

Careful consideration in communicating rejection: Discourse analysis of politeness, empathy, and denial in PhD rejection letters

Brianna O'Boyle *

Abstract. Doctoral degrees are considered daunting, but what about rejection letters? This study examines the bad news genre of rejection using 47 PhD rejection letters through the lens of discourse and genre analysis. Two obligatory rhetorical moves were found in 100% of the letters, a rejection move and a goodwill move. The rejection move includes steps like thanking the applicant and providing reasons. On the other hand, the goodwill move expresses empathy and well wishes. A transitivity analysis also reveals the wordings of the actual rejections employ tactics of indirectness. This project hopes to bring light to the ways that rejection is delivered and how this may impact the receivers of bad news.

Keywords. Discourse Analysis; Bad News; Rejection Letters; Genre Analysis; Move Analysis; Transitivity Analysis

1. Introduction. Pursuing a PhD is not for the faint of heart, Carlino (2012) found that there is only a 50-60% completion rate for PhDs in the US and Australia. Yet despite the fact that PhDs are challenging, many people apply for them, even amidst competition increasing as acceptance rates decrease (Zhou 2022). A great deal of work is put into a single application. Often applicants will spend hours working on a personal/academic statement, procuring recommendation letters, compiling resumes/CVs, polishing writing samples, filling in an exorbitant amount of boxes on an application portal, on top of the monetary costs associated with application fees. The only thing many hopeful applicants receive in return is a rejection letter, often barely longer than a paragraph or two.

While applicants likely know that the chances of earning a spot in a PhD program are slim, receiving no more than a few lines of text in an application portal message or formal rejection letter in response to all of these efforts is nothing short of demoralizing. After reading these rejections during my own pursuit of acceptance to a PhD program, I began to notice patterns appearing in the messages. Many rejection letters had some features that felt oddly similar. This project sought to 1) investigate what those patterns are and 2) consider how they relate to politeness and the delivering of bad news. Rejection letters seem to pose a catch-22 for the rejectors, who are forced to give bad news to applicants while trying to maintain a positive image of the university/department/program they represent. Below I will explore how PhD rejection letters are constructed in ways that attempt to achieve both of these goals.

2. Literature Review. A genre of text is considered to be a rhetorical category of a specific discourse form that reflects complex interconnected social systems (Tardy 2011). Different genres of text can be used to achieve different goals such as the use of the promotional genre to promote one's achievements (Bhatia 1993). In conjunction with genre, rhetorical move analysis has been

* Thank you to Professor Betty Samraj who was an invaluable mentor for this project, as well as Professor Allison Burkette, the anonymous reviewers and audience members at LSA who provided insightful comments. I also would like to give a huge shoutout to my former classmate and friend Laura Fitzgerald who helped polish this manuscript—all errors remain my own. Also thank you to everyone who donated letters to this project, without your generosity this work would not have been possible. Author: Brianna O'Boyle, University of Kentucky (brianna.oboyle@uky.edu).

used to identify salient patterns within a typified discourse form (Swales 1990), some examples of genres analyzed include Fulbright personal statements and statement of grant purposes as well as DEI statements (Kessler 2020 and Wang 2024). This study investigates the bad news genre in the lens of PhD rejection letters. Because this project focuses on letters, this literature review will highlight work that has dealt with written texts in this genre. This section introduces previous work on bad news etiquette (Section 2.1) and rejection letters (Section 2.2).

2.1. BAD NEWS ETIQUETTE. Hagge and Kostelnick (1989) conducted a discourse analysis of suggestions from 90 pages of auditor letters from a business accounting firm and found these letters often employ tactics of hedging, nominalizations, and agent deleted passages. The recommendations from business communication textbooks, which contend that the organization of the message is greatly impactful on recipients, include the use of a buffer (i.e., a neutral statement providing a reason), an implied statement of the rejection, and ending with a helpful/positive closing. However Hagge and Kostelnick (1989) found many letters did not follow these textbook suggestions. They argue that many letters make use of negative politeness strategies, indicating that the politeness strategies outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987) are not only found in spoken word, but also in written text (Hagge and Kostelnick 1989).

