

Editorial: Why manuscripts are being unsubmitted and desk-rejected by editors

After the initial screening of a submitted manuscript journal editors have three options: to approve it for review and send to peer-reviewers, to unsubmit or to reject. In this editorial we would like to explain to our potential authors why the manuscripts are unsubmitted and why they are desk rejected. It is based on our more than four years of experience as editors of the *International Journal of Health Governance (IJHG)* (see [Table 1](#)).

Unsubmitted manuscripts

A manuscript is usually unsubmitted by the editor when it fits the journal's scope and meets most of quality criteria, but lacks some required parts and/or might have some issues with format and structure. In the following table we have presented common causes of manuscripts being unsubmitted and the suggested solutions.

It is obvious that most of the above-mentioned problems could be easily avoided by reading carefully and following author guidelines published on the *IJHG* web-site and explained in a series of recent editorials. We fully share the sentiment of a journal editor who wrote: *"it never ceased to amaze me how easily authors let their research perish just because they did not read the instructions for authors or wrote an abstract that did not reflect their work"* ([Carneiro, 2024](#)).

When choosing the unsubmit option, editors usually provide specific recommendations to authors about the missing information and point to useful resources and to recently published *IJHG* articles with similar study design or paper category. Still, we have noticed that many of unsubmitted manuscripts are never submitted again, which could be explained by their originating from paper mills, or by being submitted by authors to other journals (we have found two unsubmitted papers, later published by peer-reviewed journals in 2024).

Desk-rejected manuscripts

IJHG acceptance rate in 2024 was about 22%. When reviewing typical causes for manuscript desk-rejection we have found that very similar causes are stated by editors of other Emerald journals ([Shukla, 2024](#); [Newell, 2024](#); [Russo and Wong, 2024](#)), as well as healthcare-related journals from other publishers ([Hallas, 2024](#); [Carneiro, 2024](#)). These reasons for rejection could be combined into three main groups: suitability; rigor and novelty.

Suitability

IJHG promotes the evolution of governance for health and health systems to meet new challenges in the 21st century. Serving a wide international readership, *IJHG* publishes empirical and theoretical papers that offer national perspectives, international comparisons and global approaches. *IJHG* presents innovative research and conceptual papers, viewpoints, case studies, evidence synthesis papers and reviews that provide actionable insights for smarter governance.

The majority of desk-rejected manuscripts are out of scope of the journal: e.g. epidemiology studies, mortality and morbidity rates, description of medical technologies and devices, professional learning curriculum to improve patient outcomes, bibliometric analysis, health information behavior on social media and similar. Just adding the word "governance" to the manuscript title is not enough to justify its acceptance by the *IJHG*. Where



Table 1. Manuscripts unsubmitted to the *IJHG*: causes and solutions

Manuscript section/aspect	Problem	Solution
Abstract	No structured abstract, keywords or paper category included in the main file	Abstract should include the four mandatory sub-headings and their accompanying explanations: Purpose; Design/methodology/approach; Findings Originality. The following three sub-headings are optional and can be included, if applicable Research limitations/implications; Practical implications; Social implications Also, up to 12 keywords and the chosen paper category should be included
Paper category	No category or wrong category chosen	- Search for <i>IJHG</i> articles with similar categories on the journal web-site as the examples - Consult the <i>IJHG</i> editorial at https://doi.org/10.1108/IJHG-06-2024-162 - Contact the journal editor for recommendation
Tables/Figures	Included in the main file	All tables and figures should be submitted as separate files. The position of each table should be clearly labeled in the main file
Format	Exceeding the allowed word count (maximum 6,000 words including all tables and figures)	Where tables, figures, appendices and other additional content are supplementary to the article but not critical to the reader's understanding of it, authors can choose to host these supplementary files alongside their article on Insight, Emerald's content-hosting platform or on an alternative trusted online repository. All supplementary material must be mentioned at the appropriate moment in the main file
Structure	Not following the structured abstract	The main text should include the mandatory sections: Introduction/Background (Purpose); Methodology/Approach; Results (Findings); Discussion (Originality) and Conclusion
Introduction/Background	Too long and too general	Focus on the gaps in evidence and on justification for the submitted research
Methods	Reporting guidelines not mentioned or not correctly applied	When submitting their primary research and evidence synthesis papers, as well as case studies, authors should state in the Methods section which reporting guidelines they used to prepare the manuscript and should submit as a Supplementary file the completed checklists for those guidelines For more detail consult <i>IJHG</i> editorial at https://doi.org/10.1108/IJHG-06-2024-162
	Stating not including human participants while using surveys and interviews as research methods	If the research included human participants, authors should provide evidence of the ethics review board clearance and include a statement about this in their manuscript. If they do not have clearance, they should provide the reasons as to why this was not required
	Not enough detail to make the research reproducible	Adhere to reporting guidelines appropriate for the research design

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Manuscript section/aspect	Problem	Solution
Discussion	Repeating results section	The discussion should focus on the novel and relevant aspects of the results and compare them with the current available evidence. Also, possible explanations for the reported results and implications for future studies as well as generalizability and practical applications should be included
References	Not following the journal style	All references in the manuscript must be formatted using one of the recognized Harvard styles
Use of AI tools	Not enough detail in methods and acknowledgment sections	If an AI tool/LLM has been used to develop or generate any portion of the manuscript then this must be clearly stated in the methods and acknowledgments. Consult the <i>IJHG</i> editorial for detailed instruction at https://doi.org/10.1108/IJHG-09-2024-163

applicable we advise authors to submit their manuscript to other Emerald journals, more appropriate for their research. We recommend that authors read carefully journal's aims and scope, recent editorials, and contact journal editors to check the suitability of their research for a particular journal at the early stages of preparing their manuscript.

