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Dealing with Rejection

Does everyone like the same things? Do all people have the same taste in books, music, movies, cuisine, vacation destinations, pets or anything else for that matter? Are you fascinated by the lives of everyone around you? And are they all unreservedly interested in you as a person? Of course not. We're all individuals, with our own likes and dislikes and it would be a pretty dull world if we were all the same, wouldn't it? The same applies to your writing, with which you're never going to please all the people all, or even some of, the time. Your work is never going to be to everyone's taste. Even the most prolific or famous authors are not read and enjoyed by every literate person on the planet.

No one wants to be rejected, of course, but when submitting your work for publication, the experience remains very much an aspect of the writing life. Throughout their careers, all writers will be rejected by publishers far more often than they are accepted. Rejection might be a little easier to take for the seasoned professional, but is still never pleasant, even if you have perhaps twenty or thirty published works to your name. Just as we will never please everyone we encounter throughout our lives, rejections are a part of being a writer and happen to everyone at some point of another.

To quote renowned science fiction author Isaac Asimov, "almost every writer, before he becomes a success, even a runaway supernova success, goes through an apprentice period when he's a 'failure.'" And yet, rejection of your work can sometimes result in you improving as a writer, going in another direction with your craft, perhaps into a different genre or market, or into non-fiction instead of fiction, for example. How writers deal with rejection can often make the difference between success and failure in the long run.

Taking It Personally

As painful as rejection is, especially for the beginning writer, it must be stressed that it is nothing personal on the part of the publisher or editor. Writers who take rejection personally have to change their way of thinking if they hope to have a career in the business. Writing can be a solitary and lonely profession and writers tend to live very much inside their own imaginations for long stretches of time, as the plot comes together and the characters form. As a result, they can't help but be deeply attached to the project.

Consequently, when you mail that manuscript out to the publisher, it's a little like sending your children off to their first day of school. This is your baby, one that you've nurtured until its perfect. How could anyone not like it? However, a writer must remember that the rejection by the editor or publishing house is a rejection of the writing, not of the person. If you can accept that, then perhaps you can look at ways to improve the work you sent out, or even abandon it altogether, if you so desire. But if you convince

yourself that there is something dreadfully wrong with you as a human being, you might never write again or at least never have the courage to submit anything else, forever fearful of being rejected.

Those reviewing your work at a professional publishing house are doing so in an unbiased manner. Your novel has already been read perhaps by friends, relatives, work colleagues and lots of people who know you. Yet you are never going to get a truly honest opinion until you send your work to someone who isn't acquainted with you personally. Since the editor has no idea who you are, how can they be judging your work on anything but its own merits?

Reasons for Rejection

So what kind of reasons could an editor possibly have for not wishing to publish your masterpiece? Well, perhaps they just accepted a similar story to yours or they might even have just published one. You weren't to know this, of course, but this will mean that they aren't going to look favourably on your story right now, no matter how good it is. Your project could even feature a topic that this particular editor finds intensely irritating, a personal preference you couldn't have anticipated, but something which certainly prevents your work getting any further with that particular publisher.

You could also be guilty of not doing your homework. Maybe you didn't study the publisher's guidelines closely enough and submitted something that was the wrong length or in a genre which they specifically state on their website that they have no interest in publishing. Your delightful tale of an adorable dog who gets lost in the forest and has adventures with various woodland creatures is hardly going to appeal to a publishing house dealing exclusively with non-fiction topics such as earthquakes, volcanoes and tsunamis. And naturally, the editor could even just be having a bad day, which again is impossible for you to plan for, but is something which does nothing to improve your chances. Whatever the reason, it's important to realize that there *is* a reason and it's usually a business decision, based purely on whether your work is a fit for them at that moment in time.

The Rejection Letter

Rejection letters come in a variety of different styles, the most common perhaps being the form rejection letter. Some of these can be very formal and professional, on company letterhead, but others can be very poor examples of business communication. I actually still have one of the latter from a quite reputable publisher, who pride themselves on their professionalism, I'm sure. The letter thanks me for submitting my manuscript, but regrets that after reading it thoroughly, it is not suitable for their house at this time and wishes me good luck in my search for a publisher. Encouraging you might think, except that I had not sent them a manuscript, merely a query letter and synopsis. The letter they sent was also a poor quality, off-centre photocopy, made on a machine in need of replacement toner. Not exactly a strong recommendation to submit to this house again.