Beyond politeness in bad news, there have been some who have investigated not only bad news in written text, but also what are some effects on recipients. Jansen and Janssen (2010) studied politeness strategies in letters: they designed an experiment in which participants were asked to imagine themselves as the recipients of insurance claims refusal letters, manipulating the amount of “politeness strategies” in the letters. It was found that participants were more impacted by whether or not a reason was given in the refusal rather than how many strategies were used (Jansen and Janssen 2010). In fact, letters that did not provide a reason for the refusal but employed multiple politeness strategies were evaluated more negatively than refusal letters that omitted the reason and did not include politeness strategies (Jansen and Janssen 2010). This brings up interesting questions of: are people more apt at accepting bad news if they are given a reason as it may be viewed as justified and/or are overly polite letters viewed as less genuine?

On the other hand, there have been those who have found that perhaps the structure of letters is not as impactful. French and Holden (2012) found in organizations, the culture of the company and its leadership had more of an impact on how messages of bad news were received, rather than the actual wording of the messages.

While the studies described above are investigations of bad news in general, it is important to consider whether there might be differences in these findings within rejection letters specifically.

2.2. REJECTION LETTERS. Bad news can be related to a variety of subjects, but rejection letters have a unique focus. Jablin and Krone (1984) investigated characteristics of job rejection letters, and the impact of these characteristics on job applicants. After reviewing the job rejection letters from 170 participants some of the common patterns they found in the letters were that the letters tended to be short and typically expressed appreciation and goodwill towards the applicants (Jablin and Kron 1984). Interestingly, and perhaps counterintuitively, Jablin and Krone (1984) found that more direct rejections were perceived as less clear by applicants, they attribute this to perhaps more direct letters were considered less personal than indirect letters. Similar to Jansen and Janssen (2010), Jablin and Krone (1984) found that letters with reasons were interpreted more positively than letters without, and unfortunately within their dataset 20% of letters did not include a reason. Brown (1993) examined 500 of his own job rejection letters and identified how many rejection letters were a “form letter,” which is a single letter that is sent to all unsuccessful

applicants. While Brown (1993) recognized the logistical necessity for form letters, as it is often not feasible for institutions to provide a personalized rejection letter, he argued there are some form letters that are better than others. He maintained the better rejections balance compassion with conciseness, and the use of judicious adjectives—though this is perhaps limited in generalizability as Brown is an individual who reacted to his own letters.

Locker (1999) also investigated characteristics of rejection letters, but examined fabricated scenarios rather than letters participants actually received. Locker (1999) devised two experiments, one where participants imagined they had been denied credit, and the second where participants imagined they received a rejection letter from a graduate school. In both experiments the organization and structure of the letters were not found to be significant on their impact on the letter recipients (Locker 1999). In the graduate school rejection experiment, some were told they were accepted at other schools; perhaps unsurprisingly this had a much greater effect on participants' perceptions of the letters than the wording. Locker (1999) also argued that letters should give reasons for the refusals as well as presenting the information clearly, but that a positive ending is not required.

Thominet (2020), like Jablin and Krone (1984), investigated characteristics of job rejection letters, though specifically rejections from academic jobs, and perceptions of applicants using a more formal discourse analysis through the lens of move analysis. Thominet (2020) found two obligatory moves (job refusal and goodwill) which were present in $\geq 95\%$ of the letters, one conventional move (appreciation) present in $\geq 60\%$ of the letters, and two optional moves (declaration and explanation) present in $< 60\%$ of the letters. Like Brown (1993), Thominet (2020) found most of the letters to lack personalized content. Thominet (2020) also argued that the aspects of the letter have an effect on applicants' perceptions, and letters that used less conventional methods of building goodwill, such as some of the less common moves were more effective at making applicants feel valued. One potential explanation for this is these unconventional methods could have been perceived by applicants as more personalized content rather than the typical form letter conventions.

