

Editorial

A Few Good Manuscripts

One of the most difficult aspects of the editorial job is the required rejections. Sending out rejections is not something we enjoy at *Matter*, as we realize the time and effort spent on each and every submitted manuscript. However, it is a necessary evil. As Teddy Roosevelt said in 1910, “there is no effort without error and short-coming.” Rejection is part of the game. Or rather, rejection is part of scientific publishing, which at times can feel like a game.

We are also suffering from our own success—as the recognition of *Matter* increases in the field, our team is receiving more and more submissions, resulting in more and more rejections (as our total number of accepted papers per month is limited). While this gives a nice talking point about how selective we are, it bears a heavy mental load on the editorial team. We don’t want to be power-hungry gatekeepers of science; we only want to promote what we think is the most exciting and relevant research to the materials community.

That is the ideal I hope to instill in the team.

We realize it can be immensely frustrating when, after many weeks and months of preparing plots, figures, and a manuscript, you receive a rejection letter from your selected journal. I’ve had my share of rejections. Trust me. Moreover, the system is not perfect—our team makes mistakes. Sometimes we end up rejecting great papers. We are only human. Personally, it keeps me up at night. It really does. Wondering if I offended author A, hoping I didn’t overlook the next big thing in submission B, hoping that reviewer C was acting in good faith by suggesting the inclusion of those “relevant citations.” Restless nights and the laments of the editor-in-chief. It comes with the job. This also leads to the dreaded rebuttal—when an author disagrees with the rejection decision. Sometimes, the rebuttals are warranted (due to superficial reviews or indicated errors that were simple miscommunications), and rejections are overturned. Other rebuttals are simply one last-ditch Hail Mary—one last play with a low probability of success.

Sometimes, however, they are more confrontational. One recent night I awoke in a cold sweat, having a most lucid dream of such a rebuttal. Let me set the scene.

It was a local conference, and I had just finished a talk about the journal. I was sitting alone, like some “joker” at the front of the room. The chair of the session—who somewhat resembled Kevin Bacon—gave the floor to an audacious author who somewhat resembled Tom Cruise. The assembled symposia audience was silent. I recognized the author as one I had recently rejected—after two revisions, no less—and anticipated a hostile confrontation from this disgruntled academic or, shall I say, a *sore kin*, to say the least (apologies for the ostentatious Easter egg for film buffs.)

Our conversation went as follows:

Corresponding author (CA): I have one question—did you reject my manuscript after two revisions?



Editor-in-Chief (me): You want answers?

CA: I think I'm entitled to them.

Me: You want answers?!

CA: I want the TRUTH!

Me: You can't HANDLE the truth!

And nobody moves. The symposia room is silent.

Me (*continuing*): Son, we live in a world that has scientific publications. And those publications need to be accepted by journals with peer review. Who's gonna do it? You? You, so-called lead author?

I have a greater responsibility than you can possibly fathom.

You weep for low-impact publications and you curse the long submission process.

You have that luxury.

You have the luxury of not knowing what I know: that low-impact publication, while tragic, probably saved time.

And my existence, while grotesque and incomprehensible to you, saves time.

That all of your suggested reviewers declined to review, and the ones who agreed were late. And then late again.

You don't want the truth.

You don't want to know that two reviews were superficial, asking to include citations to pad h-indices. You don't want to know the confidential comments to the editor. They were not respectful.

Deep down, in places you don't talk about at parties, you WANT me to handle submissions. You NEED me to handle submissions. You LIKE it when we're HIGHLY SELECTIVE and REJECT others' works, but only if your own is ACCEPTED.

We use words like REVISION, REBUTTAL, TRANSFER...we use these words as the backbone to a life spent editing manuscripts.

You use 'em as a punchline.

I have neither the time nor the inclination to explain myself to a PI who submits and resubmits under the very flexible formatting of "combined manuscript file" I provide and then questions the manner in which I assess it.

I'd prefer you just said thank you and went on your way. Otherwise, I suggest you sign up for an editorial board and handle submissions.

Or submit to an open access mega-journal.

Either way, I don't give a damn what you think you're entitled to.

CA: Did you reject my manuscript after two revisions?

Me: I did the job you asked me to do.

CA: Did you reject my manuscript after two revisions?

Me: You're goddamn right I did!

A gasp from the crowd, and I awake.

This story may have been slightly embellished for entertainment. The point I want to convey is that we don't take rejections at *Matter* lightly. Our team assesses the merits of each submitted paper, and each decision is made as a team. If one member really supports the work, then we send it out for peer review. Our editors are facilitators, not adjudicators (although my dream somewhat resembled a courtroom drama, thirty years since a *A Few Good Men* debuted on Broadway [November 15, 1989]). We have trust in the community to act as our "jury."

This is supported by the current issue of *Matter* containing sixteen full-length research articles. Our anticipated output is only ten articles per month, but we received too many great submissions (even prior to our first issue in July). Maybe our scope is too large—the topics range from anticancer drug delivery to nanoporous graphene to electrides, metallic lithium anodes, silk-templated electronic fibers, nacre-like amorphous alumina, and self-sharpening sea urchin teeth. It appears that a multitude of materials inspire continued innovation, and there are fascinating results continuously being written (and published beyond *Matter*) across a spectrum of fields. We owe a huge thanks to the materials community for these early submissions and continued support. We could have decided to limit the accepted papers, but ten is just an arbitrary number.

If the work is well reviewed, we accept.

Why limit science to a few good manuscripts?

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