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Six Inversion Strategies for Avoiding Rejection in Academic Publishing: Lessons from the IS Discipline

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Abstract:

The publication process in many academic disciplines, including in Information Systems (IS), can seem arduous and unpredictable, particularly for early career researchers. While the literature offers plentiful guidance on how to pursue a paper acceptance, this paper offers a crisp summary of common mistakes that lead to rejection and how to avoid them. We provide six actionable inversion strategies for avoiding common mistakes that often lead to paper rejection. Namely, when preparing a paper, we recommend you (1) abstain from methodological promiscuity and (2) never overclaim (but try not to underclaim either); When submitting a paper, it is a good idea to (3) steer clear of bootlicking and (3) avoid sloppiness; And, after receiving the reviews, you should (5) forego belligerence, and (6) stop flogging a dead horse. These inversion strategies can help early career researchers better navigate the review process, increasing the chances of their papers maturing, and helping to avoid mistakes that lower the chance of publishing in high quality IS journals.

Keywords: Inversion, Scientific Writing, Academic Publishing, Tips, Advice, Rejection, Acceptance.

[Department statements, if appropriate, will be added by the editors. Teaching cases and panel reports will have a statement, which is also added by the editors.]

[Note: this page has no footnotes.]

This manuscript underwent [editorial/peer] review. It was received xx/xx/20xx and was with the authors for XX months for XX revisions. [firstname lastname] served as Associate Editor.] **or** The Associate Editor chose to remain anonymous.]

1 Introduction

Publishing plays a vital role in academic careers (McCarthy & Dragouni 2021; Tourish & Willmott 2015). This is no less true in the Information Systems (IS) discipline, where publications in reputable journals shape decisions in hiring, promotion, and tenure (Dennis et al. 2006; Lowry et al. 2013). While career motives may extrinsically motivate IS researchers, many are equally intrinsically motivated to publish, for instance, because they want to share their knowledge, claim ownership of their ideas, and contribute to a discourse they care about. Whether extrinsically or intrinsically motivated, it is safe to say that IS researchers, especially early career researchers, want to publish in reputable journals.

However, the journey to publication is often arduous due to high competition, low acceptance rates, and the seemingly unpredictable outcomes of the review process. While numerous editorials provide guidance on how to have a manuscript accepted for publication in IS (Baird 2021; Te'eni et al. 2015; Young et al. 2021) and management (Arino et al. 2016; Grodal et al. 2021; Pratt 2009), far fewer address the other side of the publication coin: avoiding common mistakes that can lead to rejection.

Inspired by the concept of *inversion*—a mental model that focuses on avoiding undesirable outcomes (Munger 2008)—we discuss six pitfalls that often result in paper rejection, and offer practical advice on how to steer clear of them. Inversion was coined in 1829 by the German mathematician Jacobi, who said inversion was his key to solving difficult problems. Inversion was popularized by American investors Warren Buffett and Charlie Munger in their slogan 'all I want to know is where I'm going to die, so I'll never go there', reflecting an investment strategy that focuses on avoiding losses, rather than chasing gains (Munger 2008). This sentiment is embodied in the book 'Thinking, Fast and Slow', in which Daniel Kahneman (2011) suggests that poor decisions can be avoided through a 'PreMortem' – telling the fictional story of our endeavor's destruction in advance, focusing on how the disaster unfolded, how key failures compounded, and how we were complicit in creating the conditions we did not want.

In this spirit, we join a nascent conversation among editors who have begun outlining the most common reasons for desk-rejection at IS journals (Dwivedi et al. 2022) and rejection of theory papers at management journals (Campbell & Aguilera 2022) by discussing common pitfalls that can lead to rejection of any kind of paper (beyond theory papers) at any stage of the peer-review process (beyond the desk-screening stage). By drawing on our experiences as authors, editors, and reviewers, as well as anecdotal evidence from colleagues, we aim to help researchers, particularly early career researchers, to better navigate the peer-review process and reduce their chances of publication failure. Our six actionable strategies for avoiding paper rejection are as follows. Table 1 sums them up.

When preparing a paper, we recommend you

1. **Abstain from methodological promiscuity:** Stay true to appropriate research methodologies and avoid combining epistemologically incompatible approaches without a clear rationale.
2. **Never overclaim (but try not to underclaim either):** Clearly articulate your paper's contribution, striking a balance between pomposity and false modesty.

When submitting a paper, it is a good idea to

3. **Steer clear of bootlicking:** Approach the submission process professionally, ethically, and candidly, without attempting to curry favor with editors or reviewers.
4. **Avoid sloppiness:** Make sure your manuscript is carefully prepared, error-free, and follows the journal's formatting guidelines.

After receiving the reviews, you should

5. **Forego belligerence:** Be respectful and open to feedback, addressing reviewer comments constructively and staying well clear of a confrontational or presumptuous stance.
6. **Stop flogging a dead horse:** Recognize when it is time to let go and move on from a failing paper, project, or team.

Although our experience is primarily with IS journals, we know our advice is broadly applicable across disciplines, as we have a wealth of experience getting papers rejected at many reputable outlets in fields such as organizational behavior, strategic management, supply chain management, software engineering, and more. By focusing on avoiding these pitfalls, early career researchers can improve their chances of

successfully navigating the peer-review process and ensure that their valuable contributions to knowledge appear in the journals they deserve.