Despite this body of research on bad news rhetoric and rejection/refusal letters, relatively few studies have specifically focused on PhD rejection letters and how they may contrast or support prior work.

3. Methodology. This section will address the data/data collection and the types of analysis conducted. A discourse analysis of these rejection letters was performed with two types of analysis: move analysis and a transitivity analysis.

3.1. DATA COLLECTION. After removing duplicates, or letters with confidentiality clauses there were 47 letters left for the analysis. Using Antconc, a publicly available freeware corpus program developed by Laurence Anthony (2023), it was found that the dataset had a total 6746 tokens (words), and an average of about 6 sentences per letter. The letters came from 10 different academic fields, including English, Speech Language Hearing Sciences, Neuroscience, Clinical Psychology, Peace & Justice Studies, French, Fine Arts, Women's Gender Sexuality/History, and Anthropology. Fifty-five percent ($N=26$) of the letters were from Linguistics. Forty-five of the 47 letters were from the United States, one was from Canada, and one was from the United Kingdom. The letters were from 2014-2024, though most of the letters ($N=35$, 74%) were from 2020-2024.

3.2. MOVE ANALYSIS. Move analyses have been used to identify patterns within a specific genre of works (Swales 1990, Samraj 2014, Kessler 2020, Wang 2024). Moves can be obligatory,

conventional, optional, or uncommon depending on their frequency in the genre, though some texts may not be prototypical examples of the genre and may have some variation in the order or presence of these moves. Thominet (2020) has identified five moves of academic job rejection letters: the appreciation move, declaration move, job-refusal move, explanation move, and goodwill move. Since rejection letters fall under the category of bad news, it would be reasonable to assume there would be some similarities between academic job rejection letters and PhD rejection letters. Drawing from some of the norms established by Kanoksilapatham (2005), Samraj (2014), and Thominet (2020) the criteria for the classification of the types of moves for this project are as follows: obligatory moves are present in 100% of the letters, conventional are present between 99-60% of the letters, optional are present between 59-25% and uncommon are present in <25% of the letters. The moves and their frequencies can be found in the table below. Additionally, a single move can have multiple steps, though these steps can occur with varying frequencies, i.e. not every move will have every step, though there is a typical order of the steps, which is also illustrated in the table in the results.

3.3. TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS. This study also conducted a transitivity analysis of the agents in the clauses of the rejection step that rejected the applicant to understand if rejection letters employ tactics of politeness through indirect language. Using frameworks from Fang and Schleppegrell (2008) the clauses with the rejections were categorized as either doing (material) or being processes. Doing/material processes are ones in which there is an actor who is doing an action to a goal, and a being process is where there is a carrier that is an entity that is having a quality attributed to it, and an attribute that is the quality being attributed. Additionally many of the rejection clauses were the subordinate clause, the main clauses were also categorized, primarily as saying processes. Saying processes include a sayer and a message.

As Hagge and Kostelnick (1989) pointed out, there are many deleted agents in bad news rhetoric, this may reveal interesting patterns in the actors of these rejection letters. Transitivity analyses have been used to study the actors of newspaper headlines and different countries roles in history textbooks (Clark 1992 and Hashiba 2010). Clark (1992) analyzed how women were referred to in the reporting of sexual violence crimes and found that often the attacker was omitted in these reports, and she argued that the newspaper purposely employed these linguistic choices to lessen blame on the attackers. Hashiba (2020) used a transitivity analysis to compare how a Japanese textbook and an American textbook portray their respective countries in the WWII context. She found that both textbooks have a majority of non-human actors, and argued that passive constructions are used to deflect responsibility from the actors (Hashiba 2010). It is hypothesized that PhD rejection letters will employ a similar omission of the rejecters and the use of ellipsed agents to make the language less direct in an effort to soften the news.

