

Narration:

This is a story about rejection.

[typing]...[click]

(youtube) Howcast [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nn3Yx1A3HTo>]: How to write a letter rejecting a job offer: When you decide to reject a job offer, you don't want to burn bridges between you and potential future colleagues and peers. There are ways to soften the blow of a rejection and still remain friendly. You will need: decisiveness, a letter, and politeness.

(youtube) Some other dude [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9noZkrV6kt8>]: The writer Evelyn Waugh had a very simple, all-purpose rejection letter to strangers. It was a printed postcard which simply said: 'Mr. Evelyn Waugh will not do what you wish.' Evelyn Waugh didn't care if the strangers never got back to him again. In fact, he preferred it that way. But for most of the rest of us, it's worth taking a little time and trouble to write a rejection letter.

My name is Alex Hanesworth. And I'm on something of a quest to uncover the alchemical secrets of rejection letters. But before we get to any of that, we're going to talk to Thea.

Thea was 22, just starting a fancy new publishing internship in New York City.

Thea: My name is Thea Walsh. I worked at publishing house in New York called FSG, Farrar, Straus and Giroux as an intern.

Narration: But FSG, or at least their offices, were not exactly what Thea had hoped they might be:

Thea: I hated my office. So it was a cubicle office which were cubicle walls that only go up four feet so if you leaned back, you could see people in the cubicle across from you and you could see floating heads walking around all the time. I sat directly next to a fake Monet painting of wilting, drooping sunflowers with thick, bulbous disgusting paint drops, and it was covered in dust. It was from IKEA and it was nailed into the wall. I tried to take it down one day and I couldn't and then I went to my boss and asked if we could take it down and he said 'no'. It was a really disheartening, unpleasant thing to sit next to every day. I hated the lights--it was fluorescent lighting. I felt like my soul was being slowly seeped into the fluorescent tubes.

Narration: Every day Thea came to FSG, sat in her small fluorescently lit cubicle and got to work. She would sit down, read a submission, and reject it. Again and again and again. Thea worked for FSG for five months and rejected about 200 manuscripts in her time there. If she liked something enough, she could pitch it to her editor, who could reject her pitch, or pitch it to *his* higher-ups.

Thea: But that only happened like three times of the five months that I was there. They actually didn't even publish the three that I liked. But all of those *have* been published.

Narration: Later in the internship, as rules and regulations began to relax, Thea spent a good chunk of her day working on her own novel. She'd go back and forth between writing and rejecting other people's writing. So how does an aspiring writer go about telling another aspiring writer that their work didn't make the cut?

Thea: There was actually rules: They had to be as short as possible. The shorter the better. If you could do it in one sentence, that was the best. Just like: *The character's interest in raising a flock of pigeons developed nicely, but the relationship with his brother is flat.*

Narration: And rule number two...

Thea: Don't let them write you back. Like don't put anything in the letter that makes it seem like they should contact you again.

Narration: And perhaps the only rule that wasn't just a way for FSG to save time and money:

Thea: You had to prove that you read it. Even if you didn't read it. You had to prove like I know the character's name, I know sort of what the central plot development is. I have a precise issue that I can point to.

Narration: We've all received rejection letters. And it's hard not to hate the people like Thea who reject us or our work, often halfheartedly. I interviewed Thea as a part of my hunt to uncover the formula to good rejection. But it was almost hard to figure out how to feel about her. On the one hand, she was the harsh gatekeeper to the exclusive world of publishing, but on the other hand she was an intern sitting next to a painting of wilting sunflowers.

I asked Thea if she would change anything about the way FSG wrote their rejection letters.

Thea: I always wanted to sign my name to the rejection letters, but I wasn't allowed to. Like I think it should be allowed to be a little more personal. Because it's like 'oh okay, the *estate* of, like, Harper Collins rejects your manuscript.' I think that's very misleading. It's more like: 'me, Thea,'--who's like a 22 year old girl--'rejects your manuscript.' It doesn't mean that no one will ever publish your book. It's like I rejected it, and here are my reasons, which are subjective.

Narration:

I've been thinking a lot about rejection lately. Not in just an abstract sense.

A few weeks ago, I ordered a meal alone at a Mexican restaurant in San Antonio, Texas. A few musicians, employed by the restaurant, serenaded the table behind me. The ceiling was covered in beautiful multi-colored banners. I opened my email, while sipping on a Shirley Temple, to discover three new rejection letters, delivered to my inbox within an hour of one another.

These rejection letters, stacked neatly on my phone screen, felt like three completely different things. One was clearly a form letter that felt like Siri had probably written it on weird electronic stationery. The next one was a three sentence note from a woman who had interviewed me over the phone. The last: a long, friendly apology that referenced the details of my cover letter and urged me to reach out again in the future, even if just for advice.

