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Technovation

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Editorial

How to get your papers rejected (or not)

Recently a group of editors met for a workshop (1st International Workshop to Foster Publications on Engineering Design, February 2011, Grenoble, France) to help people identify how to make papers on design more publishable and less rejectable. As in the past, at the workshop I heard editors complain about the high number of desk rejects and how we (editors) would much prefer to have a small number of excellent submissions with a low rejection rate than a large number of papers—with a high rejection rate.

In support of this goal, a list of reasons for desk rejection is offered. The items are put into groups as opposed to relative importance. The intent is to assist authors avoid desk rejection, by avoiding inclusions and omissions that increase the likelihood of desk rejections. Having reviewed thousands of papers, I have come across all of these issues and can comfortably advise that editors will often desk reject papers for one or a combination of these reasons. While most of these issues are correctable, they should be addressed prior to submitting a paper. If the editor and reviewers were to try and convince the authors to correct these issues in addition to improving the paper it would add several rounds of reviews to the review system. As many researchers find themselves buried under review requests, it is easy to argue that editors should be sending fewer papers out for review (as opposed to more). Consequently, authors should take extra care to avoid providing reasons for oversubscribed journals to reject papers prior to external review.

There are definitely many additional ways to obtain a rapid rejection, please feel free to submit missing one's <http://ees.elsevier.com/technovation/default.asp> in the form of a brief letter for possible inclusion in a future issue of Technovation.

Self-identification concerns

1. Place your name within the paper.
2. Do not include your name at the start of the paper, but place a biographical note at the end of the paper.
3. Name your institution.
4. Place a picture of yourself in the document.
5. Refer to your grants in the acknowledgements.
6. Make it clear in the acknowledgements who you probably are.
7. Name drop in the acknowledgements.
8. Use extreme levels of self-citing.
9. Cite all your very old unpublished working papers, presentations, and conference papers.

Reference related

10. Cite papers in foreign languages heavily.
11. Cite websites heavily.

12. Use a different formatting style for every reference.
13. Use incomplete references.
14. Do not cite literature—assume no one else has ever written anything else related to the subject.
15. Cite everything imaginable—reference section longer than the paper.
16. Literature is summarized rather than utilized—usually the case in PhD thesis-derived papers written by inexperienced authors.
17. Only cite newspapers and magazines.
18. All reference are in a form that is specified by a different journal—this makes it appear that the article was just rejected by another journal.
19. Cites are all very old.
20. Cites seem to stop at a certain point in time, as if nothing has been written in the last x years—it is more likely that the paper is old and has never been updated.
21. No recent citations—paper should be very up to date.
22. Citations focus heavily on a different journal.
23. Citations focus heavily on a different discipline or field of research.
24. No citations to the journal that the paper is being submitted to (the issue here is that of relevance and fit).
25. Citations do not include the field of study that the paper is on.
26. Add references in the end that are not mentioned in the body of the paper.
27. Leave many of the cites out of the reference section.

Overall style

28. Structural omissions: no abstract, no conclusions/implications, no methodology (if empirical), no title.
29. The paper is written like an advertising brochure—cases, quotes, situations showing how great your new concept is.
30. Start the paper with one or more clichés.
31. Paper is obviously written by a non-native English speaker—some papers are so awkwardly structured that they may even appear to have been translated by a software program. (If there is any question about the quality of your English, have a native English speaker carefully read and edit your paper.)
32. Use acronyms as much as possible—we are after all the text messaging generation.
33. Do not define acronyms—people should know them already or figure them out themselves.
34. Use *etc.* it is nice and vague—it keeps your options open so no one can say you left anything important out.
35. Intersperse foreign words and spellings into the text.
36. Use contractions.

37. Make it very personal—refer to yourself at every possible opportunity.
38. Use clichés.
39. Use slang and colloquial terminology.
40. Spelling mistakes are okay.
41. Leave the change track changer on.
42. Leave notes to yourself or your coauthor in the footnotes or sprinkled within the text.
43. Do not worry about the real meaning of words.
44. With punctuation, more is better
45. With punctuation, less is better.
46. Use different fonts and character sizes in random parts of the paper.

Figures

47. Refer to figures, but do not include them.
48. Do not label figures.
49. Include extra figures.
50. Use different formatting styles for header and sub-headers throughout the paper.
51. Label figures incorrectly.
52. Use small font and single space in an effort to make paper shorter.
53. Use a multiple column format.
54. Paper is written like a mystery novel.
55. Paper is written in a style that is alien to the journal.

Objectives of paper

56. Who needs a reason to write.
57. Purpose for the paper exists, but is not stated.
58. Purpose for the paper exists, but is not clearly stated.
59. The purpose of the paper is stated, but hidden somewhere far away from the first paragraph of the paper.
60. There are multiple questions or purposes.
61. The stated question or purpose of the paper is not addressed in the paper.
62. Questions are answered, but not the question referred to in the paper.
63. Author invites the reviewers to state what objective should be as the data can be “Taken in many different directions.”
64. Name-drop fashionable concepts out of context—not every paper is a contribution to “Open Innovation” these days.