Manuscripts that fit the journal's scope could still be rejected because of lack of proper structure or not following journal formatting requirements, when it is difficult to follow logic or the data are poorly presented.

Violation of publication ethics is another reason for rejection. Any manuscript submitted to this journal should be original, meaning it has not been published before in its current or similar, form. Exceptions to this rule are outlined in Emerald pre-print and conference paper policies. We have noticed that authors quite often post their research on pre-print servers without mentioning it in their submission. Originality requirements also refer to how the authors cite or paraphrase previously published research. The journal editor may use Crossref Similarity Check to check on the originality of submissions received. This service compares submissions against a database of 49 million works from 800 scholarly publishers. We also look carefully at manuscripts with too many old references or self-references.

Rigor

Very often we see that authors concentrate mostly on results section, without proper explanation of why their research is needed (introduction/background), and how it was planned and conducted (methods/approach). It was confirmed by other Emerald journals that many manuscripts are desk-rejected as they “*demonstrate weak engagement with prior research. A fundamental element of building a strong narrative is to engage in a constructive dialog with existing literature and not just who said what . . . Many authors tend to engage with the literature review section superficially by citing a lot of articles but not really understanding their underlying logic.*” (Shukla, 2024).

Thus, not enough explanation about the gaps of evidence and justification for the submitted research, as well as lack of the necessary detail for readers to fully understand and repeat the authors' analysis and experiments are the reasons for rejection.

The problems with reporting research methods in scholarly journals are a global one. A new report entitled “Promoting Reusable and Open Methods and Protocols (PRO-MaP): Recommendations to Improve Methodological Clarity in Life Sciences Publications”

(Batista Leite *et al.*, 2024) was issued this year by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre. The report was developed by a working group of researchers, institutions, publishers and includes recommendations for concrete actions that can be taken by each stakeholder group, as "*detailed method descriptions are essential for reproducibility, research evaluation, and effective data reuse.*" (Batista Leite *et al.*, 2024).

In the rejected submissions there is often no explanation why certain research design/ methods were most appropriate to answer the research question, and no references to methodological literature are provided. One of the common problems of journal articles is the "use methodological shortcut citations": when the authors cite another resource that used the method, instead of fully describing the method. As it is stated in the above-mentioned report "*shortcut citations can seriously impair understanding of the method if the resource cited is missing details needed to implement the method, also uses a shortcut citation, or is not accessible for everyone to read*" (Batista Leite *et al.*, 2024). Also, we see quite often that authors submitting manuscripts are citing old versions of research frameworks and reporting guidelines, when the new ones are available. This could be explained by the fact that "*authors sometimes tend to copy and paste methodological sections from comparable articles rather than presenting their methodology and analysis in a way that is appropriate and complete*". (Shukla, 2024).

We see specifically many problems with evidence synthesis submissions (systematic, scoping, mapping, rapid evidence, umbrella reviews and similar): chosen type of review does not fit the research question; applied methodology does not correspond to the declared review type (many reviews labeled as "systematic" when they are not); not understanding the difference between the guidelines for conducting research synthesis and guidelines for its reporting; stating the use of reporting guidelines while manuscripts are missing the majority of items required by those guidelines; flaws in conducting and presenting the search strategies make them impossible to reproduce and to trust the results. In all those cases the manuscripts are desk-rejected.

Novelty

The reasons for manuscript rejection related to novelty are not enough of an advance or of enough impact for the journal: key issue is whether the manuscript contains enough novel content to inform our international audience, rather than being more suited to a regional or national journal.

As editors we are looking for manuscripts that stimulate new thinking, while reports from quality audits in single institutions that check conformance with already widely accepted norms would be rejected. Manuscripts reporting nation-wide results, coupled with historical perspective, or comparisons among several countries are more likely to receive priority. However, pilot projects and small or early studies, especially in sectors from which relatively little has been published, that offer generalizable insights into new approaches and stimulate further research also are important to us. As the editors of another Emerald journal concluded, simply studying a new or less studied topic does not justify publication; real contribution to a body of knowledge is "offering new explanations or new insights", and that "the explanation of how the new evidence changes current (theoretical) understanding should be the focus" (Russo and Wong, 2024). Thus, at the very early stages of conceptualizing their manuscript "the authors should start thinking about the implications from the ground up". (Shukla, 2024).

Conclusion

IJHG is oriented to those concerned with policy-making and governance within government and academia, as well as in public, non-governmental or private healthcare systems or organizations. This editorial highlighted several crucial aspects that authors should consider to enhance the suitability and quality of their submissions to this journal, so that IJHG

accomplishes its aim of promoting a true international and interprofessional dialog among all stakeholder groups, and supports health governance to keep pace with innovation and social change.

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Further reading

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