

Will my Paper be Rejected More Easily, or Even Automatically, if I am from the Global South?

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Abel POLESE

IICRR, Dublin City University

abel.polese@dcu.ie

Abstract

There exist concerns about potential bias against Global South scholars in academic publishing. While discrimination exists, in academia as in life, I suggest this statement is an oversimplification. It is obviously worth acting if we witness clear signs of discrimination, but no work is immune from errors and an accepted paper might still offer room for improvement. Accordingly, rejection is a chance to revisit your work critically and improve it. In the piece, I offer an overview of the most common reasons for paper rejections, including unclear structure, weak methodology, language barriers, and insufficient engagement with global debates and practical advice for improving your manuscript (and possibly acceptance rate). They can range from co-authoring with international colleagues, to seeking feedback at conferences, reviewing for target journals, and pay special attention to methodological approaches.

Keywords: Academic Publishing; Global South Scholars; Peer Review Process; Academic Writing; International Collaboration; Publication Strategy

I get this question a lot, and my feeling is that there are both some victimization and truth in it. When framed this way, it irritates me—as any statement offering an oversimplification of a complex situation, we are academics after all. But adding a twist of reflection and variety, it is a good exercise to explore some obscure practices that permeate academia.

Let us start with a critical reflection: can we answer this question for all existing journals (29,165 in Scopus the last time I checked) and editors? Can we claim that all editors have prejudices against those with surnames from Asia or Africa? Or that submit from a non-Western university?

No, we cannot. That said, I cannot guarantee the opposite either, that everyone will be accommodating or that there are no prejudices. At any rate, some journals focus on the Global South, and I even know editors willing to go the extra mile to help young authors if their paper is not up to the standard of the journal.

So, my first answer would be no. There is no automatic death sentence for your article based merely on your name or affiliation. Besides, academic hierarchy and prestige also depends on your career stage. If you are an early career from a prestigious university, you might be as helpless as a scholar from the Global South against arbitrary or shallow decisions. The situation changes, however, if you are recommended to the journal by your famous supervisor or if you co-author with them.

I am also confident that an editor would avoid brutally rejecting a paper, even a weak one, from a superstar from their discipline or, as I suggested in my *Scopus Diaries* (Polese 2018), they might want to sugar the pill and at least write a personal letter explaining the reasons for the rejection.

So, why my paper was rejected?

Beyond discriminatory factors, several structural and methodological attentions can increase the likelihood of manuscript rejection in the peer review process. As discussed in my previous piece on desk rejection factors (Polese 2021), and extending that discussion to the peer review process, papers often receive negative reviews when their structure makes them hard to follow, their methods are not solid, or they have not engaged with broader academic debates.

Clear Structure

Reviewers are not paid and often have limited time, therefore they will try to minimize the time they spend reviewing your article. If they do not grasp the meaning of your article at the first reading, chances are that their evaluation will tend to the negative side. I always advise to start from a clear structure: introduction, literature review, empirics, and conclusion. While this structure is not a condition *sine qua non*, it helps both reviewers and future readers navigating the article.

The same structure can also serve as a checklist. You can always use a different one but keep in mind that those four elements should always be present in an academic article and you should be able to move from one to the other: the literature briefly mentioned in the introduction can be expanded in the literature review, the argument you make in the introduction can be backed up by evidence in the empirical section.

Methodological Rigor

Weak or inconsistent methodology is a major problem for scholars who have undergone little or marginal methodological training. A flawed methodology compromises basically everything, from data collection to interpretation to the capacity to engage with the arguments.

Language and Communication

One thing is to write with some mistakes, and another is to write something that the reader cannot even understand. You might be requested to send the article for proofreading if accepted but there is no need to do so if your English, although non-native, is clear. As a starting point, I usually suggest using the simplest ever sentences: if you write each sentence short, using a subject, a verb and a complement, even if the sentence is not clear, it is still understandable.

Global Engagement

Your articles should engage with global debates. There is no problem in sending an article about any country to any journals, but if you are submitting an article about Bhutan to, say, the *Journal of Global Politics*, you should explain why your case is important and why readers will learn more about global politics (not only Bhutan politics) from your article.

Some Advice

Having outlined the common pitfalls that lead to desk rejection, there are a few tricks enhancing your chances of publication success. The following recommendations draw from my experience as both an editor and author, providing practical strategies that have somehow helped me. While not exhaustive, these suggestions can represent a starting point to improve the quality of your submission.

Collaborative Writing and Co-Authorship

Co-authoring (Polese 2019) can add a lot about your publication in terms of input and experience but also visibility and citation, consider and try to engage with other authors, especially from other countries/universities. This is especially advantageous when you manage to get one co-author that is a native English speaker. They might work a bit less on the content, but they will be the crucial ones helping with proofreading.

Embracing New Tools

AI is not something we can overlook. I enjoy the writing process, and I think there are still some risks, but it can be useful at least to get an overview of debates and to correct your English, some colleagues who are English native speakers, for instance, use it to identify typos and awkward expressions.

Building Professional Relationships

If there is a chance to meet the editor or some members of the board, for instance to have a chat at the conference, you might better understand how to tailor your article for the journal or even manage to discuss your submission informally.

Seeking Feedback and Improvement

Get as much feedback as possible on your paper before submitting, send it to colleagues and present it at conferences, as others will often spot issues you might miss. If someone at a conference is interested in your presentation, take the opportunity to ask them to review your draft and provide comments.

Developing Through Peer Review

Review for journals, especially for the ones you plan to submit to. This will help you understanding what their modus operandi is but also will develop your critical skills. In the end, identifying inconsistencies in other people's work might also help you noticing your own mistakes in your papers.

Continuous Learning

Never stop learning and studying. New methodologies continually emerge, and maintaining an elastic mind is key to quality writing.

Lessons learned?

Engaging with a new task, in this case prepare and submit a manuscript, often involves failing a few times before getting things right. Reasons for rejection can certainly be external (for example, someone dislike your style, the focus of your work, or other aspects), but rejection also offers a chance for critical reflection on what you are doing. We can victimise ourselves (“my work is great, the world does not understand it”) or think “if this happened, what were my own mistakes”? You do not have to conclude that you made it all

wrong. Perhaps you made just a few minor mistakes, but these were enough to tip the scale toward rejection. You might want to take care of them when preparing the next text.

It is not always easy to critically look at your own work. It is painful to think (or even realise, months later) that your approach was flawed, especially after investing so much effort. However, in my experience, this self-reflective attitude pays off better in the long term.

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