

Rejection or Refusal?

Accentuate the Positive!

By Jil McIntosh

Recently I received a call from a friend. She'd written an article and believed that it was a sure-fire winner (as we all do about our work, of course). She sent it off to one magazine, then another and another. Naturally, with each rejection letter, she became more and more depressed. By the eighth one, she was just about ready to give up writing completely.

She did what many of us do—she simply filed each letter away. But at my insistence, she pulled them out for an experiment. We divided them into two piles. One was “rejection letters”—rejecting the piece because of the work itself.

We dubbed the second pile “refusal letters.” These were rejections for reasons other than the actual writing: not suitable for our publication, does not meet our needs at this time, we already have an article on this subject, etc. Technically, they *were* rejection letters, but for something other than the quality of the writing.

Once the letters were sorted, we discovered that only one letter actually rejected her writing. That lifted her spirits quite a bit, which was a goal in itself. Many writers, especially those just starting out, can find rejection letters a crushing blow. (Heck, I've been writing professionally for over twenty years and I *still* get a sinking feeling whenever I receive one.)

Just as importantly, this experiment presented a new opportunity for my friend to look at the way she'd been submitting her work. Rejection letters should not be a dead end; rather, they should be considered a springboard, a chance to move in a new direction in order to get the piece sold.

Not all rejection letters will allow you to do this, of course. Few editors have the time to send anything more than a form letter. But by analyzing as much as you can, you may discover what's standing between you and the publication.

You may also realize that it isn't the quality of the work that's being rejected—and that will help give you the confidence and ability to move on to your next submission.

Why do pieces get refused? Sometimes there's nothing you can do—circumstances were simply out of your control. But by analyzing these refusals, you can increase your chances in the future:

The current issue is full, and your piece won't be timely by the next publication date. Sometimes there's no way you can get around this—you're simply a victim of bad timing. But you can also minimize it by examining your piece in light of the publication's lead-in time. This can be anywhere from overnight, in the case of a daily paper, to months or even a year or more for some magazines. Time-sensitive articles should be sent only to publications that can print them while they're still current.

The editor has already bought or assigned a similar piece. Sending it to a rival publication probably won't help, since editors don't want to run something already covered by the competition. Instead, try to find a new angle to your subject that will suit an unrelated publication. I once tried to sell a travel piece on a Mexican city and was told it had already been covered. So I focused on the street food offered in the town square, and sold the story to a cooking magazine.

Your story doesn't appeal to the editor. Sometimes, a piece can be well written and well researched, but it just doesn't tickle the editor's fancy. There isn't much you can do but submit it elsewhere—and that can even mean keeping an eye on the masthead. Upon learning of a personnel change at a magazine, I resubmitted an article rejected by the old editor; the new one purchased it.

With those letters out of the pile, it's time to reassess the ones where a little forethought might have made a difference. Look carefully for these, so you can avoid similar problems in the future:

You didn't break new ground. This is especially important when you're writing about a subject that's frequently covered. Editors received thousands of articles following the September 11 attacks. The ones that did get published were

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those that presented a unique angle to the tragedy. Christmas, Memorial Day, Mardi Gras, first day of school—any major event on the calendar is going to get writers writing, and run-of-the-mill is going to get editors rejecting.

Your article's "voice" isn't appropriate for the publication. Think about the difference in writing between a magazine intended for opera fans and one for hip-hop enthusiasts. You have to speak to your audience in the voice they use themselves. But tread carefully here; try too hard when it's not a tone you're used to using and you'll come off as a phony.

You didn't triple-check your facts. I'm ashamed to admit that I once threw in a seemingly inconsequential line without checking its accuracy, because it improved the story's flow. The magazine staff didn't catch it, but several readers did. The editor's rebuke was swift and merciless, and it was a long time before he accepted my work again. Believe it or not, it's most likely to happen when it's a subject you know very well, because you tend to rely on memory rather than research. That was the trap that caught me.

The publication is staff-written. Check bylines carefully. If everything's written by staff columnists, the editor's not going to substitute your work for theirs. (One tip-off is if the author's picture is included, which usually indicates a regular column.)

Your piece isn't appropriate. Of course you're not sending poetry to *Time*. But look at the content of articles a magazine runs, not just the topics. Don't send a story on your cross-country driving trip to a car magazine that only prints tech-heavy reviews of new vehicles.

Of course, any negative response means that you should examine your work with a critical eye before you send it out again. No matter how many times I look at a piece, I can almost always find some way to tighten it up, to improve an introduction, or to wrap it up more convincingly. Don't just be a writer—be an editor, as well.

So was there a happy ending to my friend's story? Indeed, there was. After examining the "refusal" letters, we came to the conclusion that the focus of her piece was too narrow for the national magazines she was approaching. After a rewrite that tied her subject to some neighborhood stores, she quickly sold it to a local business publication. And that gave her the confidence—and the tools—to begin writing in earnest again.

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