

# HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR: AN AUTHOR'S GUIDE

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## ABSTRACT

*A letter to the editor provides a means of communication between the author of an article and the reader of a journal, allowing continued dialog about journal content to take place. Although not original research per se, a letter may provide new insight, make corrections, offer alternate theories, or request clarification about content printed in the journal. By providing additional information, the evidence may be strengthened. This paper provides first time writers some insight into the process of writing a letter to the editor.*

## INTRODUCTION

There are times when one reads a journal article and something more needs to be said. Perhaps a possible error is discovered or there is a need to clarify a portion of the text. Sometimes an alternate and worthy view point should be considered. In these and other cases, a letter should be written to the editor to share with others your viewpoint to help clarify the records in the literature. Busy practitioners have little time to spare in scholarly pursuits and often find the publication process intimidating. However, letters from practicing doctors may help add clinical insight into the scholarship of chiropractic.

Although some people are motivated to write a letter to the editor, sometimes it does not occur. What often happens is that once the passion for the author to write is converted into the pragmatics of writing, fear sets in, which may hold back the author from ever publishing the vital information that he or she wanted to share. It is for this reason, that we offer this brief "how to" article on writing a letter to the editor, so that journal readers may feel more comfortable contributing to the literature.

## Who should write a letter to the editor?

One need not be a researcher or a well-published author to contribute a letter to the editor. All readers of the journal are responsible for reading and making corrections or comments by way of letters to the editor, thus keeping the literature accurate and authors and editors accountable. Therefore, if you are reading a paper, you are part of the group who can write a letter to the editor. What is required is that you have thoroughly read and thought about the content that you are responding to and are familiar with the other literature published on the topic.

## Why are letters important?

Letters to the editor help to maintain and strengthen the evidence. The process is fairly simple: readers provide a critical review in the format of a letter to the editor and have it published. From there, the letter is recorded alongside the original paper in literature indexing systems, thus helping to clarify the original work and strengthen the evidence.<sup>1-6</sup>

In most indexing systems, letters are indexed and linked to the original article. This allows readers to view both the original article, the letter and re-

sponse from the original authors and helps provide additional information about the original article.<sup>1</sup> One would think that once a paper is published, that is the end of the discussion. However, the publication of an article is just the beginning of the discussion since, through letters, a type of post-publication peer-review process occurs and a more complete picture is recorded.<sup>2</sup>

### **What should I write about?**

Authors should write about what they are passionate about. Typically, letters address the contents of an original journal article for 1 or more of the following: 1) identify errors and make a correction; 2) provide an alternate theory; 3) provide additional information; 4) offer additional evidence; 5) provide a counterpoint. Depending on the original article you are responding to, your focus should be on the purpose you have decided to write about.

Keep your points simple and focused; avoid injecting personal comments about the authors. Comments that are included should be backed up with references. Traditional reference formatting should be used in letters, the same way they are used in full length articles. Be sure to have references for statements made as fact so that you can back up the points that you are making.

Typically, the best letters are brief. Just because there is a word limit does not mean that you need to reach that number. Do not repeat the original article at length. Since it is already assumed that you are replying to a specific article, there is no need to repeat substantial portions of the original article in your letter. No paper is perfect and the chances are good that you may notice a few points that you feel deserve clarification. Addressing several minor issues in a letter generally makes the letter too long and dilutes your message. Instead, keep your letter brief and to the point and stay focused on your primary purpose for writing.

### **How do I submit a letter?**

Before sitting down to write, it is best to read the instructions for authors for the particular journal to which you wish to write the letter. Some journals have specific requirements and restrictions, so knowing these limitations in advance is very helpful. For example, if a journal limits the letter word count to 500 words and 8 references, it would be frustrating to find this out after you have written a

2500 word letter with 25 references. Remember, it is a letter to the editor about an article in the journal; it is not a journal article by itself.

Most journals only accept letters discussing papers published in their own journal. In other words, most journals will not publish letters about a manuscript that is published in a different journal. Some journals will also consider letters that address items not related to a previous publication, such as a clinical pearl, a lesson learned from a patient case, etc. To make sure, contact the editor if there is any question before you submit your letter for consideration.

Most journals have a limit on the amount of time allowed for letters post-publication. For example, some journals may only consider letters submitted within 2 months of the original publication date. The reason for this is that corrections to the record should be done in a timely manner. So if you are impassioned to write a letter to the editor, do not put it off until another time, since there may be a window of time in which you need to submit in order for it to be considered for publication.

