



A letter on rejection to my younger self

Marc Reid 

As scientists of all stripes grow as leaders, it becomes their responsibility to shed light on the opportunities that may be hidden within an apparent failure. Presented as a letter to his younger self, Marc Reid looks back at the time when he could scarcely handle professional rejection and examines the lessons he learned.

To my younger self,

The tears you shed for that job you didn't get might yet lead you to an emotional meltdown. You might not handle it well, you might not know how to take it, and you might not have the resource to move on without blaming the world for everything that hasn't gone your way. From the version of you who has been rejected more times than the number of applications you've even considered, take this unsolicited advice with the love and encouragement with which it is so deeply intended. One day, this won't just help you go forward, but will serve those in your care.

Consider your 'CV of failures' as well as your CV

Every job you ever apply for, every professional profile you ever create will, in some fashion, centre on your resume, your curriculum vitae ... your mighty CV! But while you focus on polishing your CV with the badges, triumphs, papers, awards and memberships that you think will make you stand out from the competition, always remember that your CV will never capture the fullness of your effort. Take inspiration from Melanie Stefan, Johannes Haushofer and those who have followed in their courageous footsteps by creating your 'CV of failures'¹. Record every bump on the road, every mistake, every rejection and every failure that has led you to this point. Award your itemized rejections with the same careful bullet points as you use to acknowledge your accolades. When you are able to hold both documents in your hands — your CV and your CV of failures — then you will more fully appreciate that the successes you define for yourself are not so much divinely inspired and unwaveringly driven.

Be aware that repeated rejection is not specific to your time in academia

The ferociousness of the competition for professorships² can act as if to place academia in an opaque bubble. Your failed lab work, unpublished manuscripts and repeated reads of the immortal mind-numbing phrase "we regret to inform you" will tempt you ever deeper into the falsehood that all these mechanisms of rejection are particular to the academy. This is not true. I urge you to

explore stories of the writers, the Stephenie Meyers, John Grishams, Stephen Kings and William Saroyans of the world, who were (as a mere handful of countless examples) rejected 14, 28, 30 and 7,000 times, respectively, before their labours of literary love ever felt the warmth of a dustjacket³. And yet, while rejection lies in and beyond academia, your appetite for rejection needn't be bound entirely by the pursuit of someone else's approval. The likes of Beatrix Potter and Zora Raeburn chose themselves. They chose to self-publish and to create success on their own terms when self-sponsorship was still taboo. But you have the privilege of being alive when yesterday's taboo is today's opportunity and tomorrow's norm. Rejection will happen to you in academia, it will happen more if you stay there, it will happen aplenty if you leave, and it might follow you everywhere until you choose to define your own path. For those you seek to serve, find a way to get your stuff out there. You can always find another way.

Acknowledge what is out of your control to focus on what is in your control

Understand, in balance, that there are situations in which you may realize that your efforts are being invested in playing the wrong game. The debate on whether we have too many PhDs⁴ or too few⁵ can tempt you into ignoring the broader economic changes that might stack the odds against you in one game but all the while improve your chances of success in another. It is no longer the case, for example, that professors can spawn endless younger versions of themselves to take their academic chairs upon retirement. The number of PhDs continues to rise while the number of academic posts (the permanent kind, not the veiled pre-tenure kind) remains comparatively stagnant⁴. The growth in PhDs versus comparatively flat-lining academic posts is merely a microcosmic case of a broader economic phenomenon. Undeniably positive information technology trends aside, you are alive during a time when there are multiple dimensions on which growth may, in fact, have plateaued. These trends have emerged since the 1970s, after a post-war productivity boom. Thus, not every rejection inside the academy is in your control. Nonetheless, your time is now, and

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there are many opportunities outside academia — jobs, careers and entrepreneurial ventures alike — that may ultimately prove to be your calling. And if you still love research, consider that some of the most profoundly successful academics of our time — [Stephen Wolfram](#), for example — are not in academia.

Understand the many components that drive you forwards

If you take nothing else from this letter, mark the following point most carefully — you will fail. The key for your own well-being, and those in your future care, is to stop labelling each instance of your apparently fruitless efforts as ‘failure’ and start calling them ‘experiments’. Each rejection, mistake and near miss is an experiment. The engineer James Dyson didn’t fail 5,000 times before creating his first bagless vacuum cleaner, he instead made 5,000 data points that helped refine his offering and point him in the direction of a revolutionary domestic product. The comedian Michael McIntyre didn’t fail in his comedy career when he delivered his earliest routines to a bar full of empty seats, he was humbly creating the craft that would later fill arenas. You, and others, might experience a diminishing appetite for terms like ‘resilience’ or ‘grit’. As incomplete as these ideas may be, don’t dismiss them. They are pieces of the puzzle that make up the picture of your envisaged goals. They help you understand that it’s not the overused notion of passion that you need to pursue your goals, but rather an unflinching direction in which you will keep on moving, no matter what, no matter how, no matter who chooses to discourage you. Above all elements of psychology that you may come across in your own pursuit of understanding how to move past rejection, there is one that matters more than most. Understand that you are not fragile like a wine glass. You do not shatter into uselessness the first time you hit a wall. You are perhaps as resilient as a plastic cup; still functioning after countless knocks and

bumps and falls. But you are more than resilient. The miraculous biological body that you inhabit is not simply resilient, not at all fragile, but ‘antifragile’^{6–8}. Every time you fail, you learn. Every time you get rejected, you find out how to make your offering fitter, sharper, clearer and crisper.

These things and more I wish I knew at the time when my first job application was unceremoniously rejected. These things I wish were in my ken when the lack of feedback felt like a knife had been twisted in my side. You, too, will feel such pain in the pursuit of what you want to achieve in your life. At the same time, you will one day lead others in whom you will recognize the propensity to fear the same repeated rejections that you now call an old friend. Tell them what I have told you, and watch the timid worrier today become an intellectual warrior tomorrow.

Yours sincerely, still failing, still learning, still growing,
Your older self

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Competing interests

M.R. is the author of the forthcoming book *You Are Not A Fraud*.

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