



Communicating with the Editor

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Correspondence with authors is an important activity in the day-to-day work of editors. The exchange of information and ideas facilitates the publication process from the pre-submission phase through production and publication of accepted articles. Correspondence with the editor creates opportunities to clarify uncertainties and provide essential information about an article or other work under consideration for publication or accepted for publication. This article takes a look at the content of various types of correspondence that can help you establish efficient and clear dialogue with an editor as you work to get your manuscript published.

Queries

Finding the right journal to publish your work is an important first step in a successful and efficient publication experience. Sending a query to the editor of a journal you are interested in can facilitate this undertaking. Queries provide editors the opportunity to discourage submission when the topic and/or article type for the proposed paper are not a good fit with the journal. If the proposed paper seems like a good fit, the query process becomes a mechanism for manuscript development. Based on the abstract you send along with a query, the editor can provide feedback about missing content or limitations that could be corrected prior to submission (for example, reanalysis of data using an alternate approach). As part of the query process, authors can ask practical questions about preparing their proposed manuscript, submitting their paper, how their paper will be peer reviewed, or publication timelines for accepted papers. Queries alert the editorial office to potential papers and allow the editorial staff to prepare for peer review. Despite these advantages, not all editors will accept queries. Before sending a query, read the Information for Authors for the journal you are interested in to carefully determine whether a query will be answered.

Queries are sent to the editor by email or via the editorial management software used by the journal. To get started with your query, characterize your work by topic and article type. Then, carefully read the Information for Authors for journals that seem to be a close match. Prepare a draft title and abstract. Think about why a given journal is a good match for your work so you can convey this information, and make a list of questions for the editor. Compose your message, which should be concise. The subject line for queries sent by email should identify the message as a query, and should include some

indication of the content of the proposed paper (for example, Query: Pain Control RCT). Without this information, a query can easily be lost in an editor's inbox (it is difficult to track a dozen or more queries all with the subject line "Query"). Queries should be answered within about a week. It is acceptable to resend an original message when no reply is received within that timeframe.

Cover Letters

Once you are ready to submit an article to a journal, start with a cover letter, which is an essential component of an article record in the manuscript management system. Cover letters are business letters that transmit essential information about the manuscript, the research or clinical issue, and compliance with legal and regulatory standards. The corresponding author writes the cover letter on behalf of the coauthors of a paper. The corresponding author does not need to be the lead author on the paper.

The cover letter is the first document in an article folder that the editor reads. The complexity and importance of the information requires a thoughtfully composed, well-organized, and carefully formatted letter. Address each of the following items:

- **What the paper is about.** Provide the title of the paper and describe how the content and type of article fit with the journal's mission. State "what the paper adds" to what is already in the literature, and why you think it is important.
- **Novelty.** State whether the contents have been disseminated in any other forum. If yes, provide detail (such as conference name, date).
- **Overlap.** If there is overlap with any other publication, say so. If the paper reports findings of a research study, identify all other papers that have been published, are in press, or are currently under review that use the same project dataset or subset of the dataset (cases, variables, occasions). Provide complete citation information for each paper. Some journals require that a confidential copy of papers under review be provided to the editor, or the editor may request a confidential copy.
- **Authorship.** A statement assuring that all coauthors met criteria for authorship, reviewed the final version of the paper, and agreed with the order of authorship should be included. Briefly identify the contributions of each coauthor. (Note that reordering of author names in the byline, adding authors, or deleting authors requires approval of all the authors ever named in the paper. Colleagues who determine that they should have been authors but were not may contact the editor about authorship). Papers will not be published or accepted for publication until authorship issues are reconciled and satisfactorily documented.
- **Conflicts of interest.** All coauthors independently must provide information related to conflicts of interest (COIs) using the mechanism developed by the publisher of the journal. A summary statement about COIs should also be included in the cover letter and on the title page. If no COIs exist, it is sufficient to state that "The authors have no conflicts of interest to report."
- **Copyright.** Alert the editor to any copyright-protected information (text, tables and figures, video) submitted as part of an article. Identify the copyright holder and include written permission for reuse of the material. Often, permission can be requested using the Copyright Clearance Center (www.copyright.com). Occasionally, identifying the current holder of copyright and contacting them can be a challenge. Let the editor know when this is the case.