Table 1. Six Inversion Strategies for Avoiding Rejection in Academic Publishing

Issue	Importance	Inversion Strategy
Methodological promiscuity	Maintaining methodological consistency helps to strengthen the foundation of your research and avoid rejection due to shaky foundations or incompatible methodologies.	To prevent methodological promiscuity in research, avoid unnecessary mixing and matching of methodologies, understand compatibility before combining methods, use a single, well-defined methodology for a strong research foundation, clearly describe methods, use visual aids, discuss results logically, and provide context and explanation by linking to research question and literature.
Overclaiming	It is crucial to present clear, modest claims in academic publishing. Overclaiming contributions can result in rejection due to disappointment in the actual impact or lack of a convincing argument.	To improve precision in writing, ensure the research question is convincingly answered, request frank feedback prior to submission, strike a balance between pomposity and false modesty, link the contribution to relevant discourse, conduct a thorough literature review, summarize findings, discuss implications, acknowledge limitations, and offer recommendations.
Bootlicking	Maintaining the integrity of the publication process is critical for the credibility of the journal and the authors involved. Actions that undermine integrity can damage relationships, result in negative consequences for authors, and compromise the reputation of the journal.	To maintain integrity in the submission process, avoid implying expectations of favorable treatment, be honest when responding to negative reviewer feedback, engage with the journal's conversation in referencing, improve conference papers to meet journal standards, and focus on the value of research.
Sloppiness	Avoiding carelessness in submissions demonstrates a commitment to quality and adherence to professional standards. Although limitations in a paper may be forgiven if properly acknowledged, carelessness can leave a lasting negative impression on editors and reviewers.	To avoid carelessness, follow formatting requirements, proofread thoroughly, write a concise cover letter, address previous reviewer comments, update journal name, provide rationale for reviewer nominations, ensure accuracy of contact details, declare previous related submissions, reach out to EiC, and express commitment to improving the paper.
Belligerence	In the peer-review process, it is crucial to maintain professionalism and avoid unnecessary confrontations. Engaging in quarrelsome behavior can lead to a negative outcome for your manuscript and damage your reputation in the academic community.	To maintain a professional demeanor during the review process, nurture patience by recognizing the challenge of the process, avoiding impulsive reactions to negative feedback, showing gratitude and modesty in response letters, and providing a clear point-by-point response letter with explanations and references to changes made in the manuscript.
Flogging a dead horse	Knowing when to move on from a failing paper is crucial to maintaining productivity and focusing on more promising projects. Persisting with a paper that is unlikely to be published wastes the time and energy of authors, reviewers, and editors and contributes to clogged submission backlogs.	To avoid investing excessive time in a failing paper, consider the opportunity cost, focus on promising projects, satisfice with conference papers, or book chapters if journal potential is limited, re-evaluate novelty, data collection, and team dynamics, recognize defeat, and learn from rejection to improve future work.

2 Abstain from Methodological Promiscuity

2.1 The Issue

Combining incompatible methodologies in a study can undermine the credibility of the research and lead to confounded knowledge claims. Hence, *methodological promiscuity* – combining epistemologically incommensurable research approaches in an attempt to validate the findings – strongly attracts criticism from the methodological purists among reviewers and readers. Chief examples include citing positivist case study methods papers alongside interpretive ones in a qualitative study (for a classic introduction, see Orlikowski & Baroudi 1991), or being oblivious to the difference between Glaserian and Straussian approaches in a grounded theory study (see Seidel & Urquhart 2013 for a discussion). Early in our careers, we often crossed these boundaries and the reviewers vigorously pointed out their perceived incompatibility of these approaches, every single time. In a memorable anecdote, the SE at an IS journal wrote:

> *"I was not aware of this schism in the church of Grounded Theory. As always, when you see a fight between two rival groups, it is better to avoid it. I suggest you drop the claim of using GTM. Just say you did a qualitative study."*

2.2 The Importance of Methodological Consistency

Maintaining methodological consistency helps to strengthen the foundation of your research and avoid rejection due to shaky foundations or incompatible methodologies. In all fairness, methodological promiscuity may well signal obliviousness to the combination of incommensurable epistemological positions. In such cases, rejection might well be justified, particularly if it places the contribution on shaky foundations.

2.3 Strategies for Abstaining from Methodological Promiscuity

While we know that mixed methods research seems to be a catchword of the day, we have learned to avoid unnecessary mixing and matching of methodologies because reviewers generally do not appreciate methodological promiscuity and will likely respond with sharp criticism. We once received a review package, where each reviewer complained about the under-reporting of a different method in our three-study paper. In evaluating the studies, reviewers focused on each method individually, overlooking the meta-inferences drawn across studies. In any event, if we had addressed all their comments, the paper would have ballooned. In retrospect, we are glad the paper was rejected, because we could see no good way to address the demands of each reviewer and still conform to the journal's length requirements.

We acknowledge that warning of the dangers of mixed methods is unpopular. Particularly because we agree with the intuition that mixed methods approaches offer opportunities for richer insight into complex problems. But we did not make the rules of peer-review, and after rejection of several mixed method papers, we strongly recommend early career authors step back and wait for a consensus to emerge on what should and should not be reported in mixed method papers. After all, very few (if any) papers ever get accepted for creative combinations of methods, but a lot of otherwise valuable papers get rejected for it. In the spirit of inversion, methodological promiscuity can be seen as a minefield on an unnecessary battleground and should thus be avoided.

To prevent methodological promiscuity in your research, consider the following:

- Avoid unnecessary mixing and matching of methodologies, as it may provoke negative reactions from reviewers. Citing positivist and interpretive case study approaches in one paper usually does not sit well with reviewers. Neither does mixing Glaserian and Straussian grounded theory methods.
- Understand the compatibility of various methods before combining them in your study.
- Focus on using a single, well-defined methodology to ensure a strong and coherent research foundation.
- Clearly describe the methods, use visual aids, discuss the results in a logical order, and provide sufficient context and explanation by relating them to the research question and existing literature.

3 Never Overclaim (But Try Not to Underclaim Either)

3.1 The Issue

As early career scholars, we tended to overestimate the value of using grandiose language, assumed that the importance of our research is self-evident, and demonstrated a tendency to overstate contributions, which may lead reviewers to question your research and its value. As a result, we received a remarkably consistent litany of comments from reviewers, who said our work is not interesting, not surprising, not clear for whom it is valuable, does not advance the field, or, even worse, not coherent. While we sometimes still receive these comments, we receive them less now that we have learned to make more modest claims of contribution. We now understand the iron law of peer-review: never overclaim.

3.2 The Peril of Overclaiming

Overclaiming – overstating or exaggerating the significance or novelty of the knowledge contribution – will almost certainly result in rejection due to disappointment in the actual impact or lack of a convincing argument. Tall poppy syndrome, a common expression in Australia and New Zealand, refers to the widespread tendency to question the success of very visible people. It appears to be rampant in academia. Overclaiming will almost certainly trigger it in reviewers and prompt them to exercise the need to chop down your tall poppy. A good example of this is reviewers questioning the contribution of the paper. Typically, this means that the paper has raised enough interest to be read, but has failed to convince reviewers after being read, usually because the contribution disappoints (in which case rejection is justified), or because it has not been articulated in a manner to the reviewer's satisfaction (in which case rejection is not entirely unjustified but at the very least unfortunate), or because the contribution overstates the actual results (in which case, the rejection results from perceived flaws in the method and is justified).

