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An Essential Guide

From Literature Wales

**Dealing with Rejection as a Writer**

**Introduction**

Whatever genre you write in and whatever your aspirations, almost all writing careers involve regularly meeting rejection. This is brief guide on how to handle this, with top tips on how writers can develop resilience when faced with rejections, when submitting work to publishers, or when applying for opportunities or commissions from organisations.

**What impacts how you experience rejection?**

* ***Your history*:** how you have been treated in the past can impact how you respond to rejection today. Some people can take rejection in their stride, for others, it undermines their confidence and leaves them feeling pointless or demoralised. In creating a supportive environment, taking our experiences of rejection into account is essential for our sustainability as writers. If having your writing turned down causes serious distress, you may want to speak to your doctor or a mental health professional to get support[[1]](#footnote-2).
* ***Your expectations***: understanding the publishing industry can help contextualise when your work isn’t accepted. How many books similar to yours are published per year? Is it realistic to hope for breakout success on your first attempt? It is important to understand that the ‘success’ you see other people experiencing has often arrived after long periods of being turned down. Check out the career trajectories of your favourite authors. What we see on social media is often the highlights of people’s experiences. Not many people share their rejections, just their successes - but don’t assume they aren’t happening.
* ***Your support network*:** if you are surrounded by family and friends who support and believe in your work, getting turned down can be easier because you have people to reassure you and encourage you to keep trying. But if your family are dismissive of your writing or don’t believe it is valuable unless it is published commercially, it can be tough to rationalise rejection, because it can feel like confirming all your worst fears. But it can be possible to build a supportive writing community via groups, classes, social media.

**Navigating working as a writer**

Working as a writer - for pay or not - involves navigating the writing industry. This can encompass everything from your local open mic night to freelance journalism to children’s publishing and everything in between. But whatever you write, you’re likely to meet tensions between commerciality and art.

Lots of industries do not treat artists well and there are groups and organisations campaigning for better conditions for writers (see resources section). It can be empowering to get involved in improving writers' conditions but here, we are focusing on what you can do to make your journey more navigable.

Firstly, recognising publishing as an industry can be important. When we see it as a whole, we can begin to reckon with the damage it does. This is both in reinforcing stereotypes and exclusion, and on a personal level to writers who are exposed to predatory contracts, pressure and racism, ableism, classism, homophobia and transphobia and all prejudice. It can be useful to think about the publishing industry as a whole. Publishers are businesses, they aren't just looking for a good story, they’re looking to be able to sell specific merchandise to specific people at specific times. There are many reasons one could get turned down, and the majority of them probably aren't 'quality'. They could be because of the market, the time, publishers' current plans, market saturation, subtle changes in fashion, how it was pitched etc.

Many writers have portfolio careers and work alongside their writing with writing-adjacent specialisms like editing, sensitivity reading, manuscript reviews, mentoring, tutoring, teaching classes and giving readings. Others combine writing with a career quite separate from writing. Check out [Mslexia Magazine’s Portfolio Career](https://mslexia.co.uk/magazine/meet-the-readers/portfolio-careers/) section for interesting examples.

It can be useful to consider the business of writing: how much can you budget for classes, competition fees and literary magazine subscriptions (to support them and to avoid submitting something unsuitable to a publication you’ve never seen). Many places offer subsidised fees for people on low incomes or those who are under-represented in publishing, and if they don’t, you may be able to ask and access support. Getting clear on the numbers you need for your plans can be scary. But it helps us consider how we’ll navigate the financial ups and downs and what we’ll need to do to make it possible.

Sometimes, as writers, we elevate the publishing industry to a position of artistic authority. But agents, authors and editors are humans and can’t possibly pronounce on our worth as an artist or person. Rejection is seen as a comment on quality of your work (and can feel a pronouncement of the worthiness of you). But worth is subjective, and it can be necessary to separate our worth from every submission, acceptance and rejection.

If we submit our work out into the world, we need to figure out how we protect ourselves through the process. *Writing Down The Bones* author,Natalie Goldberg [says to her students](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/ethical-wisdom/201607/the-writing-life-interview-natalie-goldberg), “If your book doesn’t sell or you can’t publish it, write another book…The publishing world is a business, but it’s not any big deal. An editor is not your guru. Your agent is not your guru. And if it doesn’t [get published], that’s none of [the writer’s] business. Their job is to continue. That’s what’s important.”

Often, as writers, we focus on our first work, but one book doesn’t have to be our everything. Many published writers write other things that don't get published, but they keep writing.

**Resilience**

According to the [American Psychological Association](https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience/building-your-resilience), resilience is “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress…these adverse events…are certainly painful and difficult, they don’t have to determine the outcome of your life. There are many aspects of your life you can control, modify, and grow with. That’s the role of resilience. Becoming more resilient not only helps you get through difficult circumstances, it also empowers you to grow and even improve your life along the way.”

Remember, resources build resilience. It’s not about ‘survival of the fittest’ but prioritising conditions that support us to be able to flow with the slips and slides of writing.

