

Failing well in academia: Upcycling your work

This article provides a short reflection on experiences of rejection in academic life and the potential impact on students and early career researchers. It considers the importance of carefully adapting previously rejected work in order to fully take advantage of future opportunities. Finally, the article offers some practical guidance on upcycling academic work.

Rejection

The life of an academic is plagued with rejection. Academics are repeatedly encouraged to take chances, knowing all too well that the likelihood of success is dwarfed by the risk of failure. Though we are told that '*rejection is not failure*', this can be hard to accept when the sting of disappointment is still fresh in the memory. There have been a number of recent discussions surrounding the impact of rejection on feelings of failure, burnout and imposter syndrome (Jaremka et al., 2020; Nature, 2020). Given the growing impact that rejection can have on the lives and careers of academics, the conversation has shifted in an attempt to normalise experiences of rejection (Conn et al., 2016). Practical advice for dealing with academic knockbacks has so far focussed on what to do with rejected articles and traditional grant applications. For example, many journals and academic publishing experts offer specific guidance on what to do next when an article has been rejected (The Wiley Network, 2019). Fortunately, many articles that are originally snubbed by editors find homes in the end. This may require meticulously searching for the right journal, carefully responding to reviewers' comments, and skilfully crafting a revised submission (Sullivan, 2015).

What about if you are rejected for a non-traditional opportunity? Applications for prizes, awards, non-traditional grants, fellowship positions, doctoral proposals and job applications all require significant effort. However, the final submitted work for such

opportunities may be so tailored to the specific criteria that it can be hard to imagine finding it a home elsewhere. This may be particularly relevant to students and early career researchers. It takes time to develop the expertise and skillset required to publish in academic journals, and students and early career researchers are often ineligible to apply for traditional funding opportunities. Applying for non-traditional opportunities provides early career researchers with the chance to acquire the funding they need to ignite their research aspirations, gain much needed experience, and offers the possibility to bolster their CV and reputation. Unfortunately, early experiences of rejection in academia are likely to leave their mark. When considering whether or not to apply for upcoming opportunities, previous rejections are likely to force applicants to weigh up whether or not it is worth applying, knowing that the odds are stacked against them. If the applicant is ultimately successful, the effort was worth it. If not, the time spent tirelessly researching the topic, thoughtfully constructing the arguments and meticulously formatting the application represents nothing but wasted blood, sweat and tears. Framing opportunities as '*all or nothing*' risks is likely to cause students and early career researchers to become increasingly cautious about speculatively investing in their future, the more they experience rejection. An alternative mindset may be to apply for opportunities knowing that, even if rejected, hard work can be creatively upcycled for future success.

Upcycling your work

Upcycling is the creative reuse of something previously discarded, breathing new life into the rejected object to convert it into something of greater value (Sung & Sung, 2015). Upcycling is typically discussed as a means for engendering more sustainable approaches to consuming products and materials. However, upcycling may also serve as a useful model for repurposing previously rejected academic work. This may help students and early career researchers to

adopt a more sustainable approach to taking on new challenges by skilfully making best use of the work they accumulate over time.

Academic upcycling is about improving previously rejected work and finding it a new home. Though this entails more than simply repackaging failure in the hope of future success, it can help to salvage existing work. This is not to say that all previously rejected work can be saved. Maybe you got it completely wrong, missed the point or simply invested your time in a bad idea. It's easy to become myopic when searching for a home for your own work, ignoring the shaky foundations on which the work was originally built. That said, even in the event of clear failure, sharing one's mistakes with others can serve as a useful warning of how to avoid wandering down slippery, though often well-travelled, paths.

The following is a short description of some suggested guidance for PsyPag Quarterly readers on how they may consider upcycling their academic work in the wake of rejection.

1. ***Allow the dust to settle.*** Rejection can be hard to take. Everyone has their own approach for bouncing back, but it is important to take time to distance yourself from the initial response so that you can objectively calculate your next steps.
2. ***Carefully consider feedback.*** Once you're able to review any feedback you received with a cool head, it's vital that you carefully consider the points that were raised. This may help you to identify the weaknesses in your arguments and highlight areas that need further work. If you disagree with the criticism you received, this may suggest that you didn't fully explain your ideas to the intended audience. You may need to adopt a different approach to successfully get your message across.
3. ***Stay organised.*** Becoming a prolific '*rejectee*', which is no bad thing, can cause your pile of upcyclable work to mount up fast. New homes and opportunities for your work may not appear immediately. It is necessary to carefully archive your work so that it is easily located when the time comes to breathe new life into it.

4. ***Scan the horizon.*** Be ready for when opportunity knocks. Multiple platforms such as [Research Professional](#) and [ECR Central](#) publicise a range of upcoming opportunities for students and early career researchers to showcase their work. Organisations are also increasingly turning to social media to advertise future opportunities, so it is important to follow accounts relevant to your work. You can also choose to carve out your own opportunities by prospectively contacting organisations that may be interested in your ideas. You may choose to adapt your research in order to reach a broader audience. For example, submitting your work to platforms such as [The Conversation](#), [The Psychologist](#), and [PsyPag Quarterly](#) gives you the chance to broadcast your message to a diverse crowd. Alternatively, you can directly contact stakeholders that may be interested in your research and offer to contribute to their blogs, websites or resources. Contacting charities, businesses, local authorities and public institutions is a great way to build your network and may lead to unexpected opportunities in the future.
5. ***Restyle your work.*** Take time to carefully restyle your work to meet the demands of the newly targeted opportunity. For example, converting a grant application into a magazine article will require adopting a more journalistic style. Upcycling a research competition entry into a useful resource for a relevant stakeholder may require you to provide additional depth in a more comprehensive format. Whatever the chosen outlet, how your work is packaged is essential to successfully upcycling your previously rejected efforts.

Taking chances

There is always a chance that your work will be rejected. However, taking the time to reinvest in your previous efforts is a rewarding process that can lead you to produce work of higher value that is of greater interest to others. Young academics need to take chances in order to

build their experience, reputation and to access the funds and resources needed to develop their careers. Hard work is never wasted if you refuse to give up on your ideas. Upcycling previously rejected work can provide a successful approach to failing well in academia.

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