

An article on “letter to the editor”

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Abstract

A ‘Letter to the Editor’ is an abbreviated form of communication where ‘readers’ can express their carefully considered scientific opinion about a recently published article in a journal. It is considered as ‘post-publication peer review’. There are certain things that a letter writer and the ‘editor’ need to keep in mind while writing a ‘Letter’ for a journal. The ‘editor’ needs to curate the contents of the ‘Letter’ and make sure that there are no misinformation shared. The formatting, type, scope and the scientific quality of the ‘Letter’ depend on the journal that publishes them, and hence, different publications may require their ‘letter writers’ to present the information that they want in a certain way. The following article reflects an overview of the role of editors and writers, guidelines, scope, and format of the ‘Letter to the Editor’.

Keywords: Editorial, Letter, Short communication

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INTRODUCTION

‘Letter to the Editor’ has become an inefaceable part of every peer-reviewed journal that harbours visions of establishing a reputation for scientific propriety and excellence. It is a harbinger of a high-quality peer-reviewed journal where the scientific ‘back and forth’ not only sets the benchmark of scientific/research excellence and upholds the lofty spirit of scientific enquiry but also serves to engender and foster trust with respect to the reliability of the scientific data and evidence stated.

A ‘Letter to the Editor’ is an abbreviated form of communication where ‘readers’ can express their carefully considered scientific opinion about a recently published article in a journal.^[1] It is considered as ‘post-publication peer review’. This contributor is usually referred to as a

‘letter writer’. This ‘Letter’ may also be in the form of a brief case report or a clinical communication that is not elaborate enough to warrant the space that is normally allotted for a full-length article.^[2] In addition to all the types mentioned above, a ‘Letter to the Editor’ can also be written on any subject of special interest or contemporary issues of importance to the readers of the journal.

ROLE OF THE EDITORS

There are a multitude of things to keep in mind for both the ‘letter writer’ and the ‘editor’. Firstly, the ‘editor’ has the onerous task of culling the ‘Letter’ and painstakingly evaluating the content to make sure that there is no obvious or overt misinformation or error as this could seriously impact the stellar reputation that a highly regarded publication may enjoy with the scientific community.

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Hence, it is often at the editor's discretion that the 'Letter' will be published. The formatting, type, scope, and the scientific quality of the 'Letter' depend on the journal that publishes them, and hence, different publications may require their 'authors' (those who author the full-length articles) and consequently their 'letter writers' to present the information that they want to present in a certain way.^[3] The one key difference in the 'Letter to the Editor' section between the scientific peer-reviewed journals and other 'types' is that the 'Letters' that are published in the former are generally more austere in presentation and stripped of any 'hint' of emotion and are solely based on the scientific evidences by quoting reputed citations.

GUIDELINES FOR THE LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Healthcare reform that has a significant impact on the entire populace is often rolled out on the basis of such communication, and hence, one can now begin to understand the critical nature of this 'scientific exchange'. But despite the self-evident gravitas and the generically sombre tenor of an academic/scientific peer-reviewed journal, the 'Letter to the Editor' column is the one space, which allows a young researcher to hone his/her scientific writing skills by making piercing and pertinent scientific observations in a terse, economic style. More significantly, the 'Letter' also allows a budding researcher to add a smidgeon of appropriate humour to the proceedings, which is especially vital for obvious reasons. Now this may seem to be contradictory on the surface, but when one delves deeper, one can clearly discern that there is a self-evident time and place for making most of these observations. There is a fine line between carefully calibrated humour and flippancy, and the latter is to be completely eschewed. The 'Letter' may also be subjected to formal peer-review before publication, or the 'Letter' may be published entirely at the editor's discretion.

However, there are certain ground rules that fall within the common purview of all scientific journals. Most 'Letters' are meant to be succinct and specifically target one area of interest/expertise. Rambling, verbose 'Letters' or conversations are universally and summarily rejected. Many prestigious journals seemingly regard the 'Letter to the Editor' column to be as important and significant in value as a full-length article.

WRITING A LETTER

There are certain things that a letter writer needs to keep in mind while writing a 'Letter' for a journal. As mentioned previously, brevity is the single most significant quality that needs to be exercised by all 'authors' because although the