A common shortcut that reviewers will typically use to suggest an exaggerated contribution is to find holes in the answer to the research question. This is a particular vulnerability for qualitative papers, which tend to raise broader research questions than quantitative ones. One author recently had a paper rejected that essentially asked "how can we do things differently?", with the intent to signal that the phenomenon needs a fundamental rethink and that the paper will offer a first step. The reviewers pointed out that the research question is impossible to answer, because there are infinite ways to do things differently. In this case, bounding our question's scope to focus on a narrower set of issues and set prescriptions, and then alluding to opportunities for broader future research might have been a more effective publication strategy. However, it is also a challenge for quantitative papers, where overstating contributions based on less than perfect evidence, shakes the confidence of the review panel in your results. For example, we sometimes see authors attempt to say that a p-value of .1 on a one-tailed test is significant. While one may argue about the utility of p-values, one should be confident that if you draw inferences from a .1 significance level, you will be punished by a review panel.

The inverse, *underclaiming* – downplaying or understating the significance or novelty of the knowledge contribution – should also be avoided. Though it is less dangerous than overclaiming, it takes a generous, benevolent, and cheerful reviewer panel to lift up your underclaimed contribution. While we are grateful to have benefited from such reviewer panels at IS journals, we also often caught reviewers on the wrong foot. Hence, claim your contribution clearly and concisely, but neither overclaim nor underclaim it.

3.3 Strategies for Finding the Middle Between Pomposity and False Modesty

In academic publishing, a vigorously fulfilled modest claim almost certainly beats an unfulfilled bold claim. So, before submission, check if the research question is convincingly answered and if any limitations are sufficiently addressed. Loose ends, such as unnecessary lines of argument, should be cut out to minimize potential points of attack. Also, take care in reading the motivation and the discussion, to make sure they align. Read these important sections independently of the rest of the paper, to make sure that the promised contributions do not get lost in the often long and wordy in-between of the literature review, hypotheses, and research method.

We have found some phrases that tend to trigger reviewers to take a "whack at the tall poppies." One is to claim that "no prior research has done" what you do. Another is to style your work as novel or groundbreaking. From experience, we can tell you these phrases can provoke snappy reviewer comments, such as "maybe that's because this research is not worth doing". Or, more frequently, the reviewer will know of an obscure paper that, while not the same, is close enough for them to argue that

your "breakthrough idea" is not so new after all. In all honesty, we have experienced several times that our presumably groundbreaking ideas were not so new after all. While painful at first, this is often the moment when you realize how to make a more modest contribution.

It can be hard to strike the sweet spot between pomposity and false modestly. Anecdotally, it can be detrimental to state the main claims of the paper in the motivation, or to present important theoretical insights obtained during the study as part of the literature review – this may lead reviewers to think that your ideas come from existing literature and are thus not novel. Conversely, presenting theoretical insights as novel when they could be derived from existing literature can prompt reviewers to reject papers, too. The trick is to firmly root the contribution in a related and relevant discourse, and to then go one step beyond what is already known, with neither exaggeration nor false modesty. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1851) encapsulates this sentiment in his Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life: "With people of limited ability modesty is merely honesty. But with those who possess great talent it is hypocrisy."

A helpful way to safeguard against setting yourself up as a tall poppy, that is offering a disappointing contribution, is to request candid feedback from cheeky colleagues who are not invested in the work before submission. We have colleagues who have proven expert at pointing out the insufficiency or lack of contribution in our own work. We have grown to value their comments because they make our contributions sharper and more realistic.

Key ways we have learned to find a middle way between pomposity and false modesty, through hundreds of encounters with reviewers and cheeky colleagues, include:

- Ensure the research question is convincingly answered and any limitations are addressed.
- Request cheeky comments from friendly-but-frank colleagues before submission to identify areas for improvement.
- Strike a balance between understatement and overstatement and root the contribution in related and relevant discourse.
- The literature review should involve a comprehensive search for relevant studies, organizing them thematically, evaluating them critically, and linking them to the research question or hypothesis to identify gaps in knowledge and opportunities for further research.
- Acknowledge a strong set of limitations, suggesting a need for future work, that responds to problems in your own work.
- Summarize the main findings, discuss their implications for theory and practice, acknowledge the study's limitations, and offer specific recommendations for how stakeholders can resolve the issues raised in the practical motivation of the paper.

4 Steer Clear of Bootlicking

4.1 The Issue

Sometimes, early career scholars attempt to curry favor with senior editors (SE) or associate editors (AE) through unsolicited contact, excessive politeness, or gratuitous citations, which can often backfire. Where the early career scholar may think this will result in winning the senior scholars' favor, it can often evoke feelings of discomfort, unease or even antipathy. Unless these actions are authentic, and senior scholars often have strong disingenuity detectors, they can lead to rejection or create discomfort.

As rookies, we thought it was a good idea to alert an SE that we were submitting a paper and of our confidence in their ability to manage our work. To do so, we would send them a paper and ask for feedback, because we knew that some senior faculty enjoyed this benefit. In most cases, the SE did not answer or said that we should ask the EiC. In some cases, the SE said we could nominate them, but stressed that they could not promise anything (the paper was then assigned to a different SE). Contacting an SE prior to submission turned out to be either useless or counterproductive, because it slowed down our progress or elicited superficial feedback.

Looking back, we now understand that sending unsolicited papers to SEs that we did not know, was not a very good idea. We did not understand that many SEs were extremely busy and managing many papers. Rather than currying favor, we were adding to the burden of their volunteer work. Moreover, when we

reviewed the feedback, if any was offered, it was clear that the SE had not done more than skim the manuscript, because they were clearly swamped with papers.

Note, that if you have a personal relationship with an SE, that might be a different matter. If you solicit feedback, they will give you an honest assessment of their availability. Generally speaking, you should be prepared for a long wait for feedback and know that it is possible the SE will disqualify themselves from handling your work. Truthfully, you are better served by asking a peer or someone who is not serving as a SE for feedback if you want timely comments on your work.

