



BEGINNING WRITER'S ANSWER BOOK

30TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION
COMPLETELY UPDATED

EXCERPT

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WHY AM I GETTING REJECTED?

There is no easy way to face rejection, and editors give little information about why they rejected your work. These are the tests of the writing life. When you encounter them—and, at some point, all writers do (beginners more so than others)—face them with renewed determination. Success begins where most people quit.

Rejections tend to happen for two reasons: (1) your work isn't ready to be submitted, or (2) you queried incorrectly, either by choosing the wrong market or by querying unprofessionally. The first reason can only be remedied by making your work the best it can be, through constant analysis and revision. The second reason for rejection can be completely eliminated by following the advice in this book and getting information from other expert sources.

Why are editors rejecting my work when family and friends love it so much?

Your family and friends love you and see you in your work. An editor doesn't know you and can be much more objective. *(Thanks to Jennie Pitkus for providing this important question and answer.)*

I get lots of form rejections that have little or no feedback on my individual work. What might be wrong?

Reasons for rejection can be incredibly subjective (indefinable issues of taste), but you might consider the following possibilities:

- Something similar is on file or was recently published: You're not the

only person with your idea. Often your work will be rejected simply because someone else beat you to it.

- The timing is wrong. Editors change. Publishers cut back on their lists. The market changes. Sometimes it's hard to hit things just right.
- You don't have adequate credentials (particularly if you're writing a non-fiction article or book), or you don't have an attractive marketing platform—a way to reach readers and promote yourself and your work.

If you're attempting to get your book published, keep in mind that most New York agents and editors take on a new project or new author only when they feel there's solid potential for a significant or guaranteed return. Your book may be too "small" for some publishers to consider; if you believe that's the case, start querying small or regional presses.

What should I do after an article is returned with a rejection slip?

Send a rejected query or manuscript to another appropriate publication the day it is returned to you—or decide it's time to revise or recast it. Always keep your work in circulation.

How many rejection slips do you consider the cutoff point—where I should give up completely?

If you put a lot of time and effort into a project, don't abandon it too quickly. Look at the rejection slips as bits of advice for improvement, or as patterns of criticism. Rejections, if used properly, can be lessons to improve your writing.

If you've been sending the same magazine query around for many months, your idea may have grown too stale for you to keep circulating it. If you've been attempting to sell a book manuscript, and have had some near misses, then your timing or your luck may be off; some books circulate for many years before finding the right agent or editor. As long as you feel passionate about the work, you shouldn't give up on it—even if it means returning to the manuscript a few years down the road. Some ideas and manuscripts have to be set aside because the market isn't ready for them.

If I'm aiming at a specific type of market, should I continue to submit to (or query) publications that have rejected my past work? Do editors begin

to recognize certain authors as “losers” and push their work aside because of past rejections?

Just because a market has rejected your manuscripts in the past doesn't mean it will in the future. Editors reject manuscripts for many reasons that have nothing to do with your manuscript's value. For example, the editor could have recently bought a manuscript on a topic similar to yours. Don't assume that the sight of your name on a manuscript will cause an editor to automatically reach for a rejection slip. Assuming your manuscripts are neat, appealing, and suited to the publication, the next manuscript you send may be the happy combination of the right idea in the right place at the right time, while your earlier pieces weren't. On the other hand, tread carefully. If you've submitted six stories in the past six months, and they've all been rejected, you might want to back off from that market for a while. Watch the publication closely and try to make your articles as good as the ones the magazine is publishing.



Frequently
asked question

May I submit the same manuscript more than once to an editor (or agent) who has rejected it?

In the case of magazine articles, if the editor tells you he's rejecting it because he's overbought at the time, or he's recently bought something similar, you might have a chance at a later date. Also, watch the magazine's masthead. If an editor leaves, the new one might have different tastes, and you might be able to sell him your manuscript. But use your best judgment before resubmitting. Try to ascertain if the editor was simply being polite, or if your manuscript may really stand a chance at a later date.

