

Beat Desk Rejection: the checklist editors run before a reviewer ever sees your paper

7 MIN READ

Most rejected papers never reach a reviewer. An editor opens the file, reads the title and abstract, glances at a figure, and sends it back the same week. That decision takes minutes. It turns on things that have almost nothing to do with whether your science is good.

That is the frustrating part and the hopeful part at once. Almost everything an editor screens for is fixable before you hit submit. Below is what they check first, drawn from the pre-submission reviews we run on manuscripts across every field, with a worked example where it helps and a two-minute self-audit at the end you can run before you send.

01 Is this the right journal at all?

The most common desk reject is the plainest one: out of scope. Editors reject a strong paper in the wrong venue faster than a weak paper in the right one.

- Read the last ten papers the journal actually published in your subfield, not its aims-and-scope page. The page is aspirational. The papers are the truth.
- Name, in one sentence, the question your paper answers. If that sentence would look out of place in the journal's table of contents, you have your answer.
- Check the article type. A brief report submitted as a full article, or the reverse, gets bounced on format alone.

Test the scope call free (Lens)

- ☐ Paste your abstract and your target journal into our free Scope-Fit Risk Calculator at manusights.com/tools/scope-fit-risk.
- ☐ It answers the narrow question this section is about: whether scope alone is likely to end the submission before a reviewer sees it.
- ☐ No signup, nothing stored. If it comes back high risk, the fix is usually a different venue rather than a better abstract.

It is ours, and it reads scope only. It cannot tell you whether the science is ready, which is what the rest of this checklist is for.

02 The abstract carries the whole decision

The editor may read nothing else. Treat the abstract as the paper. State the finding, not the topic, and put a number in it.

- "We show X" beats "we investigate X." An abstract that describes what you did without saying what you found reads as a paper that is not sure it found anything.
- Put the effect size, the sample, the improvement in the abstract. Vagueness there signals vagueness in the work.
- Cut the last sentence if it is a generic call for future research. It wastes the line that should land your contribution.

IN PRACTICE

WEAK

This study investigates the relationship between sleep quality and academic performance in undergraduate students.

STRONGER

Undergraduates in the lowest sleep-quality quartile scored 11% lower on final exams than the top quartile, an effect that held after controlling for prior GPA (n=430).

03 You followed the journal's rules, exactly

This one is pure hygiene, and editors treat a miss as a signal that the rest of the paper is careless.

- Word count, section structure, reference style, figure format. Match the journal's guide line by line.
- Title-page requirements, running head, keywords, highlights. The small stuff a busy editor uses as a first filter.
- The cover letter names the journal you are writing to and why the paper fits. A recycled cover letter with the wrong journal name in it is a real and common way to get rejected in the first thirty seconds.

04 Declarations and ethics are complete

Missing declarations are a fast reject because they are a compliance risk the editor will not carry.

- Ethics approval, consent, data availability, funding, conflicts, author contributions. Every one the journal asks for, present and specific.
- Trial or study registration where the field requires it.
- Reporting-guideline compliance (CONSORT, PRISMA, ARRIVE, and the rest) named and followed if your study type has one.

05 Your references are real, current, and clean

This has always mattered. It matters more now, because AI writing tools invent citations that look perfect and do not exist, and editors have started checking.

- Every citation points at a real paper that says what you claim it says. Not the abstract, the paper.
- None of your key references are retracted or under an expression of concern. Building on a retracted result sinks a submission and follows the authors afterward.
- Across 200 papers we ran through our reference check, 14 had at least one reference that was retracted, under an expression of concern, or since corrected. Two were outright retractions; most of the rest were corrections the authors had not picked up. A reviewer who notices you cited the uncorrected version will say so.

Screen the bibliography free (Sentry)

- ☐ Paste your reference list into our free Reference Integrity Checker at manusights.com/tools/reference-integrity.
- ☐ It flags retractions, expressions of concern, and references that trace back to hijacked or predatory titles, using Crossref and Retraction Watch data.
- ☐ No signup, and the result is a shareable link you can keep with the manuscript.

A citation to a retracted paper is the kind of thing a reviewer finds and you do not, and it quietly tells them to trust your other references less.

06 The writing does not get in the way

Roughly seven in ten submissions worldwide come from authors writing in a second language, and language quality alone drives a large share of desk rejections. The bar is not elegance. It is clarity an editor can read fast.

- The first paragraph of the introduction says why the problem matters and what is missing in what came before. If a reader cannot find the gap, the editor cannot either.
- Every figure and table can be understood from its caption alone.
- If you drafted with AI, read it aloud once. AI writing tends toward smooth, even, hedged sentences that say little, and editors are learning to spot it. The fix is not a bypass tool. It is to cut the filler and write the way you would explain the work to a colleague.

07 You did not overclaim

The last desk-reject trigger is the one authors resist most: the paper promises more than the data delivers.

- Your strongest claim is one your results can actually defend. A causal claim on a correlational design is a reliable way to lose a skeptical editor on the first read.
- The novelty is stated plainly and it is true. "First to show" only survives if you have checked that it is.

IN PRACTICE

WEAK

Our findings demonstrate that mindfulness training causes improved workplace productivity.

STRONGER

Employees who completed the mindfulness program reported higher productivity, though the observational design cannot rule out that more motivated employees were likelier to enroll.

08 Run the two-minute desk screen before you submit

This is the pass an editor makes in the first few minutes, compressed into a checklist you can run on your own paper. Any no is a likely desk reject, and every one is fixable tonight.

- Do not submit until every line is a yes, or you have a deliberate reason it is not.

The desk-screen self-audit

- ☐ The journal published a paper like mine, on my method and my kind of question, in the last year.
- ☐ My abstract states the finding with a number in it, not just the topic.
- ☐ I matched the journal's formatting, word count, and article type line by line.
- ☐ Every declaration the journal requires is present and specific.
- ☐ Every key reference is real, current, and not retracted.
- ☐ My strongest claim is one my design can actually defend.

Six yeses: you have cleared the desk screen most rejected papers fail. A no anywhere is the single highest-value thing to fix before you send, not after.

WHERE TO CHECK

The database this guide sends you to, free and open without an account.

EQUATOR Network (<https://www.equator-network.org/>) · Every reporting guideline, organized by study type, so you can find the one that applies to your design instead of guessing. Start here if you are not sure whether your paper needs CONSORT, PRISMA, ARRIVE or something else.

THE NEXT STEP

A checklist catches the misses. The Academy fixes them with you.

You can run this audit by hand. What a checklist cannot do is tell you whether your abstract actually lands, whether your claim is really defensible, or which of these is the one that will sink your specific paper, because that read comes from seeing thousands of manuscripts hit the desk. That is what the Academy does, on your own draft: it scores where you stand, finds the desk-reject risks that are actually in your paper, and walks you through fixing them, one task at a time.

Get published, one task at a time.

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