Composition of Cover Letters and Effective Suggestions for Potential Reviewers

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The Significance of Cover Letters

Preparing your manuscript for submission is a large task; however, creating a good cover letter is an equally important one. Although online submission has become extremely common, a cover letter is nevertheless required. Many years ago, before the rise in awareness regarding ethical issues, the cover letter was basically a mere formality. However, with the growing concern for author responsibility and higher ethical standards, it can be said that the cover letter carries more weight than it did 30 years ago, as it is the first formal document in the communications between the author and editor-in-chief. The cover letter should make it immediately clear to the editor about the novelty and significance of your study or findings, and why the specific journal and its readership would benefit from accepting to publish your manuscript. In other words, as the cover letter is probably the first document the editor will read, it must capture the attention of the editor by providing the main highlights of your manuscript to convince the editor that it is worth publishing. Furthermore, in addition to introducing your manuscript, there are a number of elements that should be included concerning the issue of publication ethics, such as conflict of interest, duplicate publication, and authorship.

Important Elements to Include When Composing a Cover Letter

A cover letter should be within one A4 page in length, therefore, all the information you provide needs to be concise. Although there is no longer any mention of double-spacing in the ICMJE Recommendations, the authors believe that it is still recommended to maintain double-spacing throughout all scientific manuscripts including figures and tables, but an exception to that is the cover letter, which should be single spaced.

In the first paragraph, you should give the title and format (such as an original research paper, case report, letter to the editor etc.) of the manuscript you are submitting. In addition, a cover letter should include statements indicating that the manuscript submitted is original, meaning that it has not been previously published in another journal or is being submitted to another journal simultaneously. In a situation where duplicate or redundant publication could be suspected, it is very important to explain the situation thoroughly to the editor-in-chief and also provide copies of any previous works that might be related to the problem. Addressing the situation openly and honestly in the cover letter before publication is crucial because if you are investigated for scientific misconduct after the manuscript has been published, it can be very damaging for your career.

A very effective way to rapidly introduce the highlights of your manuscript, is to prepare a mini-abstract, usually in the second paragraph of your cover letter. In it, you should provide a brief summary of the most important conclusions or findings of your manuscript as “the cover letter provides the chance for authors to persuade the editors of the significance of their work in a less formal manner than what is written in the manuscript itself”\(^1\).

In the final paragraph, include a statement that all authors have read and approved the manuscript; and that all authors meet all authorship criteria, either defined by the ICMJE\(^2\) or the journal’s specific authorship criteria if it has one. Even if there is a statement elsewhere, it is better to also have in the cover letter, a segment concerning authorship. Furthermore, you will also need to include a conflict of interest (COI) statement concerning the possibility of any COI that should be disclosed. Most journals now have separate COI disclosure forms which require all authors to disclose any potential COI in detail, but you still need to include a COI statement in the cover letter.
Suggesting Potential Reviewers

Authors may find it uncomfortable to suggest the names of potential reviewers as they are often under the mistaken impression that this will somehow have a negative effect on their submission. However, it is often better to suggest reviewers, as long as this is done properly. For example, for about 10 years or so, the New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) has stated in its Instructions to Authors that “we encourage authors to suggest the names of possible reviewers, but we reserve the right of final selection.” In other words, not only the NEJM but many other journals actually encourage authors to do this, although the final decision will be made by the editor-in-chief. Since reviewers are most likely to be researchers and colleagues in your field of research, there is a chance that the journal may select inappropriate reviewers to review your manuscript as they cannot always find the most suitable, active reviewers in each field. Therefore it would be helpful for the author to select and suggest potential reviewers who are actively doing research in the field, who may have a better understanding of the topic or study. Furthermore, the journal will welcome new and active reviewers, as this will help to improve its level. As you can see, there is nothing harmful about suggesting reviewers.

How to Suggest Reviewers

When suggesting potential reviewers, it is advantageous to give 3 or 4 names with contact information (address, affiliation, e-mail address, telephone/fax number), either in the cover letter, or in the appropriate section which can be found in some online submission formats. If this information is being included in the cover letter, it should appear in the paragraph after the brief summary. A possible statement might be, “Without wishing to take a liberty, my coauthors and I would like to suggest as possible referees, Dr. AAA, M.D. (contact information), Dr. BBB, M.D. (contact information), and Dr. CCC, M.D., Ph.D. (contact information)”.

When suggesting reviewers, you may wish to consider the location of the journal and its main readership and suggest potential reviewers from the appropriate region. For example, if you are submitting to a U.S. based journal, then it would be better to select 2 people from North American institutions and 1 from another geographical area such as Europe or Asia. It is also advisable to include papers written by suggested reviewers as references. Another important thing to remember, based on common sense, is to never tell your colleagues that you have suggested them as potential reviewers, as this may cause some hostility or possible friction between the possible reviewer and author.

References