are simply not within the aims and scope of the journal. How hard can it be to check have similar papers been published in the last few years, to read the journal homepage, to perhaps even email the editor or an associate editor? Again, this is not to say that journals shouldn’t, and perhaps even have a responsibility to, go outside the box a little, but sending a theory paper to an empirical journal, or a paper on international trade to one focusing on corporate finance suggests sloppy preparation and a lack of clarity. In the ABS journal rankings there are 1400 journals. There is one for your paper. Check if it fits. Make sure you submit to the right journal.

1.4. Contribution

I mentioned salami slicing. In empirical papers this most often appears where one or two variables or approaches are changed and a new paper produced. Thus one paper uses one methodology and another a similar, with essentially the same explanatory variable set. These are really robustness checks on the original paper, and should be treated as such. Let the reader feel they learned something. Not every paper is going to be the next big
thing. Most are destined to be rarely cited, filler in the edifice of science, even in the top journals. But that doesn’t mean they should be of air. Make it meaningful

1.5. Triviality

Some things, if not known (can anything be known, really, in social science?) are well accepted. A paper that demonstrates already well attributed findings but in another setting, that is hard to publish. In my area this usually manifests itself as a paper that takes a concept or finding from developed or increasingly emerging markets, applies it to a frontier market and finds the same findings. Salami slicing works this way also, or rather, not. A paper should have some substance. This is different to contribution - replication in another setting is a useful contribution but it may be rather trivial. Give the reader a solid reason for reading the paper. Within the paper don’t put in things you don’t need to. Don’t spend time showing the statistical derivation of a cointegrating relationship, or what a GARCH(1,1) model looks like, unless there is something unusual about what you are doing here. People, especially referees and editors have limited time to wade through something going ”yes, yes WE KNOW...get to the point” Make every line count

1.6. Coherence

Some papers are a mess. There is a good reason for, and again this is in my area, a conventional layout: introduction, previous literature, data and methodology, findings, robustness checks (but see above), conclusion and recommendations. It works to aid the writer and more important the reader in understanding the flow of the paper. Too many or too few sections, a host of nested subsections, lack of integration across same, a sense where there are multiple authors of multiple voices rather than one, tables that are either not at all explanatory or have footnotes as long as the paper - all these make a paper hard to read and hard to understand. Remember, this
is a discourse, a communication. I often read paragraphs and entire sections out. Make it easy to read.

1.7. Completeness

Some papers are simply not complete. For most publishers now there is a technical screening before it hits the editor; are the manuscripts, tables, figures, data etc. in the submission? Has it passed the plagiarism screening? Is it legible? Sometimes people simply forget to include material. It is uncommon but not unknown to see papers that have ¿to be added ¿Jim¿ or something similar. If its not complete, its not going anywhere. The only exception to this is perhaps for a conference, where it is clear that an extended abstract submission is fine. Make it complete

1.8. Legibility

At times I feel like channeling Samuel L. Jackson, discussing linguistics with Brett, in Pulp Fiction. English is overwhelmingly the language of academic publishing. If the language is poorly structured, riddled with errors syntactical and lexical, then its going to be rejected. Get it proofread, even if you are a native English speaker. Make it grammatical

1.9. Correctness

A paper needs, especially if it is going to challenge established wisdom, to be very well constructed and to leave the reader feeling that yes there is a solid challenge. If the paper misses a whole pile of literature, has bad or poorly applied statistics, has overambitious conclusions drawn from fuzzy data, is in general suffused with poor science, then its going to go down. Alternative perspectives are great, but being wrong is an alternative to being right. Check your science. Ask if each bit stands. Do it right

1.10. Seasoned

This is often the case when papers are from junior researchers or are driving forward a new area. At the end we want to know so now what do
we do or where do we go? If the paper can’t tell us that, perhaps because of some of the other issues noted here or because the paper spent too long or in too rambling a way to get to the point, then it is not going to prosper. Strength is hard to specify but like prose we know it when we see it. As an editor we know who the authors are. Have they presented the paper at symposia, at conferences, at workshops? Who and where is thanked? If the paper is raw, then it will be hard to digest. If it is green then it wont stand up. **Make it strong.**

1.11. *Replicability*

Data integrity and replicability are becoming key concerns of journal editors. Some have adopted a policy of having data and commands deposited with the paper. In general however the paper should be complete in its descriptions so that someone with the same or similar data can reproduce the essentials. Explain what data were used, where sourced, what cleaning etc.; outline the nature of the theoretical steps; explain the experiments. Many of these explanations, which can be quite long, can be placed now as supplemental appendices, and should be so done. That way the paper as such can be short and pointed (brevity, remember) and the interested replicator can go to the appendices for detail. If there is a sense that this cant be replicated, then its incomplete and poorly written and will crash. **Make it reproducible**

1.12. *Courtesy*

The academy is quite small once you get into paper writing and reviewing. I have had occasion to reject a paper from a journal knowing, as I had been the reviewer just two weeks before, that the authors had not made any effort to address my previous concerns. That doesnt mean agreeing with them, it does mean addressing them. Sending a literally identical paper sequentially rejected to a multiple of journals will get you a bad reputation and you WILL meet as editors or other gatekeepers people whose views you
have blown off. Editors are usually busy people and reviewers also tend to have other things to do than read your work. So when they spend any time on your paper its rude to blow it off as pointless. **Don’t be rude.**

1.13. *Bad Luck*

Ideas and topics go into and out of vogue. It is not uncommon to see two or more similar papers addressing similar areas submitted. In that case there is an element of luck. Generally I will try to track back, via working papers dates, and see who has some claim on priority. This, by the way, is another reason why working papers and conference presentations are useful; they show intellectual priority. At any rate, Solomonic judgements are sometimes required. Be swift, but sure, I suggest. Once you have a complete, reasonably sound paper, shop it round (to season it) and to stake a claim. You are in a race with people who are as smart, as motivated, as hard working as you are, with essentially the same resources. When you send a paper out into the world you lose intellectual control. The best you can hope for, ever, is citation. So, when you have a seasoned decent paper, send it off. You are not (unless you are..) engaged in creative writing or literature construction. Polish, but just enough. Send it off. **Make it snappy.**

2. *Some further reading*

I found the following sites useful in preparing the above.

http://thebyps.typepad.com/my-blog/2015/01/deskrejectionfrench.html

http://patthomson.net/2013/05/20/seven-reasons-why-paper-are-rejected-by-journals/


http://www.elsevier.com/connect/8-reasons-i-rejected-your-article