

## EDITORIAL

# How to Get Your Article Rejected

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As an Associate Editor, I handle a considerable number of manuscripts submitted to *Stress and Health* for consideration for publication. Many of these articles are rejected from the journal. Sometimes manuscripts are rejected because they are deemed not to make a sufficiently original contribution to the field or contain 'fatal flaws'. Often there is very little that can be done in such cases, other than to identify an original question or repeat the study ironing out the fatal flaw. However, many manuscripts are rejected for reasons that have little to do with the reported research, which may be original and competently conducted. Instead, the researcher may have failed to make a convincing case for the inclusion of the research in the journal, omitted crucial details or committed errors in their writing, some of which border on the felonious. In some cases, so blatant is the lack of detail, omissions or errors that I can only conclude that the author's aim was to get their manuscript rejected. So great is this apparent need for rejection that I feel duty-bound to provide a set of guidelines to assist authors in getting their manuscripts rejected from *Stress and Health*.

What follows therefore is my comprehensive set of guidelines on what to do when preparing a manuscript for publication in *Stress and Health*, or any social science journal for that matter, if you want to substantially increase the chances of your manuscript being rejected. I anticipate that authors following these guidelines will have no troubles in getting a reject decision and the best thing is that these guidelines will probably work for most journals. Along the way I will cite some recent examples of articles published in *Stress and Health* whose authors made a real hash of getting rejected by disregarding most of my guidelines. If you are keen to get that rejection letter from the Associate Editor of the journal to which you plan to submit your work, you would do well to avoid following their example.

**Guideline 1.** Do your best to hide your hypotheses, aims and research question from the reader, or, better yet, fail to state them at all.

Bury your aim and exact purpose of your research within your manuscript so that is difficult or, better still, nigh impossible for the reader to ascertain what you have set out to do. Importantly, avoid stating your aim close to the beginning of the article where it is easily accessible to readers. Keep them guessing. After all, you know exactly what your aim is, so if it is not self-evident to readers, quite frankly, they do not really deserve to have the privilege of reading your masterpiece. In addition, never state how you are going to conclude until the final lines of your manuscript. Keep your readers guessing right until the end, like in the *Sixth Sense*. You can think of your reader as an opponent in a poker game with your conclusion as your hand. Wait right until the very last moment in the game when all bets are placed, at which point you can reveal your hand and win the pot. Finally, avoid, at all costs, a clear, itemized list of your research question and hypotheses at the end of the introduction section, probably best to make them vague and opaque, better yet, leave them out entirely. Examples of articles published in *Stress and Health* that did this particularly badly include the reviews by Weinstein and Ryan (2011) and Hargrove, Quick, Nelson, and Quick (2011), who make clear, lucid statements of purpose at the end of the introduction and outline how they will conclude, and the articles by Barber, Munz, Bagsby, and Powell (2010) and Larsman, Lindegard, and Ahlborg (2011), who provide a set of itemized hypotheses.

**Guideline 2.** Never state the original contribution your manuscript makes to understanding the link between stress and health.

Assume that readers will know how your work is original and makes a contribution to our understanding of the nexus between stress and health. Why waste your effort in stating clearly how your article builds on current research and is unique to previous findings, should not that be obvious to anyone in the know? As you are submitting to a journal called *Stress and Health*, it is safe to assume that the readership is entirely conversant with the current research in all disciplines in field and will know exactly where your research fits in and fills those gaps in the literature. An article that did not heed this guideline and blatantly states how the research adds new insight into understanding in

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the field, and was even so bold so as to do so in the first sentence of the abstract, is that by Mäkikangas, Hätinén, Kinnunen, and Pekkonen (2011).

Guideline 3. Organize your manuscript in an eclectic and unique manner.

The form should reflect the content, right? If your research is original, then why not structure your manuscript in a new and interesting way, like in *Citizen Kane*. So avoid the rather dull structure you see in every other published article and organize your manuscript in the way you see fit. Most importantly, avoid a systematic approach where your hypotheses or research questions flow through the manuscript like threads so that the reader can clearly identify them in each section of the manuscript—the introduction, method, results, discussion and conclusion sections. Instead, keep the reader guessing which of your methods will be used to test which of your hypotheses or how a particular analysis will address a specific research question. Examples of articles published in *Stress and Health* that unashamedly flaunt this guideline and provide a clear and coherent structure are those by Cieslak, Benight, Luszczynska, and Laudenslager (2011) and Nixon, Yang, Spector, and Zhang (2011).