Follow the instructions for authors as to how to submit your letter. Most journals forbid the letter author to communicate directly with the author of the original paper in order to insure impartial handling of the letter by the editor. Thus, if there are any questions about your letter, contact the editor of the journal, not the author of the paper. The letter should also be submitted to the journal, not the author of the original paper, so that the submissions process and procedures may be appropriately followed.

Most journals require a cover letter with all submissions. Although it may seem strange to submit a cover letter for another letter, the purpose of the cover letter is to introduce your intentions to submit your work to only this journal, to declare if you have any conflicts of interest, and to include any other details as to why you feel this letter is important and should be published. In addition to the cover letter, remember to submit an assignment of copyright for each author of the letter. Even though letters are short in length, they are still covered by copyright for the journal. Therefore, the copyright forms must be submitted in order for your letter to be published.

### What happens after my letter is submitted?

Once your letter has been submitted, it goes through an evaluation process which is quite similar to that of a regular paper submission. The editor or editorial staff will screen the letter for essential components. Is the letter submitted in a timely fashion? Does it provide evidence for the statements made? Is it in the correct format? Does it provide a salient and meaningful clarification, enlightenment or correction to a previous publication? Even if the basic requirements are met, some letters are not accepted for publication. Thus, not all letters submitted are necessarily published. However, you will increase your chances of having your letter published if you follow some basic guidelines that are provided in Figure 1.<sup>7</sup>

### What happens if my letter is accepted?

Once you have received an acceptance letter from the editor, your responsibility as an author is not quite over. The editor will most likely have already asked the author of the original article to draft a reply to your letter. That author may choose to reply or not, depending on if he or she feels a reply is warranted. If there is a reply and it has been received by the editor, the next step is to designate which issue of the journal it will be published in. Thus, letters are not necessarily published in the very next issue since it may take some time for the original author to reply.

Typically accepted letters and responses will be edited for grammar, style, and length prior to publication. This depends on the journal; however, most editors tend to minimize editing since the original meaning and intention of the letter should not be changed from what was sent to the original author and what is eventually published.

Once the journal issue has been determined, your letter will be sent to the publisher's office to be page set. A proof of your letter (how it will look when it is finally published) will be sent to you so that you may check for any typesetting errors and answer any questions (queries) the typesetters may have. It is the author's responsibility to check for all errors and answer all queries during the proof stage. It is important to remember that once the letter has been published, it cannot be altered in any way. Most journals require a quick response from the letter author, so it is important to reply by the

#### CONTENT

1. Are the grammar and spelling correct?
2. Is the message of the letter short and to the point?
3. Does the letter focus on a clear purpose?
4. Is the purpose clearly stated in the letter's introduction?
5. Is the information relevant, accurate, and appropriate?
6. Does it make a substantive contribution to the literature?
7. Are the points supported with citable evidence?
8. Are references published works?
9. Is content timely?
10. Have you checked to make sure there are no disparaging/derogatory comments or attacks on the other authors?
11. Have you avoided repeating the original article at length in your letter?
12. Have you checked to make sure that the material does not duplicate previously stated arguments from other letters or publications?

#### TECHNICAL

1. Are the letter authors' names and affiliations clearly stated?
2. Is a separate cover letter to the editor present that lists any conflicts or competing interests and that your letter is original and not been submitted or published elsewhere?
3. Have you completely filled out the assignment of copyright form for all authors?
4. Are you submitting as close as possible to original article publication date?
5. If relating to a published article, are you submitting to the same journal of the original article?
6. Has the journal's criteria been met as stated in the instructions for authors (eg, length)?
7. Can you confirm that the material has not been published elsewhere in printed or electronic format (eg, your letter content is not published on a blog, a newsletter, on the web, etc)?

Figure 1. Guidelines for writing and submitting a letter to the editor. Modified from Johnson C, Green B. *Helpful hints: writing effective letters to the editor. J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2006;29:415-416.

requested deadline, or else the letter will be published 'as is' since journals have publication deadlines and cannot wait for tardy authors.

Finally, when your letter is published, sit back and enjoy seeing your letter in print. Who knows, maybe someone will write a letter about your letter?

## CONCLUSIONS

Letters to the editor provide an interesting way for authors and readers to communicate and improve the literature. This venue is an ideal way for busy practitioners to contribute to scholarly dialog in the profession. Although not all submitted letters can be

published, authors can increase the likelihood of having a letter accepted for publication by following some of the suggestions in this article.

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