

Agreeing to disagree

Editorial rejection letters are no doubt ranked pretty high in the list of correspondence everyone hates to receive, overshadowed perhaps only by those from grant funding bodies. The immediate impulse (after cursing the editor's incompetence) is to write straight back, or call them directly, to explain why their decision is obviously wrong and why the manuscript is clearly well suited to their journal. But, in the interests of minimizing delays and preventing further aggravation, we ask that you pause to consider whether appealing is really a productive course to take in your particular case.

At this journal, two thirds to three-quarters of manuscripts are rejected editorially without formal peer review. In our experience, this represents the optimal review rate that allows a constructive refereeing process, which can sometimes require several rounds of revision, without delaying the rejection of lower priority manuscripts unduly and without saturating our referees. Importantly, editorial rejections can be based just as much on the general interest of the dataset as on its scope or quality.

A common ground for appeal — one that invariably fails — is that the journal has previously published studies related to this protein or pathway and the new submission must therefore be of equal interest. Of course, the reply to this is that although a particular subject is within our editorial scope, and we do not have defined quotas for particular subjects, this does not allow us to publish unlimited volumes of literature on that one subject. Rather, the aim has to be to publish the most novel and developed datasets in every field.

Another frequent basis for appeal is that the study is the culmination of years of hard work and that it is not feasible to address the points raised as the student or postdoc has a limited tenure. Although we would never dispute that this is a key issue for the lab to consider, it unfortunately cannot change a manuscript's suitability for a particular journal. We would suggest that it is in the best interests of the student for the senior author to carefully select the most appropriate venue for the study in the first place, and not to waste precious time. Be ambitious but not overly ambitious!

Consider whether it is clear that information key to the decision was missed in the editorial assessment. *Nature* journal editors make their decisions after an in-depth evaluation of the full manuscript and dataset. So data that may have not been particularly emphasized in the cover letter or abstract will have been taken into account when making the decision. We do use 'form' decision letters, primarily to allow more time to be spent assessing the manuscript, but we will usually try to clarify some of the factors that contributed to the decision. However, often there will be many issues taken into consideration, only some of which we will outline in the decision.

Finally, please desist from celebrity endorsements or emphasizing your previous contributions, which we will be well aware of. We do not publish according to any criteria other than the science presented in the manuscript (see editorial, November 2003).

In certain cases it can be important to contact the editor again when new information has come to light that address key concerns.

However, we cannot undertake multiple revision cycles and we will not reverse a decision when this information should have been available in the first place. Equally, you ought to contact us when it is evident from the decision letter that other studies in the literature have been misconstrued so as to reduce the conceptual advance of a study. Finally, for manuscripts that have been rejected following peer review, do contact us if you have irrefutable evidence that a referee report is either factually wrong or motivated by a conflicted agenda. We are prepared to change our decisions, but only in cases where the new information provided dramatically changes our views of those aspects of a study on which the rejection was based.

Please do bear in mind that we evaluate substantive appeals in depth and it therefore takes considerable time for decisions to be made on appeals. It is not uncommon to hear complaints at conferences that it took almost a month to receive an editorial decision on a manuscript, only to conclude that the study was not suitable for review. In reality, however, it often turns out that an editorial decision was made on the manuscript within the usual timeframe — up to a week at busy periods — but that the authors chose to then appeal the decision and this resulted in the further delay before a second decision was reached. At *Nature Cell Biology*, appeals on decisions are documented on our manuscript database, and substantive appeals will be discussed at length internally and, if necessary, externally. Although we are always willing to hear the authors' point of view, these discussions must, as a practical matter, take a lower priority than the numerous other tasks to hand: in particular, making decisions on the new manuscripts that arrive each day and ensuring rapid peer-review and publication of those manuscripts that are stronger candidates for the journal. Decisions on appeals therefore often take several weeks, not because we are unwilling to revisit the basis for a decision, but simply because there are just not enough hours in the day.

For most of the appeals received, we see no compelling grounds to reverse the original decision; indeed, less than one in ten appeals are successful. Moreover, it is often the case that the manuscripts that are sent out for formal peer-review despite editorial concerns will end up being rejected for the same reasons. So in the interest of avoiding reviewer exhaustion, we maintain that it is better to address editorial concerns from the outset or consider whether an alternative journal might be more appropriate.

At the end of the day, we appreciate that the editorial process is subjective and susceptible to error. That said, we have previously outlined why we strongly believe that the editorial process established at all the *Nature* journals over many years continues to yield the best decision making process (see editorials November 2005 and July 2003). If you genuinely feel that your decision was unfair, always remember that there are several independent journals publishing high-quality research in cell biology and it is almost a certainty that a manuscript will ultimately be published in an appropriate venue. If you succeed elsewhere please do let us know, as we are certainly interested in following up on our decisions.