Writer Rejection and the Five Stages of Grief

Only writers as hard-boiled as Hemingway emerge unscathed from the trauma of literary rejection. The rest of us — the as-yet unpublished—experience the spiking of our prose with emotions akin to grief. George Anderson describes his ordeal.

My first rejection slip should have come with a condolence card. Had my article been dumped in the editor’s in-tray bearing a ‘do not resuscitate’ tag? Was it pronounced dead before she reached the end of my blurb? I felt as I had when my pet Labradoodle, Gatsby, swallowed my ex-wife’s winning lottery ticket.

Indulge me for a moment down memory lane. There’s me, skipping to a Halloween party, aged seven. A puff of wind softer than a bushbaby’s sigh blew out the candle in my pumpkin. Stunned by this, my world collapsed. I ran home, crying.

A similar pumpkin moment arose as I stood behind my letterbox, staring incredulously at the newly delivered rejection slip. I didn’t cry, but my bottom lip trembled like a hummingbird’s wing.

**Oh, how the mighty have fallen!**

I had always pictured myself as the starving-artist-in-the-garret type writer, even though I live in a three-bedroom bungalow in Edinburgh and have a standing pre-theatre reservation at Pierre of Portobello. How dare this uppity editor cast doubt on my bona fides!

This emotional knee in the puddings perplexed me, and I found myself tobogganing through the five classic stages of grief on a tea-tray-sized luge. Denial, blame, bargaining, depression, and acceptance concertinaed into twenty seconds.

**1. Denial (it wasn’t me)**

The postman had dropped this rejection slip through the wrong letterbox. A neighbour must have written a similar article. With less pizzazz per paragraph than my carefully crafted piece, naturally.

**2. Irrational attribution of blame to the innocent**

Obviously, it had nothing to do with me, but someone was to blame for my rejection. After inadequate consideration, I settled for accusing my next-door neighbour. She had so far failed to return a lawnmower borrowed last spring, and anyway, her eyebrows were always too close together for my liking. Wait though! She’d immigrated to Australia three months ago. So it wasn’t the lawnmower thief after all!

**Read More:**

[4 ways writers can get past rejection](https://www.writerscollegeblog.com/4-ways-writers-can-get-past-rejection/)

[The best writing advice — the effectiveness of rejection](https://www.writerscollegeblog.com/the-best-writing-advice-the-effectiveness-of-rejection/)

[J-K Rowling from Failure to unimagined success](https://www.writerscollegeblog.com/j-k-rowling-from-failure-to-unimagined-success/)

**3. Bargaining**

Okay, so my neighbour was off the hook. My next thought was to re-hash the piece — shuffle some sentences around, like dominoes on a bar counter — and send it to an editor who knew her onions.

**4. Depression and Confusion**

As my emotional luge rocketed around the penultimate bend on its icy journey towards acceptance, I recalled a Chinese proverb — “Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.” But, finding myself candle-less, I cursed the darkness using words straight out of the barrack room dictionary.

**5. Accepting that I’m not Ernest Hemingway after all**

Mea culpa! After learning that [even famous writers experience rejection](https://wildmindcreative.com/bookmarketing/6-famous-authors-who-once-faced-rejection), I finally took responsibility for my failure. There are none so blind as those who will not see, they say.

**Renaissance**

Rejections be damned! Reflecting resilience-wise, I’ve grown from full-fat milksop to semi-skimmed sissy. It’s progress, but the Nobel Prize for literature may have to wait. Now, where’s me quill?