Method

65. Do not provide (withhold) information about methodology.
66. Methodology has a fatal flaw that is a concern to most journals—most common: factor analysis with large number of variables and small number of observations.
67. Methodology has a fatal flaw unacceptable for some journal, but acceptable in other journals—requires substantial knowledge of the target journal.
68. Sample has an undesirable bias.
69. Sample is based on a survey and data that are chosen for convenience.
70. Overly ambitious simplifying assumptions.
71. Reinvent the field—reject all work done previously and start from scratch.
72. Use of the language of confirmation (instead of Popperian Falsification).

Contribution

73. Contribution of the paper is to confirm existing studies—okay in many fields, rarely of interest in management.

74. Confirm/Deny something that is considered obvious.
75. Confirm/Deny something that nobody is particularly interested in.
76. Contribution is that this is the first study on existing theory/topic conducted in country or region *x*.
77. Contribution is that this is the first study on existing theory/topic conducted in industry *x*.
78. Contribution is that this is the first study on existing theory/topic conducted on technology *x*.
79. Sample size is too small for quantitative studies—representation of population concerns.
80. Sample size is too small for qualitative studies—saturation concerns.
81. This is an exploratory study... more results too follow—editors, reviewers, and readers would prefer not to read any further. They are generally surprisingly patient about waiting for the final study.
82. Copying a paper that already exists—there are many severe repercussions of this.
83. Using substantial parts from other papers (either self-authored or not, often not properly cited)—can usually be detected by style breaks, format breaks, or plagiarism-checking software.
84. Announce a field of study is completely new in an area that the reviewing editor has worked on for years (or years ago).
85. Submitting a paper published by the reviewing editor some years ago and claiming it is new (fusion of 78 and 79)—I had to include it, I am still amazed that we received such a submission.
86. Un named case studies – question of does the firm exist – at the very least firm name should be made available during the review process.
87. No contribution to theory.
88. Contribution is not generalizable—one is just telling a story that cannot be used anywhere else.
89. Relationship to journal scope is at best questionable—check the fit before you submit.
90. Decide that the paper is a fit, because something on this subject was published in the journal many years ago—journal focus and editors change over time.
91. It is evident that the paper is being sent to a particular journal, because the paper was rejected by the journals the author was really interested in.
92. Refer to a different journal in the submission letter—suggests one or more of some problems that editors like to avoid, including: sloppiness, double submission or a frequently rejected paper.
93. The paper's contribution is to summarize the existing literature of some topic—something everyone can easily write, but most journals are not looking for (or if they are looking for review papers, these review papers tend to be solicited).
94. Heavy reliance on appeal to authority—John Doe says *x*, so it must be true.
95. Paper is completely descriptive—no theoretical contribution.
96. Paper will become dated quickly—usually indicative of a descriptive paper.
97. Contribution does not seem substantial—important for author to make clear that contribution has important theoretical and practical contributions.
98. Author writes such a convincing *limitations to research* section that no one can be reasonably comfort with the paper as it stands.
99. Author writes such an extensive list of items that need to be done in the *future research* section—that everyone who reads the paper feels that the author should do more work before submission.

100. Author has written many papers on the topic and it appears that this paper may just be a rereading of old ground—author needs to make it clear why this part of the research program is important and different.
101. A contribution exists, but it is not stated—the reviewer/reader is left to determine the contributions themselves.
102. The contribution is stated, but the statement is easy to miss or overlook—language and placement within the paper is unusual.
103. Paper involves tremendous amount of repetition—appears that the paper needs to be rewritten several times to get a better value/length ratio.
104. Paper does not build and transition smoothly, consequently, if one does not read extremely carefully important points can be overlooked—this is one of the reasons that research highlights are now invited/requested by many journals as part of the submission system.
105. The paper attempts to do too many things at once—while interesting contributions may be in the paper, if it appears to be a “stream-of-consciousness” article it will probably be rejected immediately.

My thanks to the workshop organizers Professors Marie-Anne le Dain and Jean-Francois Boujut and the other participating

editors: Janet MacDonnell, Editor of *CoDesign*; Norbert Roozenburg, Associate Editor of *Design Studies*; Steve Culley, Associate Editor of *Journal of Engineering Design*; Paulien Herder, Editor of *Journal of Design Research*; Panos Y. Papalambros, Editor of *Journal of Mechanical Design*, Bernard Yannou, Associate Editor of *Journal of Mechanical Design*, and Yoram Reich, Editor of *Research in Engineering Design* for the inspiration and some of the content resulting in this editorial. Also a big thanks to my colleagues, on the *Technovation* Editorial Board for comments, on the earlier draft. Especially the helpful additions of Max Von Zedtwitz.

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Available online 19 October 2011