

REJECTED

The anticipation kicks in, and my pulse goes from a steady 68 to an uncomfortable 86 as I strap on the seatbelt to the “Extreme Publishing Adventure.” Will my stomach flip at least twice? Will I white-knuckle the handlebars with intense fear and anxiety and think to myself, “WHY DID I EVER GET ON THIS RIDE?” If the answer is yes to either of these questions, then I will leave knowing it was the BEST RIDE EVER!!!

Coffee in hand (not recommended on actual roller coasters, but highly recommended for virtual ones), I open my e-mail to find “Decision on your submission to the Journal of XX.” Finally!!!! After submitting my manuscript months ago, the reviewers have finally completed their recommendations. Now I can focus on making edits and resubmitting my paper. Meeting my goal of publishing one paper per quarter of my fellowship will be no problem. Who knows, maybe I’ll apply for a research grant! My optimism soars, and the possibilities seem endless!!

The e-mail reads, “Your manuscript has been reviewed. Based on our evaluation and the four reviewers’ comments, your manuscript did not reach a high-enough priority, and unfortunately, we are not able to accept your manuscript for publication.” Ugh. I feel as though all four reviewers have punched me in the stomach, and I don’t know if I should cry or throw up. I never should’ve gotten on this ride. I’m not sure how I even got admitted to the park.

Day 2, I try to tell myself that the rejection doesn’t bother me. All fellows have their papers rejected at some point, right?! This is just part of the process. Day 3, the process is P-A-I-N-F-U-L. If I had musical talent, I’d write a country song about it. I am a research fellow, but I am terrible at research! Do all fellows feel this way? Do all fellows consider turning back time in order to consider alternative career paths? Now what do I do? I am stuck in the middle of this emotional roller coaster of submitting my work for publication, and I want to scream, “SOMEBODY PLEASE GET ME OFF THIS RIDE!!!”

Months ago, the ride started at a slow pace, and sometimes, I was even moving backward. Just writing one sentence was a struggle. I tried to start with the background, but nothing sounded right. How can I be the most knowledgeable person about this project and have a completely blank mind? Maybe methods is where it’s at. I drudgingly complete a couple of sentences. Slowly, but surely, I compose a draft and e-mail it to the coauthors for edits. The paper comes back looking as if it had been through @#%* and back. How can there be that many revisions on a single paper? I knew my paper wasn’t great, but I had no idea it was awful. My adviser reassures me that “this is all part of the process” and “no one gets it right on the first try,” but I remain skeptical. Will this paper ever be good enough? After rounds of reviews, my paper takes on a whole new look and is ready for submission. It looks nothing like its original awfulness. I proudly make a cover page, check the references, and click the submit button! Bring on the balloons and confetti; it is off my plate (for now).

I wait a solid 24 hours before I begin to neurotically check the author’s portal for the journal. I watch my paper (my sweet baby) move from “submitted” to “under review” and then “revisions submitted.” Finally, it comes back home. It’s bundled in kind words of gratitude for my submission, but suddenly, I’m hit with the words “not able to accept,” a.k.a. REJECTION.

As any good counselor will tell you, time heals all wounds. By day 5, I realize that things can only get better. I was brave enough to get on this ride, and that is an accomplishment in itself. A mentor once told me that many researchers are less than exceptional writers. Their final product is the result of numerous edits from coauthors, editors, and reviewers. I keep this in mind every time I have to (I mean, get to) write a manuscript (or even a blog post!). It helps me step onto the ride. When the 360 and 180

degree turns (a.k.a. criticism and rejection) come and you feel like your stomach is in your throat, you can view them as a reward, not punishment. Someone cared enough to edit and review your paper. The suggestions you receive help you grow as a researcher, writer, and reviewer.

The trick is to take constructive criticism with grace and appreciation. When I receive feedback on a paper or grant submission, I skim the suggestions and try not to make changes until the next day. That way, I can work through the high g-forces with an open mind. When I finish the edits, I look forward to the next unexpected twist or turn. Sometimes, it is resubmitting the paper to a different journal or making major revisions and submitting it to the same journal. Either way, rejection and major revisions are part of the ride, the dark tunnel before climbing to the top. It is not a reason to stop.

If you are at the bottom of your emotional publishing roller coaster, relax and know that you are not alone. If you are feeling nauseated, it will pass. The exhilaration from accomplishing your goal is stronger than a scopolamine patch. Just get on the ride.

About the Author: Courtney Slough is a MIRECC (Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center) research fellow at the W.G. (Bill) Hefner VA Medical Center in Salisbury, North Carolina. She is inspired by the quote, “To escape criticism, do nothing, say nothing, be nothing” (Elbert Hubbard).