number of words allowed for a 'Letter' may vary according to the scientific journal in question, common consensus dictates that most 'Letters' are not allowed to breach the '600' word limit.^[3] One of the key objectives of a 'Letter to The Editor' is to either lend credence or negate a point of view articulated in a publication by putting forth one's own considered opinion gleaned through correct references/citations and understanding of the topic in question. This is one of the reasons why 'case reports' cannot be written in the form of a 'Letter' even if the contributor keeps it succinct and adheres to all the other stipulations. 'Case report' is generally accommodated in the 'short communication' or 'case reports' section of a journal. Most reputed journals also expect the 'Letters' to be submitted within a stipulated time frame, and hence, timely correspondence is by default, a prerequisite for publication. Adhering to the 'time/word limit' is mandatory, and most scientific journals scrupulously adhere to these limits except in rare or compelling circumstances, which may warrant a temporary relaxation of these self-made rules. Another suggestion in this regard to a letter writer is to avoid the potential pitfall of adding too many descriptions and details to embellish an opinion. All potential conflicts of interests are to be disclosed to the editor without reservations as credibility is regarded to be non-negotiable. Another important tip for the letter writer is to ensure that the assertions that contradict an opinion or a finding made in the published article shall be endorsed by appropriate citations from the literature, which is the most effective way to reinforce his/her scientific opinion.^[4] Not all scientific journals subject potential 'Letters' to undergo peer reviews, but most journals will not permit the inclusion of unpublished data in a 'Letter'. Most scientific journals also tend to not entertain publication of 'Letters' where old ideas and scientific opinions are often regurgitated. Citing of relevant and pertinent references is welcomed by all scientific journals, and the onus is on the contributor to ensure that all the references are well articulated, accurate and appropriate.

Finally, the 'writer' needs to ensure that the 'Letter' is written in a tone that common consensus deems to be civil, respectful and professional even if his/her considered scientific opinion is in sharp contrast to those exhibited by the published author(s). Otherwise, an interesting counterargument raised by the 'letter writer' may risk being eclipsed if the nature of the argument is perceived to be confrontational.^[5] The general motive behind allowing the publication of letters that disagree with published articles is that this 'exchange' will further the literature and uphold the true spirit of scientific enquiry. Thus, ad hominem attacks are promptly rejected by all journals and the letter writer is expected to 'contribute' in a manner befitting a scientific researcher/professional.^[6]

However, the *raison d'être* of 'Letter to the Editor' in Indian Scientific journals seems to be largely forgotten by most of the readers and editors. Writing a good 'Letter' is a skill in itself, which can only be honed by practice and scrupulously adhering to the norms of universally accepted practice. Pedantic expressions are to be avoided, and they abound in a lot of 'Letters' that are currently being published in many journals.

The 'Letter' is meant to explicate or interpret to further the scientific debate and provoke an interesting discussion. Parroting a scientifically established hypothesis can be used to further the existing literature in the form of a full-blown review article or independent study. This can be done to corroborate or confirm a previously established scientific opinion, but it warrants no space on a 'Letter to the Editor' column. The editor has the already onerous task of sifting through material and zeroing in on those he/she deems fit for publication as a 'Letter', and we are doing the former no favours by not adhering to established practices of writing a 'Letter'. There is a crying need to re-establish the ground rules that contributors need to adhere to, when sending in 'Letters' that are intended for publication. The 'intellectual' content of the 'Letter' occupies paramount importance because space is at a premium and generating terse, scientific prose is what needs honing and perfecting.

Unfortunately, we are privy to scenarios, where entire case reports with all the attendant data and pedantic information have made their way to the 'Letter to the Editor' section. As much as we need to acknowledge the current state of affairs with regard to 'letter writer', we must also concede the fact that most editorial boards can do better apropos the publication of quality content. One way of ensuring this is by analysing if the 'contributor' has fully assimilated the entirety of views espoused in the original article. Delving on the contributor's publication history and area of expertise by searching the scientific databases may prove to be an effective tool in curating the pertinent information needed to make publication decisions.^[7]

A 'Letter to the Editor' column needs to be carefully nurtured and subjected to quality controls not just for the aforementioned reasons but also for the simple fact that the scientific temper of a community is best reflected in the quality of these 'exchanges/deliberations'. For instance, when someone presents his research, case report, or a new scientific perspective orally, or in the form of a 'poster' at a scientific gathering/forum/conference, there is a chance for the discerning attendees and peers to reflect and ruminate on the thoughts or opinions expressed by the presenter. This is where the 'Letter to The Editor' column

comes to the fore. A scrupulously written post-publication peer review in the form of a 'Letter' will also ensure that the potential contributors and original researchers are at the top their game when they send in their scientific contributions for publication to the journal as they will understand that the scientific community will look at their contribution with a critical eye, and hence, only quality work will pass muster. In addition, the 'letter writer' will develop the much-vaunted skill of critically analysing and researching a scientific article, where review of existing literature pertinent to the topic in question can be used as an effective tool to bolster or weaken an argument or point of view. As a consequence, the quality of scientific output will see a marked increase.

CONCLUSION

'Letter to the Editor' is considered as a post-publication peer review, and journals should allocate sufficient space for the readers to express their views and initiate a productive discussion on the published material. We sincerely hope that this communication may prove useful to our scientific publication brethren across all spheres in revisiting and re-evaluating existing publication norms in regard to the 'Letters to The Editor' column and put in place quality assurance practices, which are needed to ensure that universally accepted norms of scientific publication are met.

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