

# Editor and authors' psychology and the chance of teaching

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## Abstract

It is the duty of the editor to communicate with the authors who submit their scientific work for publication. The question arises as to the best way to perform this communication. The goal is to publish papers that would make their authors proud and the readers of the journal, satisfied. This goal is expressed with honesty, kindness, politeness, diplomacy and when the editor communicated with authors from other Countries, the advice of a person familiar with the traditions of these Countries may be welcome. The unpleasant editor's duty to inform the authors of their paper being rejected, can be expressed either by writing a brief straight forward letter or by giving a more detailed answer or finally, by explaining to the authors their errors in a detailed manner, in other words, by giving them advice and consultation. In his reply to the authors whose paper has been rejected, the editor may touch a sensitive part of their behavior. Authors may consider their paper as "their intellectual child". Some times authors make unacceptable mistakes that may or may not be revealed by the reviewers. Explaining in detail errors and thus counseling the authors, is hard work for the editor but not always appreciated by the authors. The value of counseling and teaching has been emphasized even by ancient philosophers but nowadays enthusiasm in learning is sometimes lacking. Is there a solution to the above? Perhaps if "the instructions to authors" of a journal specified clearly the "submission terms" for accepting a paper for publication, then the authors could be self-evaluated and perhaps all parties concerned would be happier.

**Keywords:** Instructions to authors – Reviewers' decision – Editor's correspondence – Article rejection – Rules for paper submission

**I**t is the duty of the editor to communicate with the authors who submit their scientific work for publication. The question arises as to the best way to communicate with them. The goal is to publish papers that would make their authors proud and the readers of the journal satisfied. This goal must be achieved by communicating with honesty, kindness, politeness and diplomacy. Sometimes even these virtues are not enough, especially when authors are from different countries. In such cases the advice from a person familiar with the traditions of other countries would be welcome.

There is no greater satisfaction for the editor, than to receive and publish an excellent paper that needs no reviewing. On the contrary it is his unpleasant duty to inform the authors of their paper being rejected. There are three basic ways for an editor to inform the authors that their paper has been rejected: a) To write a short, straight forward reply: *"Thank you very much for your interesting paper... but due to limited space in the forthcoming issues of the Journal, we regret that*

*we are unable to publish your work as is. We hope that you will continue to cooperate with our Journal"* or b) To give a more detailed answer by underlining major errors of the paper submitted, like: *"We have read with interest your paper under the title... but besides its scientific importance our reviewers have suggested that major errors exist in this paper, i.e. the title does not fully represent its content, the statistics are poor and the practical importance of the paper is not well documented"*. Or finally, the editor may offer much advice and consultation to the authors, in order to help them correct their mistakes, by writing: c) *"Dear authors, thank you for submitting your paper under the title... which has been thoroughly checked by the in-house assessment and the peers' review. For your convenience our suggestions can be found in a separate list. Your text which is now attached for you, has not been accepted for publication in its present form. In case you wish to re-submit your paper please be kind enough to reply to all the above suggestions and reform your text accordingly. In addition, you may use more recent references and do not forget to adjust the whole text to the publishing rules of the Journal. More information you may find at our site: [www.nuclmed.gr](http://www.nuclmed.gr)"*.

When a paper is rejected, the first thought of the editor is to reply by a short letter rather similar to the examples a) or b) as above. On the other hand, authors have a different psychology. Few of them after rejection of their paper, feel that they themselves have been offended, no matter how justified this rejection may be. Of course they will behave politely while their true feelings are hidden. The reason is that they consider their paper so dear to them, as parents consider their own child. Their paper is their "dear intellectual child". Rejection may even raise negative feelings not towards the reviewers who have actually rejected the paper, but towards the editor who simply has the duty to announce this decision.

Some times authors make unacceptable mistakes that may or may not be revealed by the reviewers. For example: a) The number of cases studied is very small so that no sound statistics can be derived. b) The kind of statistics used is not appropriate. c) Some of the authors have not contributed at all to the study submitted for publication, so when they are asked to sign the submission letter to the journal, their actual address at that time is unknown. d) The "discussion" of the paper submitted to the journal, is repeating the main results etc.

It is very seldom indeed that the editor will choose to explain to the authors in detail all errors that make a paper not

accepted for publication. In such cases the editor will choose example c) mentioned above. This shall be a difficult choice for the editor and hard work for himself and his or her secretary. Of course by doing so the editor is in a way instructing or in other words teaching, younger colleagues how to plan, present and publish their work, actually how to make their work better known to the scientific community. Within his deeper thoughts though, shall remain the question of whether his efforts will be appreciated at all.

“Teaching or counseling”, does not seem to be very popular in our days. It is our opinion, that although medicine is familiar with only a small part of total medical knowledge, we physicians, consider ourselves very proud for what we know. To be specific, let us note some of the medical issues that escape our knowledge: the cause and the treatment of many types of cancer, the treatment of arteriosclerotic cardiovascular disease, the treatment of many contagious diseases like flu or AIDS, Alzheimer’s dementia etc.

There is another reason besides high self-esteem, making teaching and counseling not very popular in our days. The search for a better financial status and professionalism, discourage learning or medical research or teaching our younger colleagues. The importance of teaching, undoubted over the years, has been illustrated and underlined by many ancient

philosophers: Aristotle (384-322 BC) said: *“Teachers, who educate children, deserve more praise than parents; for the latter provided mere life, while the former ensure a good life.”* Antisthenes (444-371 BC) said: *“The most useful piece of learning for the uses of life is to unlearn what is untrue.”* Diogenes (412-323 BC): *“The foundation of every state is the education of its youth.”* Heraclitus (544-483 BC): *“I am what libraries and librarians have made me.”* and Diogenes of Sinope (410-320 BC) has gone even further: *“Why not whip the teacher when the pupil misbehaves?”* There is one thing that philosophers have missed to consider: teaching needs an audience, interested to learn. Many of our younger colleagues are unwilling to increase their knowledge. If this is the case, the role of the editor trying to give advice or to counsel the authors of papers submitted to the journal, is doubtful. Not even the aid of an experienced medical psychologist might change this situation.

Is there a solution to the above? Perhaps, if “the instructions to authors” of a journal, clearly specified the terms of accepting a paper for publication and if these terms were adopted by the medical publishing community, correspondence between the editors and the authors of medical journals would be more objective and more beneficial. Then, perhaps all parties concerned would be satisfied.