4. Results. This section is divided into four parts to address the different types of moves found in the letters, as well as address the different results from the different types of analysis.

Move	Counts, Percentage	Step/Type	Counts
Rejection	(N=47, 100%)	Status	(N=4)
		Review	(N=36)
		Rejection	(N=50)
		Reason	(N=42)
Goodwill	(N=47, 100%)	Unpleasant	(N=8)
		Thanking/Apoloizing	(N=45)

		Work of Applicant	(N=5)
		Well Wishes	(N=43)
Contact	(N=14, 30%)	Contact	(N=10)
		No Contact	(N=4)
Letter	(N=3, 6%)	N/A	N/A
Other Programs	(N=3, 6%)	N/A	N/A
Scholarship	(N=1, 2%)	N/A	N/A

Table 1. Breakdown of Moves in the PhD Rejection Letters

4.1. OBLIGATORY MOVES. Two obligatory moves were identified in this study: the rejection move and the goodwill move. This observation aligns with Thominet's (2020) findings of job refusal move and a goodwill move. The first move, the rejection move, appears in the beginning/middle of the letters, this is somewhat similar to Jablin and Krone (1984) who found rejections to typically be in the middle of the letter. Some of the steps and their prototypical order are: status, review, rejection and reason (for exact counts of each move please see Table 1). The status step refers to the status of the application and how the applicant is being informed about it. The review step talks about how the application has been reviewed. The rejection step is where the applicant is rejected. The reason step is where reasons for the rejection are given. An example of a rejection move that includes all of these steps is:

(1) Dear NAME:

This is in regard to your application to the Doctor of Philosophy program in Linguistics in the Graduate School of Arts and Science for the Fall 2024 semester.

Your application has been received and carefully reviewed. We very much regret to inform you that we cannot extend an offer of admission. The policy of the Graduate School is to offer admission to outstanding doctoral applicants only if we may offer a full-funding package of multi-year support. As a result, we are only able to offer admission to a limited number of applicants. Letter #20

The first step is clearly indicating the status of the application, then the letter moves to discussing how the application is reviewed (though this step also sometimes happens after the rejection step), then typically comes the rejection, which is typically followed by a reason if a reason was provided.

It is also interesting to note that 17 of the letters also implicate how the rejection was a difficult decision for the rejecters, this was often found within the "reason" step. This could be an attempt to garner sympathy from the applicant by expressing how they also were faced with an unpleasant situation. Or perhaps it is an attempt to make them more relatable to the applicant. Another potential explanation could be that the rejecters want to provide a sense of assurance to the applicant that they were a worthy applicant. However, one might question how applicants would feel when reading this: it likely would not have the desired effect of garnering sympathy from the applicant who likely feels disappointed by the news, and would not pity the rejecters. This step seems may be considered an attempt to create positive face in "establishing common

ground” (Brown and Levinson 1987). There may be a connection here to Jansen and Janssen’s (2010) finding that additional politeness strategies did not have much of an impact on readers of insurance refusal letters and sometimes had the opposite effect if not accompanied by a reason, though they did not specifically compare the effects of specific politeness strategies. A couple of examples of what this looked like are as follows:

- (2) It is painful to have to down so many talented young scholars, but at least the strength and enthusiasm of the applicant pool gives us hope for the future of our field. Letter #29
- (3) Admission decisions are difficult both for Committee members, who must carefully re-view applications to admit the best possible candidates, and applicants who anxiously await notification. Letter #24

Furthermore, there sometimes is conflicting information in the mention of a difficult decision. Three of the letters discuss how they always have a difficult decision to make, but two other letters mention how this year was particularly competitive (see below). If it is indeed true that it was only that year that was uniquely competitive this may give the applicant a false sense of hope that they simply should apply again during the next application cycle for a better chance. Those drafting form rejection letters may want to consider leaving this discussion of it being a difficult decision for the rejecters out of the letter, as well as omitting mention of a specific timeframe. Within a form letter wording that emphasizes how the reason of the rejection is related to fit of the program seems more appropriate as this is something that any rejected applicant would be more likely to understand and believe.