Moreover, as authors and editors, we have come to know that being overly polite or effusive about comments, does not expedite publication. As authors, we are guilty of this crime ten times over, offering a "thank you, you are right, here is why you are right", and then explaining what we did in the paper. As editors, while we appreciate the explanation, we much prefer a simple thank you and explanation for the changes in the paper. The *bootlicking* – attempting to secure favorable treatment or decisions regarding the paper through gratuitous politeness or excessive flattery toward the editor or reviewers – makes it harder to discern what the authors have done to address the concern. In fact, we suspect, based on our conversations, that when authors are overly effusive about the quality of feedback, editors and reviewers lose interest in the paper. Hence, if you bootlick, you create risk that an editor may not be as attentive reading your response, because their minds wander when they suspect you are not genuine.

Furthermore, we have sometimes gratuitously cited papers of people we suspected would be our editors or reviewers, or from the journal to give the impression that the submission ties in with its conversation. When doing so, we have sometimes slipped in references, which were often tangential, to our work. Rarely has this practice ended well. Most often, we have noticed that reviewers will comment on the citation and elaborate on why it is not appropriate for the research context or is not what the paper intended. In such circumstances, rather than winning favor with a potential reader, gratuitous citation undermined the credibility of our work.

Finally, not as authors, but as editors and reviewers, we have occasionally had papers sent to us by authors who either ask us to write a pre-submission review or who relay they will nominate us as reviewers for the manuscript at a journal. In one case, we had a senior scholar send out a list of working papers, as a "heads-up" about what they were working on. Where once this appears to have been a common practice, or so the sending author has told us, in our view this is an ethical breach. It violates the spirit of double-blind review, because we should not be aware of who writes the papers that are under review. As a result, when solicited to review the paper by a journal, we routinely turn the request down. So, by "priming the pump" with reviewers, authors can lose access to reviewers who might have been sympathetic to their work. Self-citation also tends not to sit well with editors and reviewers, especially if done in a way that makes identification of authors trivial. Attempting to squeeze in a lot of self-citations after acceptance, to bolster one's citation count, can also raise the eyebrows of editors and result in another round of revision.

4.2 The Importance of Candor and Integrity

Maintaining the integrity of the publication process is critical for the credibility of authors and of journals. The actions that we described not only undermine an authors' reputation but also can compromise the reputation of the journal.

Needless to say, reputable journal editors take the integrity of the publication process very seriously, so attempting to breach integrity at any stage almost certainly leads to rejection. While it is obvious that one should not bribe an editor or author, we often hear rumors of collusion – where authors a) agree not to work together, b) inform each other that they are submitting a paper, and c) provide favorable reviews to each other in different outlets. While technically, there is not a violation of conflict-of-interest policies, because the colluders have not coauthored a paper, there has certainly been ethical misconduct, as the collusion has violated the principle of double-blind review as well as resulted in more favorable treatment of a paper. However, we are not aware of any cases of prosecution of such integrity breaches at reputable IS journals, so we assume it happens rarely, if at all. We hope that even proposing such actions are more likely to lead to termination of friendship than to manuscript acceptance.

For early career authors, it is important to understand that word of an integrity breach, apparent or actual, will spread quickly, drastically decreasing the chances of future submissions securing a revision or publication not only at the journal where it occurred, but at other journals as well. In the worst case, especially in instances such as hidden conflicts of interest or faked data, not only the paper under

consideration will get rejected, but it may also trigger an inquiry into already published papers, which could also lead to informing supervisors and/or deans of the case. We are aware of rumors of this happening, but we have yet to see direct evidence of it occurring. In other words, integrity breaches are like playing Russian roulette – no matter how often the outcome is 'lucky', the consequences of an 'unlucky' outcome are simply not worth the risk. Besides, it feels awful.

Sometimes, there can be room for debate on whether or not a given action constitutes an integrity breach, because there is variation of moral codes within and across communities. For instance, whereas outright plagiarism of somebody else's entire paper is clearly an integrity breach, so-called self-plagiarism is debatable, particularly in terms of converting conference to journal papers without change, which the AIS Policy on Conference and Journal Publication[1] clearly permits – though not all members of the AIS community endorse it.

Still, even the impression of moral ambiguity can unfavorably influence an editor's or reviewer's assessment of a paper. In the face of moral ambiguity, it is safer for editors and reviewers to avoid Type II errors (rejecting an apparently fishy paper that turned out to be solid) than to commit Type I errors (accepting an apparently solid paper that turned out to be fishy). Hence, steer clear of moral ambiguity.

4.3 Strategies for Being Politely Candid

We recognize that asking an SE about their availability and willingness to handle a manuscript prior to submission is sometimes encouraged (Campbell & Aguilera 2022), but note that this does not imply it is always appreciated, depending on the nature and circumstances of the request (Sarker et al. 2015). For example, inquiring about availability is generally not a problem, or even asking if they will read an abstract to ensure topical fit; however, asking a senior editor for a friendly review and then requesting them, is not appropriate. Even if you ask about availability and fit, intending it as a as a polite gesture or to save the editor time (for instance, asking special issue editors about potential fit with the special issue), be careful not to raise any expectations of favorable treatment, even implicitly. Especially if the SE knows you personally, such a request might raise discomfort and trigger a negative response.

Rather than offering florid praise to reviewers, we believe taking a measured, even candid, tone with reviewers to be effective. As noted, keep responses to the reviewers polite and direct. If you disagree with a reviewer, it is better to acknowledge their point and explain why you are unable to respond to their request. In a particularly tedious episode, we have been through three revisions at an IS journal where the reviewers insisted that we should do something we thought made no sense. Our response in each round was essentially "great feedback, but here is a different thing we did". The paper was eventually rejected because the editor said we kept responding unsatisfactorily to the reviewers. In retrospect, it would have been better to tell them politely why we refused to implement their suggestion and to directly explain our approach.

Unsolicited gratuitous citations to a journal, a potential reviewer, or a requested editor can be a slippery slope. If one must cite the journal or editor (which, sadly, some journal editors will insist you do), a good way to do it is to carefully tie in with the intellectual conversation taking place in the pages of the journal. Then it is like going to a dinner party and listening closely to what people are talking about before sharing our views. A bad way to do it is to gratuitously squeeze in citations that are only tangentially tied to the paper, because editors and reviewers (who might be authors of the cited works) will easily tell if the literature has been engaged with superficially.