- **Research ethics.** Statements about compliance with standards and procedures for research ethics, including approval of the protocol by the ethics committee with oversight of the research, should be included in the cover letter as well as on the title page or within the text of a paper (depending on journal practices).
- **Registration of clinical trials.** The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) has as a standard of publishing practice a requirement that clinical trials be registered—prior to recruitment of the first participant—in order for a paper to be considered for peer review. If the paper is based on findings from a clinical trial, provide the registry, registry number, date of registration, and date of first participant recruitment. For more information, see the ICMJE: www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/publishing-and-editorial-issues/clinical-trial-registration.html.
- **Reviewers.** If there is a potential peer reviewer who, in your judgment, would not be able to provide a fair and unbiased appraisal of your work for any reason, identify the person and ask that he or she not be asked to serve as a reviewer. It is not necessary to explain why you came to this conclusion. If journal policy permits suggesting reviewers, provide the names of those with expertise but with whom you do not have a conflict of interest (such as recent co-investigator status, academic mentor).
- **Contact information.** Include complete contact information for the corresponding author, including e-mail address and telephone numbers. Notify the editor if you will be unavailable at any time during the anticipated period of review for the paper.

Response to Reviewer and Editor Comments

Authors who are invited to revise and resubmit a paper are asked to prepare a document describing their response to reviewer comments. Revised manuscripts are accompanied by a “rebuttal letter” and/or a table listing the reviewer comments alongside any changes that were made. Regardless of the format, the response should explain what changes were made; if changes were not made, the response should explain why the authors thought the original text, table, figure, or line of reasoning was better. “Big picture” items and details are important.

Although the document is often titled “Response to Reviewers,” the editor will read the document carefully to analyze the reasoning and accuracy of any corrections (or rationale provided for not making a suggested change). The Response to Reviewers on an original submission is an opportunity to advocate for publication of your paper; in that sense, it is an example of persuasive writing. Show the editor that you carefully considered the input you received about your original submission. Be comprehensive in your response (but don’t be slavish; for example, it isn’t necessary to note every suggestion for correcting grammar and punctuation.) Provide evidence for any issues related to accuracy of content. If something was misunderstood by reviewers, explain the issue. Don’t be afraid to admit that the original text may have been vague, but it is not necessary to be self-denigrating. Choose your words carefully. Be logical. Show how the revision is an improvement over the original, and how it is now a worthy contribution.

Phone Calls

Editorial communication is usually conducted in writing. The cover letters, rebuttal letters and documents, and appeals can then be used to document the procedures used to handle the manuscript from submission to publication and beyond. Phone calls are infrequently used, but they can be helpful

in some publishing-related circumstances—especially when issues arise that would benefit from discussion. Prepare for a phone call with an editor as you would for any business call. Time is of the essence, so be prepared. Know the topic of the discussion. Be interactive and engaged. Remember that your voice is the instrument of communication; use a positive tone and select your words carefully.

Take notes so you can recall details of the conversation later. At the end of the call, confirm your understanding of the issues as discussed and any follow-up plans that were agreed upon, including timelines and deadlines.

Appealing an Editor's Decision

Perhaps the most challenging communication with an editor involves appealing the decision to reject a manuscript. Receipt of a message conveying a decision to not accept a paper is trying. It is not unusual for authors to be upset. Reviewer comments may seem unsatisfactory and the editor's decision inexplicable. Still, dissatisfaction alone is not grounds for appealing an editor's decision, and an appeal message should never be prepared in an emotional heat. Instead, take some time to cool down. Review the journal policy and procedure for appealing the editor's decision. Then, revisit the reviewer comments and reread the decision letter. A review procedure that was perceived to be unfair or based on inaccuracies may be grounds for an appeal; in this case, follow the journal procedure. Explain that you are appealing the decision, and why. Appeals procedures typically involve timelines that should be closely followed.

Letters to the Editor

Published papers are a medium for communication among scientists. Links with the thoughts of the past are reflected in the cited literature. The paper as entered into the scientific record enables communication with scientists of the future. In the present, publication of the paper and its discovery, especially via scientific indexing services, makes communication with readers in the present possible. Contemporary readers can facilitate dialogue about published papers by writing letters to the editor. When a letter about a paper is received, the editor usually offers authors of a paper the opportunity to respond to comments about their work. Letters and author replies may be published and indexed.

Letters should be short and to the point. The article that is the target of the comments should be clearly identified. The reaction of the letter writer to the target published work should be clear (e.g., complementary, critical, raised new ideas, or suggested ideas for application) and should include evidence within a logical argument explaining the comment. The Information for Authors should be consulted for directions about preparing and submitting a letter.

Concluding Comments

Correspondence with journal editors is a critical component in the publishing process. Formal, polite, respectful, clear, well-composed messages and letters enhance communication to facilitate the publication process. You should ensure that required correspondence is prepared thoroughly and with care, and avail yourself of the opportunity to correspond with editors when they have questions.