Difficult Decisions (competitive examples):

Every Year:

- (4) Every year we have many more excellent candidates than we are able to accommodate, requiring us to make difficult decisions. Letter #34
- (5) Every year, the committee on Graduate Studies faces the difficult task of selecting a limited number of students from a group of extremely qualified and talented applicants. Letter #45
- (6) We always have more qualified applicants than we can accommodate in our graduate programs, and the selection process usually proves quite difficult. Letter #37

This year:

- (7) This year's pool of applicants was both very large and highly competitive, and our review of applicants' credentials and interests left us with difficult decisions. Letter #7
- (8) The committee’s decisions have been particularly challenging this year because of the large number of strong applicants in areas of our strengths. Letter #41

The second obligatory move that was found in the letters was the goodwill move, which was typically the end of the letter. The steps of this move were: acknowledging the unpleasantness of the news, thanking/apologizing to the applicant, acknowledging the work of the applicant, and

offering well wishes. While no single letter had all of these steps, the examples below illustrate these steps:

(9) I understand that this decision will be extremely disappointing to you. However, I hope that you continue to endeavor to reach your goals, and wish you well in your educational pursuits. Letter #27

(10) Thank you for the time and effort you invested in applying to the Graduate Program in Neuroscience at XXX, as we recognize that expenditures of money and time to do so can be considerable. We wish you well in your future educational endeavors, and hope that you continue to pursue a graduate education, here or at other world-class universities. Letter #47

The first step, if present, acknowledges the unpleasantness of the news. This step might be a more effective strategy in empathizing with the applicant, rather than discussing how the decision to reject applicants is difficult. Then the move typically thanks and/or apologizes to the applicant, which may be an attempt to save face even though they just rejected them. The next step, of acknowledging the work of the applicant, is also another clear attempt to establish goodwill by recognizing the labor put into applying. However, it is difficult to say how impactful this is on applicants (Jansen and Janssen 2010, Thominet 2020). Finally, the last step extends some kind of well wishes as seen in examples 9 and 10, though intriguingly 12 of the letters include some kind of implication that the applicant should/would eventually receive an acceptance from that institution or another, as seen in example 10. This is a particularly interesting choice: it may be perceived as disingenuous or perhaps could create a false sense of hope, as there is no a guarantee that an applicant will receive an acceptance anywhere else. This again may make applicants question the authenticity of the message.

The presence of these moves in this genre of text likely represents the desires of the institutions to maintain some positive face in the way of delivering a rejection. However, perhaps some of these moves remain from antiquated suggestions or ideals of how rejection letters and bad news should be delivered, or similar to how Hagge and Kostelnick (1989) found many people did not follow suggestions of how to deliver bad news.

4.2. OPTIONAL MOVES. While there were no conventional moves found in this analysis one optional move was found in the letters: the contact move. This move was often between the rejection and goodwill moves, though its location had some variation. It was found in about 30% (N=14) of the letters. What is of particular interest is that there were two sides to this move: contact and no contact. Ten of the 14 instances offer a way to contact someone about the decision; on the other hand, 4 of 14 explicitly/implicitly say not to contact them. Of the letters that had this contact step, some were more vague, and others were more specific:

(11) Vague: If our office may be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us. Letter #6

(12) Specific: Inquiries about your application or the decision may be submitted in writing to: Graduate Admissions Officer, Linguistics, ADDRESS, xxx@xxx.edu. Letter #3

And perhaps what is most curious is one letter had both:

(13) If you have questions about the decision you may contact the program to which you applied directly. Program contact information can be found at xxx.edu/xxx. Please note that

some departments are unable to respond to such requests due to large volumes of applications received. Letter #36

Perhaps this conflicting information is the result of a general rejection template for the whole university, that is not tailored to individual departments.