In the case of book editors and literary agents, once you've been rejected, you've killed your chances with that person on that particular project—unless the editor or agent instructs you to revise and resubmit. If there's no invitation to resubmit, then you shouldn't try again, even if you do revise the work later on. While your revised work may indeed merit another look, editors and agents don't want to see it again.

Beginning writers often look for ways around this hard truth, especially if they realize later the rejection was due to an unprofessional query letter or unpolished manuscript. They wonder if they could change their book title, use a pen name, or alter the characters' names or otherwise disguise

the fact they're resubmitting the same material. You can always give it a try, but it's not recommended; editors and agents often see through the ruse.

That's why it's so important you query and send your manuscript only when you're really ready. In book publishing, it's tough if not impossible to get a second chance on a manuscript. Make it the very best it can be before sending it out.

I am puzzled by writers who claim that after mailing a piece nineteen times and having it rejected, they mail it once more and sell it. Are they telling the truth?

These writers are telling the truth, because they have carefully explored all possible markets and recognized that, even though their work wasn't right for one editor, it still might appeal to another.

I've got an article that I've submitted to several different magazines, all without success. *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Woman's Day*—it's made the rounds of all the women's magazines. I've researched and written my article carefully, and I think I ended up with a good manuscript. Why isn't it selling?

Although it's true that all the magazines you've mentioned come under the general category of women's publications, each one has a different audience; each magazine's readers have interests and characteristics that attract them to that particular publication instead of others. The fact that you have submitted the same article to four very different publications might reveal that you have not slanted the article to one specific publication. Each magazine has different needs to satisfy its readership. *Cosmopolitan*, for example, caters to the sophisticated single woman; *Woman's Day* concentrates on family-oriented topics. An article written for the needs of one would clearly not meet the needs of the other. *Woman's Day* would be the place to market an article on problems of child-rearing; *Cosmopolitan* would not be interested.

After four years of freelance writing and not selling a word, I would like a personal remark from an editor about why my manuscript didn't qualify, instead of the usual cold-blooded rejection slip. What you can recommend?

An editor's job is to find publishable material, not explain rejections. Most editors have too much work and too little time, so personal analysis of the

thousands of manuscripts that cross their desks is impossible. For constructive criticism, take a writing course, join a writers group, or attend a writing conference to find out how to improve your chances.

Since magazines depend on advertising for revenue, would they reject articles because of controversial subject matter that might offend some advertisers?

Magazines are businesses, so they are sometimes forced to think long and hard about running controversial material. Any article likely to offend a regular advertiser probably won't be accepted. Some editors have been courageous enough to run controversial material, but most magazines choose carefully the controversies they start.

I submitted a book proposal about a year ago that was rejected. I've now come up with a better title that I think is a natural for one of the houses that rejected the initial proposal. Should I resubmit it?

As long as the same editor is at that publishing house, changing the title isn't likely to make the book idea any more appealing than it was the first time. Think up new ideas, not just new strategies to sell your old ones.

I have a cousin who is in sales with a leading book publisher, and I sent him my manuscript, asking him to pass it along to the right editor. Shortly after that, I got a form rejection letter. Am I wrong to have expected a more personal response?

If the manuscript had interested the editorial department for possible publication, you would have gotten the personal response. Some beginning writers think that knowing someone at the publishing company will be an advantage. It isn't. Your manuscript has to sell itself.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

I receive letters from editors saying my manuscripts are interesting, but "not quite right for us." What does this mean? If it's so interesting, why isn't it right?

These letters expressing interest are meant to encourage you and show that your work does have a degree of promise. The material's style or content, however, was probably not in keeping with what the editor usually publishes. Get to know the markets better by studying what they are buying. Current magazine issues and book catalogs give writers valuable clues as to what kinds of work editors are looking for.

If an editor writes “Sorry. Try us again” on a rejection slip, what does that mean?