Guideline 4. There is no need to base your research question or hypotheses on evidence and previous research.

Your introduction should contain few, or ideally no, references to current thinking and theory on your research topic. Most theory and previous research is likely to be inferior to yours, so do not bother to give it due consideration when setting up the rationale and purpose behind your research. Such an endeavour would probably be a distraction anyway, so just cut to the chase and just get on with describing your study. If you feel a little uncomfortable with this, perhaps cite some ‘grey’ literature or make assumptions and suppositions on anecdotal observations and experiences you have had. Articles appearing in *Stress and Health* that were particularly bad at this and provided excellent reference to previous research include those by Mäkikangas et al. (2011) and Mann et al. (2010).

Guideline 5. If you do have to describe others’ research, make sure you describe it in intimate detail.

If you are compelled to report the findings of others, make sure you describe each study in meticulous detail. After all, if you are going to include a description of others’ work in your manuscript, you might as well be as comprehensive as possible. So, rather than making clear points and supporting them by making reference to a number of studies that have found similar

results, describe each study in intimate detail, preferably in a series of paragraphs. No need to link the paragraphs either, or make reference to how the studies are relevant to your research, it is the detail that counts. Articles published in *Stress and Health* that were particularly adept at disregarding this guideline include those by Karibe, Aoyagi, Koda, and Kawakami (2011) and Lu, Siu, and Lu (2011).

Guideline 6. Only make a cursory reference to your study design.

Again, you can probably assume that the readership is pretty familiar with all study designs and research methods out there, so you can happily go ahead and describe what you did without the need to formally note down your design. Furthermore, stating your design would only compel you to also justify why you have selected such a design and give a rationale as to why it is an appropriate approach to investigate the phenomenon or effect in which you are interested. And you do not want to get unnecessarily encumbered with that, so avoid it as best you can. *Stress and Health* articles that make a clear reference to their design and are therefore poor examples of how to follow this guideline include those by Cieslak et al. (2011) and Larsman et al. (2011).

Guideline 7. Try to use as many synonyms as possible for key terms.

There is nothing more tedious than encountering the same phrase or word for a particular construct, theory, measure, method or statistical analysis several times when reading someone’s write-up of their research. So my advice would be to use as many different words as possible for the same thing. This will make your research article more varied and interesting. Never mind if the reader cannot follow your nomenclature or make a distinction between the terms you use. After all, they need to earn the right to read your work, and an eclectic use of terms will present them with a real challenge. Examples of articles published in *Stress and Health* that consistently use appropriate terms throughout and therefore fail to adhere to this guideline include those by Idris, O’Driscoll, and Anderson (2011) and Moksnes, Rannestad, Byrne, and Espnes (2011).

Guideline 8. Be economical with detail on your analytic approach and data analysis.

Skip any detail in your data analytic approach that you might deem unnecessary. By now, most statistical analyses, particularly the advanced ones, are pretty well known by most people in the field. So my advice would be to give a broad outline of your analysis (e.g. ANOVA, *t*-test, regression), but stop short of providing any essential details that would only be annoying to the

reader such as the exact design of the ANOVA (e.g. within-participants or between-participants, mixed model, etc.) or regression (multiple linear, logistic, hierarchical, etc.) or detail of the covariates or control variables you might have included. And do not get encumbered by reporting unnecessary statistical details like effect sizes. Also, avoid a paragraph in your methods section outlining your data analysis, no matter how complex your analysis. Interested readers will do their homework and read up on the autoregressive integrated moving-average models (or other such complex analyses) you have used. Studies published in *Stress and Health* that were bad at this and provided very detailed and coherent data analysis sections are those by Cieslak et al. (2011) and Moksnes et al. (2011).

Guideline 9. Do not bother to summarize your findings in the early part of your discussion.

