

Demystifying the appeal process



Rejections by peer-reviewed journals are frequent, but authors may get a second chance to convince editors and peers by submitting an appeal. Here we explain how we approach appeals at *Nature Aging* and share some statistics on them to help authors to carefully consider when and how to appeal.

At *Nature Aging*, we receive many new manuscripts each week and we recognize the substantial time, effort and resources that are invested in each study. As an editorial team, we assess the suitability of each new submission for the journal by evaluating a range of factors and focusing on how much the study advances the field or on its utility for the community. These decisions are informed by a carefully selected panel of expert reviewers for about one in five manuscripts. As a result of this selective and stringent process, the journal publishes only a small fraction of the manuscripts it receives. For example, in 2022, 78% of all submissions were rejected without review; of the remaining 22% that were evaluated by peer review, we published only around a third (about 8% of all submissions).

The rejection of a manuscript at *Nature Aging* is not necessarily the end of the road at the journal, however. Authors have the option to appeal – for instance, in cases in which they believe that a decision has been made in error, or where editorial and reviewer concerns can comprehensively and convincingly be addressed. The appeal process requires the submission of an appeal letter that offers an argument as to why the decision should be reversed and, if appropriate, a revised manuscript and a description of the revisions that address the reasons for rejection. Below, we provide more detailed guidance on how to use the appeal process effectively (focusing on primary research manuscripts) and share some statistics on how different types of appeals fare at the journal.

When a manuscript is rejected before external review, this is often based on concerns about the breadth and depth of the study or its similarity with previous work. In such cases,

our decision letters often mention the perceived weaknesses or gaps in the study as well as the main publications that, in our view, compromise the degree of conceptual advance of the manuscript. It is particularly challenging to overturn a decision that is based on such concerns, but if authors believe that an important strength of their work has been missed or misunderstood by the editorial team or if they are willing to add data to address the highlighted gaps, they may choose to appeal. If the reasons behind an initial rejection are unclear, we encourage authors to ask the editor for more information before submitting a formal appeal.

Considering all pre-review appeals submitted in 2021 and 2022 (to allow sufficient time to track any subsequent review and revision processes), 29% successfully overturned the original editorial decision and just 14% have since been published in the journal. In general, appeals that offer new data tend to be more successful.

Manuscripts that have been through peer review can also be rejected on the basis of concerns regarding breadth or similarity with previous work. In addition, if reviewers identify substantial technical concerns that severely undermine the conclusions or the quality of the work, this often precludes further consideration at the journal. Appealing post-review decisions that are based on these concerns is challenging, and usually requires large amounts of new data.

For post-review rejections that are based on limited breadth but where there is interest in the premise of the work from the reviewers and editors, our decisions take into account the timeframe and technical difficulty of the revisions required for the study to become appropriate for publication in the journal. In those cases, we explicitly offer in the rejection letter the option to appeal via the submission of a preliminary revision plan in which authors outline how they would address each reviewer's concerns, in a point-by-point manner. This option is designed to be a constructive process between authors and editors. Importantly, such appeals can be evaluated even before authors embark on additional experiments or run new analyses. Even if sometimes we may disagree with authors on what would be

required for reconsideration, we are often prepared to discuss how best to invest time and resources to strengthen the study as a whole, as opposed to addressing all of the points raised by reviewers. Notably, this approach based on a preliminary revision plan is available for all post-review appeals.

Of post-review appeals submitted in 2021 and 2022, and for which there was interest in the study but the scale of the revisions was too substantial to invite a revision, 78% were granted and 51% have since been published in the journal. By comparison, post-review appeals that were not encouraged were granted in 60% of cases and only 26% of these papers were later published in the journal. As these data illustrate, although the path may not be straightforward, the appeal process presents a viable option for authors who are prepared to carefully and thoroughly respond to the constructive feedback obtained through review.

Another factor to consider when deciding to appeal is timing; appeals do not take priority over regular submissions and are often complex cases to handle. Turnaround times tend to fluctuate depending on how busy the editors are, but for the first half of 2024, for instance, appeal decisions took over four weeks on average.

For unsuccessful appeals or in cases in which authors decide not to undertake the proposed revisions, we aim to guide authors by consulting with our editorial colleagues at one or several other journals in the Nature Portfolio, where the scope of the revisions may be less extensive, to facilitate rapid publication.

At *Nature Aging*, we recognize the importance of maintaining a transparent and constructive dialog between authors and editors, and our appeals process (as at other journals across the portfolio) has been designed with this in mind – to empower authors to challenge decisions and advocate for the importance and potential of their work. We hope that clarifying the way in which we make these decisions, and sharing some of the associated statistics, enables authors to make informed choices when deciding on whether and how to appeal.

Published online: 19 July 2024