We can develop our resilience through:

* Developing or maintaining relationships: being supportive to other writers and sharing how we are with people who care.
* Taking care of our well-being: stretch breaks, limits of screen time and making sure to get enough food, water and time away from the page.
* Compassionate outlets for tough times: despite images of writers with addictions and pushing for hours to finish a draft, it's important to have safe outlets for stress.
* Keeping our purpose in mind: beyond the goal of the publication or competition we’re applying for is a larger hope, such as sharing our story, helping young people like us see themselves represented in literature, or improving our skills as an artist. Keeping this in mind is essential. If we get stuck, it can be helpful to ask, "What is the next thing I am going to do about that?”
* Getting towards goals: we want to take small steps towards our goals, not overload ourselves, get overwhelmed and think it’s impossible.
* Track your growth: it can be helpful to go back to your previous writing, your early bio or your first goals and note how far you’ve come in skill, practice and understanding.
* Keep perspective: look out for thought patterns which catastrophize, ruminate or are harshly self-critical. If you notice these thoughts, try [a self-compassion exercise](https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/) or [journalling](https://www.literaturewales.org/our-projects/lwcommissions/grace-quantock/) your thoughts. Our past doesn’t predict our future, and while we can’t control the outcome of our writing journey, we can focus on what’s in our hands; writing.

*"Experience in rejection doesn’t stop it from hurting, but it helps you just dig in and keep on trying.” -* [*Ursula K. LeGuin*](https://arielgore.com/?p=737)

**Tips for growing through rejection**

Rejection is inevitable when we put our work out into the world. Knowing this means we can plan for it. As photographer and visibility expert Danielle Cohen and writer Kelly Diels share, once we realise we will face something difficult when we put our work out into the world, we can set aside bandwidth for it. We can plan a way to soothe ourselves after sending our work out and when we read the responses. Calling in support from our community, drawing on aspects of our lives that make us feel like ourselves can help us manage. Some people create practices to release rejection, like taking a bath to wash away sadness or going for a walk to get some creative fuel from nature. Some people celebrate rejections, or do a project like the [100 No’s Challenge](https://cesarlrodriguez.com/100-nos-list-challenge/), picturing that each “no” is one step closer to the right “yes”.

If we are hurting, what do we need to tend to the wound - the regret, the pain, the rejection? And once we’ve done that, through talking to a loved one, journalling, moving to music or whatever works for us, what do we need to restore ourselves after that effort, ready to move on to our next steps?

*Resources overleaf…./*

**Resources**

**Hyperlinks in full:**

[rejection sensitive dysphoria](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/friendship-20/201907/what-is-rejection-sensitive-dysphoria)

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/friendship-20/201907/what-is-rejection-sensitive-dysphoria>

[Mslexia Magazine’s Portfolio Career](https://mslexia.co.uk/magazine/meet-the-readers/portfolio-careers/)

<https://mslexia.co.uk/magazine/meet-the-readers/portfolio-careers/>

Natalie Goldberg [says to her students](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/ethical-wisdom/201607/the-writing-life-interview-natalie-goldberg),

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/ethical-wisdom/201607/the-writing-life-interview-natalie-goldberg>

[American Psychological Association](https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience/building-your-resilience)

<https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience/building-your-resilience>

[a self-compassion exercise](https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/)

<https://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/>

[journalling](https://www.literaturewales.org/our-projects/lwcommissions/grace-quantock/)

<https://www.literaturewales.org/our-projects/lwcommissions/grace-quantock/>

[*Ursula K. LeGuin*](https://arielgore.com/?p=737)

<https://arielgore.com/?p=737>

[100 No’s Challenge](https://cesarlrodriguez.com/100-nos-list-challenge/),

https://cesarlrodriguez.com/100-nos-list-challenge/

**Mental health support**

[The Samaritans](https://www.samaritans.org/)

[Mental Health Crisis Helplines](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/crisis-services/helplines-listening-services/)

[NHS Mental Health Services](https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/)

[Find a Therapist](https://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist/?Distance=10)

**Support for writers**

[Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society](https://www.alcs.co.uk/)

[Royal Literary Fund](https://www.rlf.org.uk/)

[Society of Authors](https://www.societyofauthors.org/about-us)

[Writers' Guild of Great Britain](https://writersguild.org.uk/)

[Public Lending Rights](https://www.bl.uk/plr)

**Author support**

[Nikesh Shukla, Your Story Matters: Sharpen Your Writing Skills, Find Your Voice, Tell Your Story](https://uk.bookshop.org/p/books/your-story-matters-find-your-voice-sharpen-your-skills-tell-your-story-nikesh-shukla/7357095?ean=9781529052381).

[Cathy Rentzenbrink, Write It All Down: How to Put Your Life on the Page.](https://uk.bookshop.org/p/books/write-it-all-down-how-to-put-your-life-on-the-page-cathy-rentzenbrink/6199235?ean=9781529056228)

[Ariel Gore, How to Become a Famous Writer Before You’re Dead](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/69682/how-to-become-a-famous-writer-before-youre-dead-by-ariel-gore/) and [The Wayward Writer: Summon Your Power to Take Back Your Story, Liberate Yourself from Capitalism, and Publish Like a Superstar](https://uk.bookshop.org/p/books/the-wayward-writer-summon-your-power-to-take-back-your-story-liberate-yourself-from-capitalism-and-publish-like-a-superstar-ariel-gore/7080407?ean=9781648411847).

[Natalie Goldberg, Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within](https://uk.bookshop.org/p/books/writing-down-the-bones-freeing-the-writer-within-natalie-goldberg/458907?ean=9781611803082).

\*Literature Wales is not responsible for information / resources provided by third parties.

Resource content developed by **Grace Quantock**

1. Some neurodivergent folks have [rejection sensitive dysphoria](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/friendship-20/201907/what-is-rejection-sensitive-dysphoria). Many neurodivergent people receive intense disapproval from childhood which is thought to develop into intense distress at rejection. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)