

Above All, Persistence



In which I reflect on the academic's life of rejection.

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By Niklas Elmqvist, University of Maryland, College Park

Sometime in the early spring of 2002, I received my very first peer review. I had submitted my first academic paper to SIGGRAPH in January that year, proudly packing six paper copies of the article and six NTSC video tapes into a big box and sending it off overseas, fierce hope burning in my chest. It was a rejection, of course, the stark message not just dashing that hope, but actually bringing me to painful tears with their harsh, almost cruel words. It would take another year to receive my first paper acceptance to a peer-reviewed conference after that.

SIGGRAPH 2002 was my first rejection, but not my last by a long shot. Science is an unforgiving field, and peer review a brutal teacher. While I may not have shed any more tears over rejections since that first time, there have been countless emails starting with the words “we regret to inform you”, and some very hard lessons learned along the way. We academics

receive a lot of negative feedback during our careers, with precious little positive feedback to balance it out, so self-preservation dictates that you develop coping mechanisms for all that negativity. For what it's worth, here are some of mine:

Don't (immediately) read the reviews. Don't torture yourself. Hold off reading them for a couple of days, and read them only when you have processed the outcome and feel ready to face them. I do this even if my paper was accepted since even positive reviews can be tough.

Don't check your (perceived) competition. Incessantly scouring the websites and tweets of other people in your perceived "cohort" to see all their successes is an easy road to having a bad day. Fear of missing out is a thing even for science, where you are always kicking yourself over missed opportunities. Remember that people only tweet about peaks, never lows.

Revise and resubmit. A rejected paper is an opportunity for sending a stronger and more mature version to a new venue with much less effort than writing a new paper from scratch.

A particular paper will eventually be accepted. You should also comfort yourself with the fact that all good work will eventually find a home. Peer review has an element of randomness in it; sometimes even the best papers get a bad break with the wrong reviewers.

It's not personal. Also remember that you are not defined by the papers you submit. A rejection is never personal, and, however much you put into it, a single paper is expendable (the dual to the rule above). You can always start fresh tomorrow with a new paper, and no one will be the wiser.

Be kind to yourself. Science is a job, and, for some, a passion, but should not have to be an all-consuming calling. I find that the most important factor for success is the quality of the time I put in rather than the quantity. Take care of yourself and do other things outside of work.

Rejections used to hurt like hell for me. They still hurt a little, but I've grown thicker skin over the years. Beyond that, the key to success is just to keep trying.

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