Finally, as noted above, you should take all possible steps to preserve the anonymity of your work. We detailed issues tied to altering a reviewer of your work. We also want to note that submitting a relatively unchanged conference paper is functionally a similar act. In our experience, this usually does not sit well with editors and reviewers. So, even if the journal's policy allows it, put in some effort to improve the paper after a conference.

To be politely candid, consider the following:

- While in some cases it may be appropriate to ask a Senior Editor (SE) about their availability or willingness to handle a manuscript, be cautious not to imply expectations of favorable treatment.

[1] https://aisnet.org/general/custom.asp?page=PoliciesGuidelines

- Be honest and frank when responding to negative reviewer feedback. If you disagree with a reviewer's suggestion, politely explain your rationale. It is better to get rejected early for refusing to implement changes you do not support. In our experience, feigned compliance only leads to eventual rejection several rounds of revision down the line. Worse, it could lead to publishing work that you are not proud of.
- Engage with the conversation happening in the journal when referencing the journal and its editors. Avoid superficial citations intended solely to impress editors and reviewers.
- Do not notify potential reviewers of your work before or after it undergoes peer review.
- Even if a journal's policy permits submitting an unchanged conference paper, invest time in improving the paper after its presentation to ensure it meets the journal's standards.
- Always approach the publication process with integrity and focus on the value of your research. We find it helpful to imagine what our descendants would say about our publications.

5 Avoid Sloppiness

5.1 The Issue

Manuscripts that are carelessly prepared are easy to reject. *Sloppiness* – carelessly preparing your manuscript without eradicating errors, inconsistencies, or poorly-supported conclusions – can not only jeopardize the publication prospects of a particular paper, but can also negatively affect your long-term academic career.

Repeatedly on initial submission, more often after a rejection, we failed to format our manuscripts to conform to journal guidelines. We resubmitted rejected papers elsewhere without addressing the reviewer comments, updating the tables and figures, or without fixing basic grammatical issues. In one particularly embarrassing episode, we even failed to update the name of the journal that previously rejected our paper in the cover letter! These errors resulted in swift rejections, as the lack of attention to detail, and failure to address glaring problems, signaled to reviewers that we had not taken care to prepare a sound manuscript or to tailor it to the journal's audience. We know this is not just an error we make, because as editors and reviewers, we often receive manuscripts that are poorly prepared, even at top journals.

Carelessness issues can extend far beyond sloppy formatting and writing. As editors and reviewers, we often frown when we see tables and figures not properly explained in the text. Claiming novelty while neglecting relevant recent research can also give an impression of carelessness. If you claim to have conducted a "systematic" literature review – setting aside that this term is overused in IS, as Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2015) point out – of an emerging phenomenon like blockchain, AI, or crowdsourcing and you stopped collecting papers three years ago, you will raise the editors' and reviewers' eyebrows. Worse, if a quick literature search by the reviewer reveals that several "systematic" literature reviews' have already been published on a very similar topic recently, without being acknowledged, your paper will almost certainly get rejected or even desk-rejected. Those are not hypothetical scenarios – we review or edit such papers far more often than one might expect.

A desk-rejection means that a paper gets rejected without being sent out for peer review. It usually means that the Editor-in-Chief has skimmed the paper and, perhaps after brief consultation with a Senior Editor, is not convinced that it is of sufficient quality or interest to readers to earn a spot in their journal's pages or even warrant scarce reviewer time. Like any rejection, a desk-rejection is painful, but it saves everyone a lot of time and energy that would otherwise have gone into a likely futile and elongated review process.

Conversely, avoiding a desk-rejection is good news, because sending out a paper for review signals that the editor believes there is potential in the paper to end up published. In fact, any decision that is not a definite rejection is a small win worth celebrating on its own. We know of eminent scholars in our field whose declared publishing strategy is 'earning a revision'. Statistically, the chances of rejection decrease significantly with every round of revision.

5.2 The Importance of Avoiding Sloppiness

Avoiding sloppiness in submissions demonstrates a commitment to quality and adherence to professional standards. Although limitations of research may be forgiven if properly acknowledged, sloppiness in how

the manuscript is crafted leaves a lasting negative impression on editors and reviewers, such that it undermines their confidence that you can successfully revise a paper.

While we acknowledge that we all care about our research, otherwise we would not have written a paper, the pressure to publish more and more papers may result in you to focus more on 'scoring points', rather than crafting high-quality, high-impact research (Johnston and Riemer 2014). The problem with such a focus is that, at best, it sucks the joy out of research. For example, it is easy to get fatigued by the sheer number of papers we are writing, and to neglect to carefully consider how we report our results. Once, we failed to ensure that the numbers in the text and the tables were consistent, reporting the updated analysis in the text and the first-round results in the tables. While fixable, our review panel was not pleased.

At worst, it leads us to do stupid things that can not only damage our prospects of publishing a particular paper in the short term, but also destroy our prospects of building a meaningful academic career in the long term. For example, we once failed to carefully review the uploaded documents in the peer review system and overlooked the fact that we had failed to provide the response to the senior editor, which resulted in a stern inquiry as to why we had not addressed their concerns. Seasoned academics can smell such carelessness from miles away. They might forgive limitations of the paper, especially if these are properly acknowledged, but they will not forgive carelessness in how you respond to reasonable requests.

5.3 Strategies for Avoiding Sloppiness

Journals have different formatting requirements, ranging from specific formatting guidelines (such as the JAIS Style Guide[2]) to complete freedom (such as Elsevier's Your Paper, Your Way[3] policy), and submission processes, with some being very unforgiving on meeting deadlines and others viewing due dates as more permeable. Ignoring the given requirements or not knowing the submission process is an obvious way to appear sloppy and earn a rejection, and we have done it more often than we like to acknowledge. While many journals have an initial admin processing stage, at which a submission might be returned for correction of formatting errors, not all journals will offer an option of resubmission. Beyond simple omissions in formatting, small errors in how you report the method, consistent errors in grammar/spelling, or sloppy referencing can all raise suspicion about the overall quality of the submission, so take the time to carefully proofread your paper. Given the high volumes of submission and limited capacity of editors and reviewers (Sarker et al. 2015), sloppiness can become the low hanging fruit for desk-rejecting submissions, particularly for journals seeking to improve their review cycle times and lower their acceptance rates.