The next step up from the good quality form letter is one that may have a real signature, rather than a scanned one, plus a handwritten note. This could be on the letter itself or on an attached piece of paper, but it is still encouraging if it says something like ‘thanks for your submission’, ‘cute story, but not for us right now,’ or even a simple ‘good luck’. Better still is the note that states that while your submitted story is not for them, feel free to send it something else. Yes, it's still a rejection, but you're moving up the rejection charts, no doubt about it, and you can take heart that someone in the publishing world actually thinks your work has merit.

Constructive Rejection

The best rejection letter is usually a personal one addressed to you, including the name of your story and specific comments about the plot, including what the editor liked and where they think could be improved. Are they rejecting your work in this example? Absolutely, but this time, you now have a lead to follow up on. Perhaps they think you need a faster pace, less or more description,

longer chapters, a more exciting beginning or that one character in particular could be more fully developed and even give you a few ideas. They might tell you they'd be happy to look at it again if you make the changes they suggest, so obviously in those circumstances, you should resubmit to the same person.

Alternatively, the editor might just suggest changes without a commitment to look at the piece again. However, it's still worth a try to send it back with a cover letter referring to the editor's original comments. If they then show no interest, you can simply consider this as free professional advice on how you might improve your story, which you are now free to send somewhere else. And of course, you also still have the original version that you submitted in the first place, which might still be more to a different editor's taste anyway.

The Next Step

All writers are rejected at some time or another, even the most famous or successful ones, so you're in good company. Even if you've mastered the art of not taking it personally, rejection will still hurt, even if only a little, so it's best to wait a while before jumping straight back into any writing projects. Writers spend so much time at their desks anyway, engrossed in their projects and it's always a good idea to take a break and recharge the batteries once in a while.

The same applies when dealing with a recent rejection, especially since you shouldn't probably be writing anything while still feeling hurt anyway, wondering what's wrong with your writing, considering yourself inadequate and second-guessing every paragraph, sentence, line or word that you write. Simply walk away for a while and engage in some non-writing activities. Run some errands, walk the dog, do laundry or other housework, read some magazines, watch movies or TV, even do some yard work.

And if you don't belong to a critique group or some other writer's organization, meet up with friends for coffee or dinner, to chat about something unrelated to writing. The change of scene will do you the world of good and help you to eventually get writing again, most likely with some fresh ideas on how to improve an existing piece or to start work on a completely new one.

The Numbers Game

If a publisher rejects your work, they will not be publishing it, pure and simple. However, it also means that you're at least getting your writing out there. I've lost count of the number of people I speak to who have written a novel and still not sent it out. Yes, you have to feel its ready and in some ways it never will be, but some people are so fearful of rejection that they never submit anything at all. As I've already mentioned, rejections can often come with constructive criticism and suggestions for additions or improvements.

Rejections also show that you've got the courage to actually send your work out and move toward becoming a professional writer. And once you have a rejection, you can of course now send it out to the next publisher on your list, preferably on the same day. Always have something out there doing the rounds, in my opinion. After all, some publishers can take six months or longer to reply. The more you submit, the more rejections you may receive, but the more chances you have of being accepted too. Someone once informed me that they never bought lottery tickets because they never won anything. Well, you'll certainly never attract the attention of an editor or publisher if you don't send anything out, so start submitting.

Remember, Everyone Gets Rejected

In any profession, everyone has to start somewhere and writers are no different. Every published author out there was once an unpublished author. Even writers who have sold millions of books were told at some point early in their careers that they would never be published. And of course if they'd stopped submitting their work, they would never have been successful. Yes, it can be daunting, but no one ever succeeded by stopping trying.

Fourteen publishers, including big names such as Penguin and HarperCollins, rejected J K Rowling's manuscript for the first novel in the Harry Potter series, while *A Wrinkle in Time* received almost thirty rejections over the course of a decade before securing a publisher. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* was rejected by twenty publishers, while Stephen King's first novel *Carrie* was rejected by dozens as well. Margaret Mitchell received thirty eight rejections for *Gone with the Wind* and Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* was rejected so many times that she initially self published it. John Grisham's first novel, *A Time to Kill*, was rejected by a dozen publishers and sixteen agents, before it was published and launched his career as a best seller.

So although you might be receiving rejections, rest assured you're in good company, so keep sending out your work, because you never know when your time will come.