This is just a waste of words that could be put to better use in describing studies in meticulous detail in your introduction (see Guideline 5). My advice would be to assume that the reader has all the time in the world to read your entire method and results section and is unlikely to be interested in a brief, pithy statement at the beginning of the discussion section that captures the essence of your findings. What you really want to do is get stuck in to discussing your findings and not have to go through all the bother and rigmarole of repeating yourself like a politician. Most articles published in *Stress and Health* are bad at this and provide a neat summary of findings at the beginning of the introduction, but for a good example of how not to follow this guideline, see Willemsen, Markey, Declercq, and Vanheule (2011).

Guideline 10. Refrain from relating your findings back to your hypotheses and previous research.

The reader is clearly interested in your findings and will not want to hear how this relates back to others' findings; if they wanted to know about all that, they will be able to read the references in you have provided in the reference section. So focus on your results alone, a cursory reference to some grey literature would be ok at this stage too (see Guideline 4). It is good at this juncture to speculate wildly and go way beyond your data when discussing your results. Be creative, that is what science is all about. See the articles by Idris et al. (2011) and Hagger et al. (2010) that blatantly disregarded this guideline and were published in *Stress and Health*.

Guideline 11. Your study is perfect; there are no limitations, so do not state any.

Why would you conduct a study if it was flawed in some way? And even if you did, why would you bother highlighting the limitations to all and sundry? Keep the little imperfections in your study that limit the

generalizability of your findings or open avenues for future research to yourself. Highlighting them will not really help the reader make a reasoned judgement on the extent of your findings and would just open you up to attack anyway. An example of a *Stress and Health* article that was deficient in this manner and provided a very clear limitations section is that by Nixon et al. (2011).

Guideline 12. State your conclusion and make it elaborate.

This is your moment; at last you can reveal the exciting conclusion of your research (see Guideline 1). So make it count. This should be a verbose and extended section where you state and restate your findings, preferably repeating the results (and even statistical analyses) from your results section. Never mind about making this accessible to the reader coming to it cold; they should have read the rest of the article in the first place. Articles that were not very adept at this and provided clear, pithy conclusions that captured the essence of the research are those by Nixon et al. (2011) and Rinaldi, Fontani, Aravagli, and Margotti (2010).

Guideline 13. Disregard the journal guidelines for submission.

Make your article as long as possible. All the best articles you have read, particularly those in *Stress and Health*, are extended and convoluted. Why say something in one sentence that you can say in a paragraph? The guideline on length is clearly there for inferior authors who struggle to write many words, so show your skill as a wordsmith and write as long an article as possible. View a focused and pithy research article as one that clearly is not worth its weight in paper. Consider the journal guidelines for the preparation of manuscripts as just those: guidelines. Just make up your own margins, font size, pagination and subheadings. If possible, confuse the levels of subheading, as that will make the reader work substantially harder to follow your argument and the logic of your manuscript, which is good for them and prevents them from getting lazy. As for the references, mixing styles is fine; after all, that shows versatility. Why conform to just one particular reference style like some sort of academic automaton? All articles published in *Stress and Health* must conform to journal guidelines for submission, so all are testament that ignoring this guideline is a poor route to rejection.

Guideline 14. Do not waste your time proofreading your manuscript; that is the job of the editor or reviewer.

You have expended so much time and effort in reporting your results and writing the manuscript that cursory

details such as typographical errors and precise grammar are really just window dressing that can be dealt with later. As long as the big picture looks good, the small stuff does not count. Reviewers know this and will patiently read your manuscript and see beyond any minor imperfections. Besides, the journal has editors and reviewers who will be more than happy to correct your errors; that is what they are paid for, after all. All articles published in *Stress and Health*, including editorials (Hagger, 2010), adopted appropriate nomenclature and scientific discourse and used language appropriately adopted. I

would therefore not recommend you follow their lead if you are keen on getting your article rejected.

These guidelines represent a culmination of my many years observing submissions to *Stress and Health* that are denied publication.<sup>1</sup> I cannot recommend these guidelines highly enough for researchers who want to make their manuscript submitted for consideration to journals easy to reject. If you fail to conform to the majority of these guidelines when preparing your manuscript for publication, then it will greatly improve your chances of getting your article published. You have been warned!

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<sup>1</sup>I must stress that all of the guidelines outlined in this editorial represent what *not* to do when submitting a manuscript to *Stress and Health* or any peer-reviewed scholarly journal in the social sciences.