To avoid rejection due to sloppiness, consider the following steps:

- First, always follow the specific formatting requirements of the journal to which you are submitting. Thoroughly proofread your manuscript, checking for errors in reasoning, grammar, spelling, and referencing. We find it helpful to print out the manuscript and read it out aloud (to ourselves or to a co-author, if at hand) while walking around. Using this method, we always find errors in our writing, no matter how ready we thought the manuscript was. This is especially effective if you are a non-native English speaker reading to a native speaker.
- Second, take the time to craft a well-written and concise cover letter that affirms the editor's confidence in your submission and confirms your commitment to improving the paper through revision.
    - If submitting a rejected paper to a fresh journal, take time to address any comments from previous reviewer panels. Note, you may disagree with reviewer comments, in such cases address at least some of the comments, especially the comments on quality issues. This is important, because it is possible that the same reviewers may evaluate your submission at the new journal. Do not forget to update the name of the journal you are submitting to.
    - If reviewer nominations are allowed, provide a brief rationale for each nomination, highlighting their expertise in theory, method, or phenomenon relevant to your paper. Ensure the accuracy of names and contact details for editors and reviewers in your submission materials.

[2] https://aisel.aisnet.org/jais/style_for_authors.pdf
[3] https://www.elsevier.com/authors/tools-and-resources/your-paper-your-way

- If required by the journal, include a declaration of any previous related submissions, along with a summary of how the current submission addresses previous reviewers' concerns.
- Consider reaching out to the Editor-in-Chief (EiC) to assess whether your paper might be a good fit for the journal, focusing on attributes such as contribution, method, rigor/relevance, timeliness, and topicality.
- Conclude your cover letter by expressing your commitment to improving the paper with the guidance of reviewers, acknowledging that a constructive revision is the best possible outcome.

- Third, after you upload submission files, carefully review all documents to ensure that you have submitted each document in the right place. If a source file is requested, remove any identifying meta data. Often the letter to the editor is a separate document from the response to the reviewers, and main documents and appendices should be uploaded as separate documents. Before clicking "submit", carefully review HTML and PDF versions of the paper. We find it useful to take a day between uploading and clicking submit, because we often find small errors in our work after submission.

6 Forego Belligerence

6.1 The Issue

As authors, reacting impatiently or combatively to feedback or handling of the review process can hinder your papers' progress and damage relationships. Examples include emailing editors to speed up the process, adopting a lecturing tone, and complaining about reviewers on social media or in confidential comments to the editor. Such *belligerence* – adopting a confrontational or presumptuous stance towards the editor or reviewers, dismissing or arguing about their feedback, rather than respectfully considering and addressing their concerns – only signals that you are immature and oblivious to the rules of peer-review.

We have made these mistakes. In our experience, emails asking for speed after less than six months under review invariably result in an unhappy editor. While not always resulting in a negative decision, it often does. When responding to a reviewer question, we once witnessed an author team take 30 pages to deliver an excoriating lecture about the perceived inferiority of the associate editor's opinion. The entire review panel, senior editor, associate editor, and reviewers swiftly rejected the paper. In one notable case, after receiving a rejection, one author posted a picture critiquing the peer review process at a special issue. To that author's surprise, the editor of a different special issue chimed into their social media feed and shared with the world that their paper had been rejected at his special issue. In this case, poking fun at one review process, created a perception that the author was quarrelsome in the mind of another special issue's editor – creating even more complications. In another case, one author spent an hour listening to a person rant about Reviewer 2, biting their tongue, because that author was Reviewer 2. Our point here is not to relay stories of trauma. Quarreling with review panels rarely comes to a positive outcome – no matter whether your paper is granted a revision or rejected or whether you do it in the private correspondence with the reviewers or in a more public forum such as social media or the conference bar. If you must blow off some steam, do so in trusted company and in a face-saving way, but not in a high school drama fashion.

6.2 The Importance of Maintaining Professionalism

In the peer-review process, it is crucial to maintain professionalism and avoid unnecessary confrontations.

Professionalism is maintained through being polite and writing in clear language. Briefly acknowledging receipt of the review package to the SE is not a must, but it is a polite gesture that does not hurt. Sometimes, SE's will encourage you to share your revision plans with them. We find it helpful to then briefly outline how we will address the key issues in the review package and whether we can commit to resubmitting the revision on time. Be warned that the SE may then recast the review package in a more critical light than you initially assumed, or even ask you to do additional revisions. As mentioned, you should also avoid attempting to curry the SE's favor, for instance, by seeking their approval of your revision strategy (see Rai 2019). One should never leave ambiguity in turns of phrase used to engage with reviewers. Keep the word choices clear, unequivocal, and even when you disagree, take care to not

be dismissive of a reviewer's point. Engaging in quarrelsome behavior or using ambiguous language can lead to a negative outcome for your manuscript and damage your reputation in the academic community.

We recognize that this can be challenging, because from an author's perspective, the peer-review process often feels like an uphill battle. Not only are the statistical odds stacked against us – most reputable journals publish between one in four and one in twenty submissions – and we know from our experience that appeals of editorial decisions, even when there is evidence the editor made a mistake, are rarely greeted with a "you're are right, we made a mistake." Even assuming the editor is sympathetic to the paper, it is highly unlikely that an EiC will overrule an SE, an AE or a reviewer after a decision has been issued, because they are vested in maintaining the authority of the review panel.

So what to do? As in any uphill battle, the winning strategy in such a situation is for authors to avoid any unnecessary confrontation by staying well clear of arguing with reviewers. Where confrontation is unavoidable, authors should pick their battles carefully and concentrate their forces on diplomatically standing their ground while avoiding risky fights in public or private where there is little to gain and lots to lose. At the end of the day, no matter whether you, as an author, are right, the final decision rests with the journal editor – and there is no one to appeal to beyond the EiC.