4.3. UNCOMMON MOVES. There were three uncommon moves that were found in this study: the letter move (N=3, 6%), the other programs move (N=3, 6%), and the scholarships move (N=1, 2%). Some examples of the moves are as follows:

(14) Letter: This is your official notification. A letter will not be mailed to you. Letter #45

(15) Other Programs: I encourage you to consider other degree and certificate programs at XXX. To make it easier for you to explore additional graduate programs, there will be no additional application fee for applications you submit for 2021 fall. Program information and details are available at xxx.edu/gradprograms. Letter #2

(16) Scholarships: If you have also applied for scholarships as listed on the application form, those applications will not be considered any further. Letter #22

Because there are not many examples of these moves it is difficult to say if they have steps, like what can be seen in the larger obligatory moves. The letter move consisted of a mention of a physical letter. This may be remanent of the days in which letters used to be mailed out to applicants, and still are in some select cases. In the other programs move, the letter suggested that the applicant might want to consider other programs at the same school. This move is interesting as applicants who have just been rejected from a university may not be particularly inclined to apply to a different program at that same institution. Perhaps expecting this response, one of the letters included an offer to waive the application fee. The last uncommon move was the scholarships move, where the program in question mentioned the applicant would no longer be considered for scholarships if they applied to any. This move seems to add insult to injury, as surely an applicant would be aware that if they are rejected from the program, they would no longer be eligible for the scholarships at that institution.

4.4. TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS RESULTS. It might seem surprising that there were 50 rejection clauses, despite the fact there were only 47 letters; however, some of the letters contained more than one rejection.

Examining the clauses with the rejections, similar to Hashiba (2010) the majority of them were found to be doing/material processes at 68% (N=34). The remaining 32% (N=16) were being processes. While the transitivity analysis does not reveal exactly what was hypothesized (i.e., that most of the time the rejectors would be omitted), a sizeable proportion of the rejections, (32%, N=16) in their use of a passive construction omitted the actor, which resulted in classification as a being process. Some examples of the rejections are as follows:

(17) All applicants' files, including yours, received a thorough review, and after careful consideration we have decided not to extend you an offer of admission. Letter #7

(18) I am writing with considerable regret to let you know that we are not able to offer you admission to our program. Letter #25

- (19) I am writing on behalf of the Linguistics graduate admissions committee at XXX to report that we have carefully reviewed your application, but we are unable to recommend you for admission to our program. Letter #29
- (20) We regret to inform you that you are not being offered admission. Letter #33

In examples 17, 18 and 19 the subordinate clause is where the actual rejection occurs, and the actors are “we,” and the goals are “you.” Also in examples 18, 19 and 20, the first clause is a saying process as with I/“we” giving a message to the applicant. Though in example 20 the subordinate clause is the rejection, and this is a being process as there is no agent or actor but “you” is the carrier and “not being offered admission” is the attribute.

Additionally, a closer examination of the doing/material processes (N=34) reveals that 100% of the actors were either “we,” first person plural, (65%, N=22), or a third party (35%, N=12). Perhaps indicates that the rejectors are trying to distance themselves from delivering the bad news. This especially seems evident in the fact “I,” first-person singular, can be seen in other parts of the letters, and even is often used in the main clauses of the rejection step, as seen in example 18. Among the saying processes (N=34), 56% (N=19) had the sayer as “I,” as exemplified in examples 18 and 19, but then for the actual rejection this shifts to either “we” or a third party. This may demonstrate the rejector distancing themselves from the news by lumping themselves in with a group when making the rejection, rather than them giving the rejection as an individual. Alternatively, first-person plural and/or a third party may also have been used to legitimize the decision by emphasizing that it was made by multiple people or a group/committee.

