

Why submittals get rejected

The mechanical truth about the stamp, from a structural engineer who has sat on the reviewing side of the table. Stories first. Then the eleven reasons, and their two-minute fixes.

"I opened the email and just closed the laptop."

- a project manager, describing the moment a package came back. Not the process reaction. The physical one.

Here is what makes that moment worse: when the package was re-read, page by page, the failures were not engineering failures. A data sheet covering twelve models with none of them circled. A certification the spec required and nobody attached. The contractor's stamp, blank.

Three weeks of assembly. And the rejection was decided by items that take under two minutes each to fix.

The myth: "everything gets rejected once"

Almost everyone in this industry believes a first-pass rejection is just part of the process. **Normal is not the same as necessary.** Treating rejections as inevitable is exactly what keeps them inevitable, because nobody studies what actually failed.

Most rejections are **mechanical, not technical**. Sort real rejections into two piles - "the engineering was wrong" and "the package was wrong" - and the second pile towers over the first. That is good news: the second pile is completely preventable.

The eleven mechanical reasons

REASON 1

The unmarked option

A product data sheet covering twelve models, submitted with none circled. The reviewer cannot approve what has not been identified - and choosing for you would make them responsible for the choice. Reviewers do not choose. They reject.

Fix: arrow or highlight the exact model on every catalog page. Thirty seconds.

REASON 2

The blank stamp

The contractor's review stamp, unsigned, says nobody on the sending side looked first. Many reviewers return the package unread. The stamp is not bureaucracy; it is the signature of the first review.

Fix: sign it, date it, mean it. If nobody reviewed before sending, that is the real problem.

REASON 3

The missing certification

The spec calls for a test report or certificate. The supplier did not send it, nobody chased it, and a complete-looking package ships with its one mandatory item missing. "Available upon request" reads as "not checked."

Fix: list PART 1's required items before assembly and check the package against the list, not against the pile the supplier sent.

REASON 4

The unflagged substitution

An alternative product submitted without being identified as a substitution - often not even a deliberate choice, just what the supplier had. It is one of the fastest routes to rejection, and it costs credibility with the reviewer that resubmittal prices cannot buy back.

Fix: if it is not the specified manufacturer or a named acceptable equal, it is a substitution. Use the project's form, every time.

REASON 5

The wrong spec section

An item submitted against the neighbouring section, usually because the package was assembled from a previous project's folder structure. Rejected without the content ever being read.

Fix: match the submittal number and section against THIS project's register before the cover sheet is printed.

REASON 6

The value the data sheet never shows

The spec says 1.5 mils dry film thickness. The data sheet does not say 1.5 mils anywhere. The reviewer cannot approve what they cannot verify - the burden of proof sits with the sender.

Fix: for every performance number the spec names, find it on your page and highlight it. If you cannot find it, the reviewer cannot either.

REASON 7

The recycled transmittal

Last project's name. Old dates. A stale revision number. It signals carelessness before page two, and the reviewer reads the rest of the package through that lens.

Fix: transmittals are rebuilt, never reused.

REASON 8

Four of five comments fixed

The resubmittal that addresses four of the last review's five comments is a guaranteed second rejection. Almost always an administrative miss, not a technical one - the comment lived in a scanned markup nobody turned into a checklist.

Fix: every review comment becomes a numbered item; the resubmittal states where each one was resolved, by page.

REASON 9

The mixed package

Two spec sections in one submittal forces a partial review, and a partial review has one outcome: revise and resubmit.

Fix: one submittal, one section. No exceptions.

REASON 10

Built from the supplier's pile, not the spec

The package assembled from whatever the supplier sent, rather than from what the specification requires. The mismatch is built in before the package is ever submitted - the rejection was guaranteed at assembly.

Fix: read the spec section's PART 1 line by line first. It is the reviewer's checklist; make it yours.

REASON 11

The wrong inbox

Sent to the wrong recipient or the wrong distribution list. Entirely invisible until the deadline passes in silence - a full cycle lost to an address line.

Fix: confirm the routing (architect, EOR, MEP engineer, owner's rep) in the register before sending, and require an acknowledgment.

Why good people make these errors

"I am doing submittals at 11 at night because that is the only quiet time."

Every one of the eleven is obvious in daylight. But packages are assembled at the end of long days, by the person least able to see their own gaps - because the person who assembled it reads what they meant to include, not what is there. **That is not a competence problem. It is how reading works.** It is why a separate pass, by different eyes or a systematic check, exists.

The real cost is never the resubmission

The paperwork is the cheapest part. The real bill arrives in four installments: the review cycle you now wait through twice, the administrative hours of reassembling and re-routing the package, the schedule activities that were waiting on the approval, and - when material was ordered while the submittal was pending - rework instead of paperwork. Nobody who has lived through one calls it cheap. The eleven reasons above cost under two minutes each to prevent.

Prevent all eleven in one pass

The free **42-Point Submittal Checklist** covers every reason on this page and thirty-one more - printable, no email wall, with Project Engineer, Project Manager and Contractor editions. And if you want your process scored before the next package goes out, the free 2-minute **Risk Score** shows exactly where your exposure lives.

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Stories are drawn from real practice with identifying details removed or changed. General good practice, not engineering advice for a specific project.