6.3 Strategies for Nurturing Patience

Editors generally expect authors to address any valid concerns the reviewers raise, but helpful strategies for coping with negative reviewer feedback are not often discussed, leading less experienced authors to guess at what to do. We offer three iron rules for avoiding quarreling and demonstrating patience when crafting a revision:

Rule #1: Do not complain in public.
Rule #2: Do what the editor expects.
Rule #3: Do not do what the editor does not expect.

Ranting about the proverbially ignorant and notorious 'Reviewer 2' on social media has become a phenomenon of its own. Admittedly, portraying reviewers as incapable of appreciating our genius work can provide some short-term entertainment and relief from the psychological pain of getting our dearest ideas torn apart. Some of the best memes that we have ever seen (and reposted) rant about Reviewer 2.

However, such coping strategies can be unhelpful in the long term, particularly when a) executed immediately after a rejection and b) focused on a particular reviewer's comment. Why? Because in an era where authors and reviewers are likely connected (hopefully without knowing so during peer review), it is not hard to connect the dots. Certainly, such rants are out of place in any formal communication with the review panel, particularly in response letters. If the editor or reviewer spots the rant, it will not be appreciated and only provoke antagonism. As noted above, sometimes the wrong editor will spot the rant. In any of these circumstances, it can spell the end for your work in the next round of review or even at the next journal.

It is also worth noting that many senior scholars, who do not "get" that social media is, well, social, will not appreciate the humor of your posts. If sufficiently enraged, they will publicly or privately chastise you for not keeping a stiff upper lip in the face of the abuse from Reviewer 2. They will tell you that, given the reviewers volunteered to help improve the manuscript, you should at least try to show genuine gratitude. In short, they will brand you as immature, which can have deleterious consequences for your career. From experience: You do not want to receive that text from a mentor saying "we need to talk!"

So, if you must, carefully separate your online and offline complaints from receipt of the review, carefully anonymize which journal rejected your work, and do not directly quote the review. We recognize that for many, particularly early career scholars who came of age in an era of social media, online conversations are considered a safe space to express concerns about offline challenges, but we urge caution, because many senior scholars lack a rich understanding of how and why you use social media.

Once you are through the pain of rejection, or worse, receiving an impossible revision, it helps to take a step back, assess, and work through any resentment before addressing the reviews. It is a natural impulse to take negative reviewer feedback as a criticism of one's entire scholarship or even personality at first – after all, we are usually deeply invested into our ideas. We have swallowed this bitter pill numerous times, receiving extremely tough first round feedback and being unable to work for days. To overcome this

bitterness, you need to develop a sense of self, that is separate from the paper, because most often the reviewer is truly speaking to the words you submitted and not to who you are.

With time and experience, we have developed a simple strategy for coping with, and addressing, tough feedback from reviewers: We narrow any negative comment to the smallest possible scope. We then think about what triggered the comment and identify actionable steps to address it. For example, we once received the feedback that our experiment lacked external validity. Rather than stew over the injustice of the statement, because it is a known issue of experiments that they lack external validity, we set out to conduct an applicability check to show the study had some real-world value. In this case, rather than feeling like we were being told our work was terrible, we repositioned the feedback to motivate us to think about how to address the question of real-world implications. The paper was eventually accepted, after much effort, at a pretty good journal. With this approach, it is almost always possible to re-interpret nearly all negative comments as a helpful suggestion to improve our work.

It also helps calm the mind to imagine reviewers as benevolent per default, just struggling sometimes to communicate optimally. Turning the other cheek and admitting the flaws in one's work can go a long way in a review response letter or a limitations section. When you recognize that many nasty reviewer comments result from a failure to communicate, by you or the reviewer, and that you must find a way to communicate optimally, addressing reviewer concerns becomes much simpler.

Pragmatically, authors should make it as easy as possible for reviewers to see how a revision addresses their concerns. It is good practice (and usually required) to provide a point-by-point response letter. In our experience, it is a good idea to respond to every reviewer comment individually, even to duplicate ones, by providing a brief summary of what changed as well as the page number(s) and/or a snippet of the changed paragraph(s). Keep it simple. Do not force reviewers to spend much time searching for the changes they requested. When you do so, you leave room open for them to imagine more "improvements" of your work.

Of course, peer-review is more than just a mere exercise in meditation on problems and resolving communication gaps, one must also provide a holistic explanation for why your work merits publication. In our experience, many authors fail to craft a good summary of changes in their work. Some authors even submit just one or two sentence letters to the senior editor. In our experience, an elegant review response letter can help to avoid unnecessary confrontation, but it cannot distract reviewers from actual shortcomings of the submission. In the spirit of inversion, when writing that letter, imagine you are the reviewer asking themselves two questions about a manuscript: 1) do I already know this? 2) can I reject it on legitimate grounds? A good response letter will evoke "no" to each question.

To maintain professionalism and forego belligerence in the review process, consider the following:

- Recognize that the review process can be challenging and requires patience and persistence. It often feels wasteful, unproductive, and futile. That will all look different once you crossed the valley of tears and reached the peak of publication.
- Avoid reacting impulsively to negative feedback. Take a step back, assess, and work through any resentment before responding.
- Do not air grievances online or at conferences, until your emotions are settled. When you do, carefully anonymize them and speak in generalities.
- Recognize that not all scholars, particularly senior scholars, appreciate even humorous complaints about peer review. Some will consider it a sign of immaturity, so if you complain, be aware of the possible implications.
- Show genuine gratitude and modesty in your response letters, even when addressing negative feedback. Authentic responses are appreciated. Overly effusive responses are not.
- Make it easy for reviewers to see how a revision addresses their concerns by providing a point-by-point response letter with clear explanations and references to the changes made in the manuscript.
- Respond to reviewer comments, even if that means explaining why you did not change the paper.

7 Stop Flogging a Dead Horse

7.1 The Issue

Flogging a dead horse, in the context of academic publishing, signifies the futile effort of investing additional resources into unproductive or failed research papers, projects, or teams in the hope of salvaging them. Persisting with a paper that has been rejected multiple times and undergone numerous revisions can be draining and unproductive. The sunk cost fallacy often leads researchers to continue investing time and effort in a failing paper, despite better opportunities elsewhere. Sometimes, a paper is best left in the file drawer.

