

Dealing with Rejection in Academia



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Staci Zavattaro, reflects on rejection in academia and gives 6 tips on how to manage the inevitable rejections that are part of academic life.

I just graduated from my doctoral program and was attending my discipline's annual conference. That week, I had gotten several papers rejected in a row. Back to back. I began to question if this job was even right for me. So what did I do? Cried in the elevator of course. The doors opened and standing there, oddly enough, was my dissertation chair. He asked what was wrong so I told him. He basically said, "Oh that's all?" Looking back now I can see he was right. In the moment I thought, "Well this is totally serious, and he needs to take it as such!"

Rejection is a part of academic life, just as it is part of the corporate world, nonprofit sector, and things we do every single day. Somehow though, rejection in academia seems personal because someone, usually a total stranger, is judging your work. You might write a course paper that receives a lower grade than you wanted. You might not pass your comprehensive exams on the first try. Your first dissertation proposal surely will have major revisions. Your first article... I could go on, but you see my point..

What helps me cope is to realize rejection is happening to everyone around you, even if they do not tell you.

My colleague Shannon Orr and I edited a book called *Reflections on Academic Lives*. In it, we start with what we called an ode to rejection because, believe it or not, rejection can actually be a positive thing if you let it. In that volume, we have 70 academics of all levels - from doctoral students to a retired provost - giving their best advice for surviving academia (or removing yourself from it). One reflection that is pertinent here comes from Steven R. Shaw from McGill University. Some of you might know him as @Shawpsych on Twitter. In our book, Steven writes about the "shadow CV," meaning what you do not see is all the failure behind the success. That article? You do not see that it was rejected three times before. The grants? You do not see the countless rejections and revisions each went through. His message is to look beyond the success to see the silver lining in rejections.

Here I share with you some advice that has helped me cope with rejection. This list is not exhaustive, and some of the things might not work for you. I would be thrilled to hear other tips and tricks you have learned that can also support me with continued rejection.

- **Put it away** - Rejection often hits hard. It feels like the journal or the grant agency is rejecting *us*. Really they are rejecting the version of the work they got on that day. Put the reviews away until you are in a better mental space to look at them. Chances are there is some feedback in there that will be meaningful as you progress with the project. Your task is to find those nuggets and build from there.
- **Everyone gets rejected** - For me, I never think senior scholars still face rejection. I imagine that when Big Name Scholar sends a paper to a journal, he or she gets their work accepted with no question. Whenever I

speak with senior scholars, they always laugh and tell me that of course they get rejected. And each time it somehow blows my mind. But this is important for everyone to hear because it tells me that rejection happens all throughout your career, so you better develop a thick skin.

- **Speaking of a thick skin** – You really do need one. And I say this as someone who is incredibly sensitive. I told you I was crying in an elevator! I have been an academic for almost a decade now, and this is a skill I need to practice every single time a rejection comes in. I need to stop, breathe, and remember it is not about me. I tell my students now that rejection does not bother me as much, and they look at me strangely. Notice I said as much. Because when it stops bothering me totally that means I have given up and do not care.
- **See rejection as a learning opportunity** – From each rejection comes a silver lining – if you let it. Remember above I told you my friend Shannon and I edited a book on surviving academia? Well, we met thanks to rejection. I applied for a position at her university. I received a campus interview, and she was so lovely to me. I did not get the job (which is probably a good thing because she is in Ohio, and I am a Florida girl through and through, so that means snow and I do not mix), but we stayed in touch throughout the years. I posted on Facebook about changing my doctoral course, and I asked for feedback from friends. I got so much that I wondered if maybe there was something more to this. Shannon messaged me literally the next day and said, “I think there is something here.” So we put together a book proposal, and the rest, as they say, is history.
- **Ask for help** – Do not be afraid to ask others for feedback or input. Sometimes we are afraid of normalizing rejection in academia. We want to appear as all-knowing sages immune to failure. That simply is not true. For anyone. So if you are not sure how to handle rejection, talk to someone. Colleagues have all been through it so they can lend an ear. Talk to friends. All I am suggesting is that you do not hold in rejection, because perhaps from talking comes a partnership you did not expect, or an idea you never would have had prior.
- **Have fun** – Sometimes in academia we like to have a “busy competition.” You know that game. It is where everyone tries to out-busy the other. People compare projects they worked on during spring break. Or brag about getting no sleep so they can push out a grant proposal. I hate it. I

really do. Because the reality is, we are all busy. Instead I tell my students and colleagues to go have fun. Clear your mind. Do something you love. Really, it does not matter what. Just do it. Your work will be there when you get back.

I do encourage all of you to normalize rejection in your classrooms. Be open with your students about this omnipresent academic reality. I like to walk my students through the ways in which I revised a paper. I also tell them when I had to simply let a project languish. It is okay to admit that something did not work out the first time. Or even the second time.

I know I am getting better at handling rejection because I no longer cry in elevators.

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