



Writer's Camp



We Get Letters

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You can write queries and letters to the editor but there are considerations.

As an editor, I receive several sorts of “letters.” These letters can be *queries* and *letters to the editor*. Queries are typically received as emails whereas letters to the editor are received via the manuscript submission process. Although both serve a unique purpose and have distinct considerations—and we’ll learn more about these in just a moment—I warn you that some journals and editors accept neither.

Query Me This

Let’s start with queries. Queries allow authors to take a proactive role in the scholarly publication process as they can ask about their manuscript’s fit versus a journal’s editorial mission.¹ If an editor allows queries, this will usually be noted in the journal’s author

guidelines. Not all journal editors want queries—these editors may ignore your email. If you do not receive a response to your query within a week, you can send a follow-up email. If you still get no response, it is likely the editor is not going to respond to your query. Importantly, no response to a query does not mean you cannot submit your paper to the journal—although you may not want to do so.

Frankly, as an author, I prefer sending a query before spending time submitting my work via detailed online processes—for me, queries are timesavers. As an editor, I welcome queries to *Nursing Research* as long as stated guidelines are followed. These guidelines include listing the title and the type of paper—such as an original research study, methods paper, brief report, and review. Additionally, I want to see a structured abstract that includes background, objective, methods, results, and discussion sections—which is the type of abstract we require for all papers. Reading a properly formatted abstract allows me to provide an informed opinion about the paper's fit as well as about its content, methods, and other important aspects. I will admit that I am also reading the query with an eye on professional tone. Editors do not need your life story in the query—but do provide common courtesies like a salutation and signature, as well as grammatically correct writing.

I try to respond to queries quickly (within 2-3 days). I will either encourage or discourage submission—I rarely just say “yes” or “no.” When I encourage a submission, I typically respond with a summary of our author guidelines and a link to the guidelines. If I have encouraged submission following review of a query—and if the actual submitted paper follows our author guidelines—I will facilitate the process of getting that paper to review quickly. I typically do not desk reject a paper for which I have encouraged submission unless I find some “fatal flaw” in the submission like a lack of trial registration, human subject review, or very poor writing. If I discourage submission in response to a query, I do so because the abstract reveals a focus that is not a good fit with the mission, poor writing, or sloppy science. My response to queries discouraging authors from submission will be focused on those aspects. Sometimes if abstracts reflect poor science, I will respond by saying that the paper will not be well-received by our reviewers, who expect rigorous science. On occasion, if an abstract is strong even though it's not a great fit for the journal, I will recommend the author contacts another journal—with an idea of which journal if I have one—and provide a brief rationale for this recommendation.

Write Me a Letter

Letters to the editor are a different matter. If you are thinking about writing a letter to the editor, you should first review the author guidelines in the target journal. Most journals—but not all—accept letters to the editor. If a journal accepts letters to the editor, there are typically guidelines for formatting including word counts, use of citations, and so forth.

Journals may also specify under what circumstances a letter will be accepted or published. At *Nursing Research*, we will only publish letters to the editor where a substantive comment is being made about a published paper or if we have specifically issued a call for letters on a particular topic.²

Keep in mind that the overall purpose of a letter to the editor is to engage discussion by offering a critical review of a published paper, affirming recommendations made by authors of published papers, correcting published information, or questioning the veracity of research findings by pointing out potential errors in methods or analyses.³ At *Nursing Research*, letters to the editor are not sent for peer review. Rather, if a letter follows guidelines, we invite the authors of the paper that is being commented on to review an anonymous copy of the letter and to provide a response. Both the letter and the response may use references to make points; however, the letter and the response are each limited to 250 words.

In addition to providing opportunity to engage in scientific dialogue, letters to the editor can be a useful entry point into publishing for those who are new to the process. Letters to the editor can serve early career authors by helping them gain experience with publication. Although generally not peer-reviewed, letters to the editor are usually submitted through the same online system that all papers use—and they are edited, copyedited, and proofs are sent to the author. Experiencing these aspects of publishing can help alleviate the anxiety and frustration that can be engendered in first-time authors, preparing them for when their first “big” paper is submitted. Authors of these kinds of letters can also learn to be focused as letters to the editor must be concise, clear, and brief—these are great skills to master. Letters to the editor are also required to maintain a professional and objective tone—these too, are important skills to learn. Letters to the editor provide authors practice with these important skills in a more low-stakes way.

I have on occasion received letters to the editor that do not follow the posted guidelines. Often, these letters do not address published content; rather, they are just ideas that the letter writer feels compelled to express. Unfortunately for the authors, those letters do not get published in *Nursing Research*—they are desk rejected. It should be noted however, that some journals do publish these “standalone” letters. In these cases, the letter writer may be identifying a new focus of science—or they may be providing support for a particular stance they believe the journal, and its readers, should take.⁴ *Nursing Research* does not publish these letters even if they are well-thought out and well-written. However, in my rejection letter, I might offer suggestions of journals where an interest and mission to publish such letters exist. On occasion, I will invite the author to consider submitting a commentary, which is a longer paper that is peer-reviewed.

There are a few notorious letter writers who repeatedly submit letters to the editor to numerous journals with the same message, typically about a topic or a method they think should not be addressed or used—or perhaps, only used in a particular way. These serial letter writers are rather easy to find—their contributions are minimal and may in fact be counter to scientific discussion. I do not publish their letters as they do not meet the journal guidelines and I wouldn't recommend that you become one of these writers. You want to ensure your letters to the editor meet established guidelines and make distinct contributions.

Conclusion

Both queries and letters to the editor have a place in the publication process. In the first case, if you want to know if your work is a good fit for a specific journal and if allowed, send a query to the editor. It is easy to do and you may save you time if the fit is not good. Or, if the fit is good, a query may move your paper through the process more quickly. Letters to the editor provide an opportunity to raise questions and encourage discussion about specific topics like scientific findings and methods. In our increasingly connected yet disconnected world, a well-written letter may lead to meaningful dialogue among readers, something that is greatly needed. In any event, I encourage you to consider these two avenues of communication.

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