5. Discussion. As hypothesized, there are some similarities between prior findings related to job rejection letters and the current findings from PhD rejection letters. Both types of letters make use of a refusal/rejection move, both have a goodwill move, and both often provide an explanation. However, there are some unique uncommon moves found in PhD rejection moves, such as mentions of scholarships or other programs. What is particularly interesting is the optional contact move, which in some cases gave the applicant a way to inquire about the decision, though sometimes told the applicant not to contact the program they had applied to. These differing messages may indicate a sense of performativity in these letters, especially since one letter had both a mention of contacting the program, while also saying that some departments may not respond to queries because of the amount of applications they receive. These mixed messages within a single letter may lead to confusion amongst applicants on what they should do when receiving a rejection. Additionally, there are no mentions in the letters what the procedure looks like if an applicant does try to contact an institution about an admissions decision which puts into question how effective an inquiry would be at assuaging an applicant on the legitimacy of the decision.

While rejection is not an easy subject matter, and different people would likely have different preferred methods of how they would like to be rejected, there do seem to be some rejection approaches that are better than others (i.e., giving a reason or not having contradictory information). The mixed messages found in the contact move and how some letters may provide avenues to contact programs and others request applicants do not contact them, in conjunction with the mixed messages and irony of rejectors discussing the difficulty for them in making these rejections are a couple examples of contradictions found within this genre. Additionally, if many of these letters are form letters, it may seem questionable to assure the applicant they were a strong candidate if everyone who applied is receiving the same rejection letter. Is it unlikely that all applicants were equally worthy/competitive given the fact that most people are rejected, and

this brings into question how effective this serves as a strategy in delivering bad news since this could potentially be viewed as inauthentic. Delivering a consistent, authentic message with a reason may be a small change that rejectors could feasibly implement.

Some limitations of this work include the relatively small sample size of letters, the overrepresentation of Linguistics as an academic field, and the overrepresentation of U.S. based programs. Furthermore, all the moves and steps, as well as the classifications of the transitivity analysis, were labeled by the author, so it is not possible to gauge interrater reliability from this work, and some of the categorizations or moves and steps may have been different with multiple raters.

Future work could investigate whether there is regional variation in rejection letters, as well as variation in the letters based on the academic field of the program applied to. Jablin and Krone (1984) did find some differences in letter characteristics depending on the areas of work of the job, such as whether or not the applicant's information would be kept on file or if the letter noted the position of the letter writer, but these were limited in scope. Additionally, Jalilifar and Qoreishi (2018) and Wang (2019) found different academic disciplines to have different n-grams/lexical bundles. It also would be interesting to see how letters may change over time, though this work found that many letters are reused across years. Perhaps if there were letters from a greater span or time or before the digital age, there might be some diachronic change which could inform us about how norms in delivering rejections may have shifted. Additionally, it may be interesting to consider other types of rejection letters, such as manuscript rejections or journal rejections, which may also hold some similarities as members of the rejection genre and may inform us more broadly about how rejections are delivered.

6. Conclusion. PhD rejection letters have similarities to other bad news rhetoric, particularly in their use of indirect language, as the agents of the rejections were never individuals and the actual rejections were often not in the main clause. PhD rejection letters have similar patterns to job rejection letters, as Thominet (2020) also found a refusal move akin to the rejection move, and both types of letters had a goodwill move. Additionally, the locations of the reasons and the placement of the rejection move and goodwill moves were similar to prior work. However, unlike job rejection letters the PhD letters did not have any conventional moves, and the optional and uncommon moves were different.

It is difficult to balance delivering bad news while maintaining decorum and attempting to keep a positive relationship between the rejector and the rejected. In PhD rejection letters, it is clear many programs attempt to soften these rejections, with a polite, positive message of goodwill, wanting to encourage applicants to remain hopeful. However, it is difficult to say whether applicants would be likely to hear this hopeful message from the ones who gave them the bad news. Although this project did not measure the perceptions of the applicants towards these letters putting the findings presented here into the context of prior perception studies suggests that PhD programs may wish to consider new approaches of care in how they communicate rejection.