We occasionally also get overwhelmed by having too many paper projects in parallel, especially if lots of them have been dragging on for many years. Both authors published papers after more than a decade in peer review in several outlets. Rather than a congratulations for the publication, we received a "meh" on how the papers examined a dated set of concepts.

While it is difficult to provide a precise estimate of how many ideas get thrown away in the research process, our experience and anecdotes from colleagues suggests that, for every "revise and resubmit", "major/minor revision", and "accept", we receive about three "rejects". That does not imply that only one in four ideas succeed, as paper rejection often leads to substantial improvements to an idea, rather than its dismissal. However, it does imply that abandoning ideas is just part of the overall research process.

7.2 The Importance of Knowing When to Let Go and Move On

Knowing when to move on from a failing endeavor is crucial to maintain productivity and focus on more promising ones. Persisting with a paper that is unlikely to be published wastes the time and energy of authors, reviewers, and editors and contributes to clogged submission backlogs.

It can be challenging and bittersweet to declare defeat and cut losses on a failing paper, given the high pressure to publish that comes with the strong emphasis on publications in hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions at IS departments and business schools. Much effort has gone into a paper, especially if it has already been rejected before, and crushed illusions are difficult to accept. The psychology of sunk cost reminds us that the desire not to appear wasteful can lead us to throw good effort after bad effort (Kahneman & Tversky 2013).

The temptation to 'just take chances' and submit a paper is understandable, given the pressure to publish and the abundance of journals. At times, peer-review can look like a gamble where, despite the low chances of success, the only downside is rejection, after which one can always try again elsewhere. As a result, it has become common practice to write papers that are barely good enough to be considered for review, and to then let the reviewers decide the subsequent course. This is a slippery slope. While it is appropriate to learn from reviewers and to revise a manuscript with the helpful bits of their feedback, the reviewers are not our co-authors, and it is not in our best interest to treat them as such. A culture in which reviewers are seen (or see themselves) as co-authors, suggesting changes without taking responsibility for them, may alienate authors from their own work. But, at the end of the day, our name will be on the paper, not theirs.

'Journal roulette' – re-submitting a paper so often to a different journal after rejection until one 'bites' – not only drains authors' energy, but also that of editors and reviewers. This may exacerbate already overloaded submission backlogs and subsequently lower the time and interest that authors, reviewers, and editors have for developing high quality manuscripts.

7.3 Strategies for Sending the Dead Horse to the Glue Factory

Consider the opportunity cost: If there are better opportunities to work on more promising papers that will be more likely published, it is often better to satisfice with a conference paper or book chapter. Considering all the time, effort, and resources that go into a publication, paired with the apparent futility of the peer-review process, saying 'no' to a paper can be powerful and liberating. It puts us in full control over not only the paper's fate, but also the extra resources we can dedicate to less futile endeavors.

In addition, we also frequently ask ourselves questions, such as: Is our work really novel and worth pursuing? Do we need to collect additional data? If yes, satisficing with a conference paper or book chapter and then writing a new journal submission from scratch might be the way to go. Further, if we lost

interest, or our team lost interest and we do not want to continue alone, or if we no longer enjoy working with the team, it is better to walk away and cut bait. Happiness is worth more than any publication. It is usually better to get disillusioned than to retain illusions, and to close unflattering chapters with dignity. As an added benefit, we can add another item to our *resumé of failures* (Figure 1).

RÉSUMÉ OF FAILURES

My accomplishments largely result from my toddlerish curiosity, donkeyish perseverance, and brilliant supporters, rather than magic talent. To illustrate this point, my long list of failures includes 21 rejected papers, 6 scholarships and grants not received, 5 academic jobs not landed, 3 failed exams, 2 academic study programs not gotten into, and 1 music career without landing a label deal. This being of course on top of all attempts I never heard back from and those I never even made, which I fail to recount.

Figure 1. Resumé of Failures in the First-Author's CV, Inspired by Stefan (2010).

This is not to say that we give up easily, especially if we learn from a rejection and improve the paper accordingly (our decade-old papers eventually came out, after all). Some of the most influential papers were rejected many times (Tourish & Willmott 2015). Yet still, defining a point at which to declare defeat is helpful for everyone involved, as it can safeguard against the sunk cost fallacy.

If we cannot find a way to establish sufficient value in a paper, we just let it sit on the proverbial backburner, perhaps combine it with something else, or let it sit on the cutting room floor. Possible side effects include boredom, increased thirst for action, and the inconvenient sensation of having to think deliberately about more useful things to do. We may even end up adding value through engagement with practitioners, professional development, or improved teaching. And then, perhaps, write a better paper.

Such an approach is likely most appropriate for a publication strategy that prioritizes quality over quantity, because it may lead to fewer publications in the short term, but perhaps greater satisfaction with our lifetime work in the long term. Where quantity is a priority, this approach is likely less appropriate but might still help to focus efforts on papers that are 'good enough' to meet the threshold for publication.

To avoid investing excessive time and effort into a failing paper:

- Consider the opportunity cost and focus on more promising projects that are more likely to be published.
- Be open to satisficing with a conference paper or book chapter if the paper's potential for journal publication is limited.
- Periodically re-evaluate the paper's novelty, data collection needs, and team dynamics to determine if continuing is worthwhile.
- Recognize when to declare defeat and learn from rejection to improve future work.

8 Conclusion

This paper aims to help authors keep their papers out of preventable trouble. While most guidance on scientific writing focuses on pursuing manuscript acceptance, we take the inverse approach by concentrating on how to avoid rejection. Our six strategies for avoiding common pitfalls have proven useful in our practice and have been endorsed by friends and colleagues, but they may not necessarily be widely known or applied in the IS community. Authors in adjacent disciplines could also consider adapting these strategies for their own contexts.

Of course, our work has limitations. In essence, inversion seeks to avoid stupidity rather than pursuing brilliance. While this strategy can reduce the chances of failure, it does not guarantee success. We have identified various contingencies. For example, having a clear conscience, presenting a polished appearance, and maintaining polite communication may not lead to publication if the paper does not persuade. Importantly, our tips should be seen as a checklist for meeting minimum standards before submitting otherwise worthy papers and for reflecting thoughtfully on your own practice, rather than as a 'cheat sheet' for embellishing subpar papers.

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