The ones that had a name at the bottom felt infinitely easier to bear. Because I could imagine an actual person writing them instead of some omniscient hiring mechanism. I could even imagine Thea, 22 years old, in a too short cubicle, under soul-sucking fluorescent lighting sitting on the other side of those emails.

Once I started thinking about that kind of corporate rejection in that Mexican restaurant in San Antonio, I couldn't help but think of the other, often messier forms of rejection. I've had a lot of difficulty rejecting things in my life. The act of rejecting romantic interests or even event invitations usually feels kind of impossible to me. I know a form letter is not the way to turn down a coffee date, but I wondered if there was something for me in corporate how-to reject instructions. That's why I talked to Thea. And while I appreciated her advice, her view of rejection letters felt pretty unusual:

Thea: I basically don't care about any of my rejections at all. I think they're not even worth thinking about or having a feeling about, or dwelling on. It's just like I only expect to have so many friends or so many films I love. So why would I expect to be mostly accepted? You know?

Narration: I'm not like Thea. You probably aren't like Thea. I almost think no one is.

[phone ringing]

So I broadened my search:

Alex: So I was hoping we could start off... if you wanted to introduce yourself and sort of explain what your job is and what Beacon is?

Gayatri: Sure!

Narration: I talked to a *different* publisher.

Gayatri: Um, so my name is Gayatri Patnaik and I'm Editorial Director of Beacon Press.

Narration: In case you couldn't quite make it out, that was Gayatri Patnaik, the Editorial Director of Beacon Press. They specialize in Nonfiction books with a social justice bent. Gayatri answered my questions about rejection thoughtfully and carefully, but unfortunately I had to reject the tape from the interview because it's a bit hard to understand through the telephone.

In the interview she told me that when you're writing a rejection, you want to be honest, you want to be firm, and you want to make it really clear, and that you have to remember that this is often someone's dream. You do not want to be unkind. It all felt easier said than done. Then she said something that gave me a glimmer of hope. Here's my friend Emma, re-enacting the quote.

Re-enacted Gayatri: I--in my first job in publishing I worked with a man who wrote the most beautiful and elegant rejection letters. It's like you almost wanted to be rejected by him to have one of his letters. And I really admired his craft... And part of what it was important for him to do, to signal with agents, is that he really got it. He got why those agents fell in love with the book, and even though we couldn't do it, um, he needed to express that.

Narration: After talking to Gayatri, I couldn't stop picturing this master rejectionist: a man so gifted, you'd want to be rejected just to get one of his letters. He probably wrote with a gold-plated quill tip pen, and waved to every single person he passed on his way to work. He would be able to answer all my questions. I didn't know where to look for this mythic Rejector, so instead I looked for evidence of him amongst my mortal friends. That's when my friend Julia told me about her favorite rejection letter:

Julia: I knew I was gonna be home for the summer, but had no idea what I was doing, and was like looking at like places hiring within a five mile radius of my house. And Chili's came up, immediately. And I wanna say... I wanna put this at like March or April. So four months later I open my email and the subject is "Brinker Nation Thanks You" and I think I was just like 'what is that?' And it was this really heartfelt email from Chili's! This email is like more excited about my potential than I am. This email is so enthusiastic. Like there's some typos in there, like there's a double that, there's a word in all caps, there's something a little unprofessional about it. And it's like one of the few things in a folder in my email that says 'Things to Save :)' that's like very heartfelt things that I will like return to.

Dear Julia: Thank you so much for checking out the Host - Manhattan Beach Chili's position at Manhattan Beach-CHI 0882C. Unfortunately, we've made the tough decision to continue our search, which we know is tough to hear. Please know that we never take for granted someone like you that that would give of your time and explore the possibilities with us. We know you'll find the right place for YOU, and we wish you nothing but the very best. Whatever you do, find someplace that makes you happy! Life is too short not to.

laughter

Narr: The erratically positive energy of the letter was fun, but didn't feel quite possible to naturally attain in my own life. I wasn't totally sure if the hiring manager at the Manhattan Beach Chili's was the master Rejectologist I was looking for, but the letter felt like the only force strong enough to balance the one sentence rejections of FSG. I still felt lost. I had figured out, perhaps, examples of each extreme. I couldn't figure out how to exist between them.

I think what feels scary to me is the level of intention a good rejection requires. You have to know what you want and what you need and you have to consider what is expected of you in return. Which is easy when you're a publisher. Or an employer. But not so simple as a person.

As a somewhat futile exercise, I tried to write a form rejection for myself. An Evelyn Waugh-style, all-purpose rejection slip for romance, invitations and other requests:

Dear applicant,

I will not do what you wish. This is through no fault of your own. [insert specific detail so they don't know it's a form letter]. I'm sorry it didn't work out. Please know that I would never take for granted someone like you that would give your time and explore the possibilities with me. I wish you nothing but the best.

Sincerely,
a 19-year-old girl who still doesn't own a mixing bowl
Aka me
Aka Alex