References

- Anthony, Laurence. 2023. AntPConc (Version 4.2.4). Freeware. Tokyo, Japan: Waseda University. <https://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/AntPConc>.
- Bhatia, Vijay K. 1993. *Analysing genre: Language and use in professional settings*. New York: Routledge.
- Brown, Penelope & Stephen C. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. 4. Cambridge University Press.

- Brown, Ted. 1993. Unkind cuts: Rethinking the rhetoric of academic job rejection letters. *College English* 55(7). 770-778. <https://doi.org/10.2307/378429>.
- Carlino, Paula. 2012. Helping doctoral students of education to face writing and emotional challenges in identity transition. In Montserrat Castelló & Christiane Donahue (eds.), *University writing: Selves and texts in academic societies* 217–234. London: Emerald Group Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1163/9781780523873_013.
- Clark, Kate. 1992. The linguistics of blame: Representations of women in The Sun's reporting of crimes of sexual violence. In Michael Toolan (ed.), *Language, text and context: Essays in stylistics* 208-224. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fang, Zhihui & Mary Schleppegrell. 2008. *Reading in secondary content areas: A language-based pedagogy*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- French, Sandra L. & Tracey Quigley Holden. 2012. Positive Organizational Behavior: A Buffer for Bad News. *Business Communication Quarterly* 75(2). 209-220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569912441823>.
- Hagge, John & Charles Kostelnick. 1989. Linguistic politeness in professional prose: A discourse analysis of auditors' suggestion letters, with implications for business communication pedagogy. *Written Communication* 6(3). 312-339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088389006003004>.
- Hashiba, Erica. 2010. The representation of World War II: A comparison of Japanese and American textbook discourse. *Intercultural Communication Studies* 19(3). 149-167.
- Jablin, Fredric M. & Kathleen Krone. 1984. Characteristics of rejection letters and their effects on job applicants. *Written Communication* 1(4). 387-406. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088384001004001>.
- Jalilifar Alireza & Seyed Mohammad Qoreishi. 2018. From the perspective of: Functional analysis of formulaic sequences in applied linguistics research articles. *International Journal of English Studies* 18(2). 161-186. <https://doi.org/10.6018/ijes/2018/2/310351>.
- Jansen, Frank & Daniel Janssen. 2010. Effects of positive politeness strategies in business letters. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42(9). 2531-2548. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2010.02.013>.
- Kanoksilapatham, Budsaba. 2005. Rhetorical structure of biochemistry research articles. *English for Specific Purposes* 24(3) 269-292. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2004.08.003>.
- Kessler, Matt. 2020. A text analysis and gatekeepers' perspectives of a promotional genre: Understanding the rhetoric of Fulbright grant statements. *English for Specific Purposes* 60 182-192. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2020.07.003>
- Locker, Kitty O. 1999. Factors in reader responses to negative letters: Experimental evidence for changing what we teach. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 13(1) 5-48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105065199901300101>.
- Samraj, Betty. 2014. 14. Move structure. In Klaus P. Schneider & Anne Baron (eds.), *Pragmatics of discourse* 385-405. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110214406>.
- Swales, John. 1990. *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tardy, Christine. 2011. Genre analysis. In Ken Hyland & Brian Paltridge (eds.), *Continuum companion to discourse analysis* 54-68. London/New York: Continuum.
- Thominet, Luke. 2020. We've selected a candidate who more closely fits our current needs: A genre analysis of academic job-refusal letters. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 34(1) 3-37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651919874099>.

- Wang, Ying. 2019. Functional analysis of text-oriented formulaic expressions in written academic discourse: multiword sequences vs. single words. *English for specific purposes* 54. 50-61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2018.12.002>.
- Wang, Yuanheng (Arthur). 2024. Unpacking the rhetoric of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Statements for academic job application purposes: A step- driven rhetorical move study. *English for Specific Purposes* 75(2024) 49-65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2024.04.001>
- Zhou, Enyu. 2022. Graduate enrollment and degrees: 2011 to 2021. Report. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.
https://cgsnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CGS_GED21_Report_v1-1.pdf.