

Chapter-24

How to Write a Letter to the Editor

Shaukat Ali Jawaid

International Committee of Medical Journals (ICMJE) recommendations state that “Medical Journals should provide readers with a mechanism for submitting comments, questions or criticisms about published articles, usually but not necessary always through a correspondence section or online Forum. The authors of articles discussed in correspondence have a responsibility to respond to substantial criticism of their work using those same mechanism and should be asked by editors to respond. Authors of correspondence should be asked to declare any competing or conflicting interests”.¹

Publication of letters or inclusion of correspondence section in a journal also shows its readership which is considered a plus point for the quality and standard of a journal. The editors may edit for length, eliminating grammatical mistakes or improving the English language or rephrase certain sentences to ensure that the message is conveyed to the readers effectively. The Editors are also required to screen discourteous, inaccurate or derogatory remarks comments from the letters, correspondence.

Whenever you think of submitting a letter for publication to a journal, you must consider the following basic questions. If you find a satisfactory answer, only then proceed further.

1. Why you wish to write the letter, what is your purpose?
2. Look at the journal to which you wish to submit, does it publish Letters or has a Correspondence section where such communications are covered?

3. Whatever you wish to say, does it justify writing a communication to the Journal?²

Usually most letters are comments in response to a previous publication. It is always advisable to first Read Instructions for Authors of the Journal and look at the published letters, correspondence. Mostly it should have one or at the most two authors, should not be too lengthy and must be accompanied by two to three latest relevant references to strengthen your viewpoint. Since there is always too much pressure on limited space available in the prestigious journals, the Editors always welcome short letters which conveys the message effectively. Some journals in their Instructions for authors have put word limit for letters. Some may even welcome an accompanying table or illustration but not all of them will entertain such communications.

Sometimes the authors wish to draw the attention of the readers to an important topic which may or may not be related to some already published manuscript in the journal. Instead of sending in a brief communication, they take the help of a letter to convey their message which is quite acceptable.

Example-I

Prof. H.R. Ahmad had published a new Model for PhD Elective course in Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences in 2016. ³In order to popularize that and bring it to the notice of the readers particularly academicians in the basic sciences, they wrote a Letter which was included in the Correspondence section of the Journal.⁴

Example-II

Dr. Naqvi et al published a manuscript entitled “Etiology and severity of various forms of ocular war injuries in patients presenting at an Army Hospital in Pakistan” in Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences in 2016.⁵ Dr. Qamar ul Islam another ophthalmologist working in a Military Hospital sent us a critical analysis and pointed out that ocular war injuries are bilateral in 15-25% of cases. He wondered how in a study where H.D blast

and splinter injuries are the most frequent mode of injury, not a single case of bilateral ocular injury has been reported which was quite unusual and contrary to the published literature. He also supplemented his point of view with three related references.⁶⁻⁸ in this communication the author also pointed out certain other important points including Ocular Trauma Score which is predictive model for final visual outcome on the basis of initial raw score recorded at the time of injury. He opined that Head to Head comparison of OTS in open versus closed globe injuries was not a valid option though OTS can be used to validate the final visual outcome separately in open and closed globe injuries.

In such cases, original authors are invited to respond to the criticism, hence keeping up the professional ethics, the comments from the author were sent to the authors of the above referred manuscript through the correspondence author. They were asked to respond in a two weeks' time so that their response could also be incorporated when the letter is published. They did respond and their viewpoint was also published with the letter. In their response the authors said that "ocular trauma was a vast universe in itself and victims of blast injuries do undergo post-traumatic stress disorders which can be worsened by poor vision. While OTS helped us in managing trauma victims by predicting the prognosis of ocular injury, it has its limitations and does not cater for the chemical injuries, thermal injuries and adnexal injuries but so far this was the best predictive tool in a war set up".

This is the way how the Editors handle such viewpoints which ensures a healthy debate. But if the authors of the original manuscript fail to respond, the editors cannot withhold publication of the critical comments but they are published with a note that the authors of the original manuscript failed to respond.

One must remember that rude comments or criticism is never helpful and such communications are often not entertained by the Editors.

Publication of a Case Report in a letter

Sometimes even the management of an odd case is also sent for publication by the authors in the correspondence section of the journal. If such communications give some useful information regarding diagnosis, management of a disease, it may get published. In such cases, first give brief introduction followed by case description and brief discussion which should be of interest to the readers. Do not repeat the information in the beginning and at the end which is a common mistake by some authors of such communications.²

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1. Shaukat Ali Jawaid
Chief Editor,
Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences,
Karachi - Pakistan.
E mail: pjms@pjms.com.pk, pulse@pulsepakistan.com