When an editor indicates interest in future submissions, it means he thinks enough of your work to offer the encouragement of a personal note. It means your writing style and approach are suitable for his readers, and he wants to see more ideas from you.

On recent rejection slips from greeting card companies were handwritten messages, “Terrific possibilities but more punch” and “Ideas good but lack sales appeal.” I don’t know what composes “punch” and “sales appeal.” Should I take these handwritten remarks to be encouraging?

These handwritten criticisms certainly should be regarded as encouraging. By referring to “punch” and “sales appeal,” these editors probably meant that your work lacked the impact necessary to make the prospective card buyer immediately react favorably to the cards. It would seem, then, that your underlying ideas are good, but you need to present them in a more colorful, entertaining, or dramatic way that will catch the customer’s attention and make him buy. If, after studying published cards and revising your own work, you feel your ideas capture the right sales appeal, don’t hesitate to resubmit them.

I sent an article to a magazine and it came back without a rejection slip. Somebody had just crossed out the editor’s name in my query letter and scrawled, “Read the magazine!” Isn’t this rather insulting?

Apparently, you hadn’t looked at a recent issue and learned that the editor you were addressing the submission to no longer worked there—a serious error on your part. The comment “Read the magazine!” may also indicate that the editorial slant of the magazine has changed and the type of article

you were submitting is no longer appropriate. It's very important to look at recent sample issues of a magazine in addition to reading the market requirements for the magazine.

I sent a query to an agent who was mentioned specifically in a writer's magazine for her openness to new writers. I received a form letter that said she was "no longer taking new clients." What's going on here?

The agent is probably overwhelmed with queries and submissions after being mentioned in that magazine, so she has probably decided to start turning new prospects away. Or, this could be her polite way of informing you that she didn't like your work well enough to represent it.

interpreting rejection phrases

After you get rejected a few dozen times, you might discover that agents and editors tend to use the same old phrases over and over again when turning down your work. Here are a few of the most common and what they might mean.

- Doesn't fit our needs usually means that you've targeted the wrong agent or editor for your work—your work doesn't fit in its genre, style, tone, or approach. If you know without a doubt that the material you sent is a perfect fit, then your work probably lacked sufficient quality or didn't suit the editor's needs on that particular day. Doesn't fit our needs could also mean that your topic or focus is too strange/esoteric or too cliché/overdone.
- Doesn't have sufficient market appeal means that your work lacks marketability or salability. Perhaps the market for your work is too small or indistinct or weird. Or maybe your work lacks punch—it's not different enough, unique enough, or special enough for people to take notice.
- Just couldn't get excited about it means exactly what it sounds like. If someone makes this comment about your fiction, it usually reflects the lack of a compelling story or hook or character.

- The writing doesn't stand out probably means your writing lacks a voice, or your story is boring, unoriginal, or uninspired.
- Not fresh enough or original is similar to the writing doesn't stand out. For fiction writers, perhaps your plot line is too cliché, your characters are too common, or your story is not special enough or compelling enough for publication. In a competitive market, your story has to stand out and have unique qualities, in addition to being well-written.

Remember, even if an editor or agent gives a specific reason for the rejection (that you understand), that doesn't mean she's interested in seeing the work again. If she is, she'll invite you to resubmit.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

BOOKS

The First Five Pages, by Noah Lukeman, contains essential information for any novelist wondering what triggers rejection in the first five pages of a manuscript.

In *The Resilient Writer: Tales of Rejection and Triumph from 23 Top Authors*, you can read all about how best-selling authors deal with rejection, and glean tips about how mere mortals can survive as well.

In *No More Rejections*, Alice Orr, a longtime agent for successful novelists, gives advice on making your fiction manuscript rejection-proof (almost).

WEB SITES

Rejection Collection (www.rejectioncollection.com) is a Web site devoted to collecting writers' rejection letters; good inspiration and comfort.