Letter to Editor: Keeping the Dialogue Going

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Abstract
Journals publish a variety of manuscripts under the section titled “Letters to the Editor”. This communication discusses the important role played by letters written as a comment on an article previously published in the journal and provides suggestions regarding the way to write such letters.

Introduction
Letters are the earliest media of human communication. Several types of letters get published in medical journals: Some letters describe interesting cases, while some others are opinions expressed by readers.¹ In addition, many editors publish short studies that do not qualify for a full-sized manuscript, in the form of letters.²⁻⁴ Then there are letters that float a new hypothesis, describe a novel adverse drug event or draw attention to an important point relevant to clinical practice.¹³ This communication, however, will discuss the letters that readers write in response to articles published in the journal.

Journals publish readers’ letters commenting on previously published articles under the section head called “letters”, “letters to editor” or “Correspondence”. Including such a section in the journal provides readers with a forum to question, comment on and criticize previously published articles or seek clarifications.⁵,⁶ Journals allocate about 8% of their page space to such correspondence.⁷ This is a unique section of the Journal in which readers become authors. It is an important characteristic of peer-reviewed journals distinguishing them from other less credible publications.⁴

Letters to Editor constitute a post-publication or continuing review process supplementing the pre-publication peer review process.⁸ They help alert readers to the biases and limitations that have been overlooked by the investigators, reviewers and editors.⁹ Letters with constructive criticism stimulate debate among researchers world over,⁵,⁷ thereby contributing to science. More importantly, they allow free expression of opinions and at the same time, make the investigators, editors and journals accountable to the general scientific community.⁴ Editors are keen to publish these letters, as they indicate that the journal articles are being read and are being considered worth commenting upon. These letters also have a favorable influence on the journal’s impact factor. The acceptance rate, therefore, is also generally higher than that for submissions to other sections of the journal.⁴ Letters make the journals lively, informative and entertaining. This is the only section of the Journal where there is a dialogue. It is, therefore, no surprise that it is one of the most widely read sections of the journals.⁴ The authors also generally welcome comments on their articles. Such letters provide them with the satisfaction that their research has caught the readers’ eye. In addition, letters give them an opportunity to clarify issues and address concerns and a chance even to post additional information and data that could not be included in the original article due to constraint on available space.

Most letters to the editor are written to criticize an article; be it to correct imprecise statement, point out frank errors or comment adversely on methodology, interpretation of results or drawing of conclusions.⁷ As the main purpose of the correspondence section is to initiate and continue a substantive dialogue, letters that merely agree with everything that authors have done and reported are unlikely to be published.

Why Write Letters?
Although letters to the editor are often seen as publications of lower grade, considered as minor texts and published without abstracts,³ and are limited by a highly restrictively prescribed ‘word count’; it is worthwhile attempting to write letters. There is no denying the fact that letters contribute immensely to furthering science. The predominant motive for commenting on a published article should be to promote understanding. And there is no dearth of questions, comments and critique that one can make on published articles. Across the
Writing a ‘Letter to Editor’

Writing letters requires dedication, much effort and considerable discipline. Although, the way an author writes a letter would depend upon the original article and the issue on which the author wishes to comment upon, certain general guidelines could be of help:

Identify the message: Whether the letter is meant to convey an observation, a critical comment, a request for clarification or a supporting statement, it must have a key message. The letter writers must make their point, quickly, avoid repetition and be coherent. The arguments employed should be scientific, relevant and constructive. The claims should be backed up by relevant references. It should have a title that is short and catchy and relates to the subject matter or issues raised.

Refer and adhere to the “Instructions to Authors”: Many journals provide advice regarding the manner in which a letter to editor should be written. Generally, they prescribe a maximum word count of 250-600 words. Additional instructions refer to the number of tables (none to two), figures (none to two) and references (generally 3-5) permitted. These instructions should be strictly adhered to.

Structure: Unlike research articles, letters are not divided into different sections. This makes writing letters that much tougher. They still require to be structured in a manner that will express a clear line of thought.

“Cooling off”: While criticizing an article in a letter to the editor, the writer should desist from making libelous statements; not only because letters with such statements are generally rejected outright, but also because this is in bad taste. Strong criticism, true statements (that can be proved) or expressing legitimate concerns in strong words does not constitute libel. However, while writing a letter that is critical of another article, it is a good idea to let the written piece lie on the table for a few days, cool off, revisit the written letter before dispatching it to the editor.

Writing style: The letter should demonstrate clarity of thoughts and provide arguments in a logical manner. The argument and description should be plain and simple. Brevity and clarity are always preferred by editors. The authors should not repeat the arguments already covered or referenced in the original article or provide unnecessary description or detail.

Taking help from colleagues always enhances the value of any manuscript, including letters. After having convinced themselves, the writers should invite their colleagues and friends to comment on the contents of the letter, the way message is coming across, the language and the style.

Submit early: The journals are interested in comments when the primary article has not faded from the readers’ memory. Hence, letter should be submitted as early as possible but definitely within 4-8 weeks. A few journals allow such letters to be submitted up to three months after the publication of the primary article.

The Review Process

Most journals follow the policy of encouraging debate through publication of letters to the editor. Hence, the acceptance rate for submitted letters is very high compared to other forms of manuscripts. The common reasons for rejection include absence of a new argument, going outside the scope of the journal, late submission (long after the initial article has long ceased to be a matter of debate), presence of general comments that lack focus, unscientific arguments and excessive text. As the letters to the editor are supposed to encourage civil debate, letters that make inflammatory, disrespectful, obscene or libelous remarks, those that contain abusive language, make comments on the integrity, competence or sincerity of primary authors or those that exhibit downright hostility are rejected outright by the editors. As succinctly stated by Carlton Gyles, the editors “encourage readers to disagree with a point to write as through the letter was being addressed to a respected friend and colleague. This should not preclude vigorous disagreement but should contribute to a discussion that generates more light than heat.” Letters to editor are a marketplace of ideas, where there is a vibrant social atmosphere and everyone feels welcome to express an opinion with the understanding that comments may be challenged but individuals will never be put down.

Generally, letters submitted to the journal are assigned to one or two editors mainly to scan for abusive language and for other aspects for rejection listed above. Some journals do subject letters to a formal review process, too. Even if letters were to be published at the discretion of the editor, it is not uncommon for editors to edit it for length and send an abridged version of the letter to the writers for their approval. During this editing for form and format, care is taken to not curtail the right of expression; even though the editors may not agree with the comments made. Once the decision to accept the letter for publication is taken, the editors take a call on whether the author
of the original article needs to be invited to respond. If the letter is critical of the primary article or if the letter requests for additional relevant details, editors generally provide an opportunity to the authors to respond.4 The right of whether to respond or not and how to respond lies with the author of the primary article. Many journals juxtapose letter to the editor with the response of the primary author. While others publish letters to editor as they are received with primary author’s comprehensive reply being published later.

A few observers have commented upon the way authors respond to letters to the editor. Some authors fail to adequately respond to the criticisms made or do not address serious criticisms related to a fatal flaw and pertinent queries posted6,8 and there are some others who choose not to file any response, at all. The reasons for not responding could be related to logistical problems (loss of original or raw data or lack of coordination among co-authors), lack of interest on their part, or genuine inability to respond to a pertinent query.13 Considering the fact that the existing peer-review process is imperfect, and non-reproducible; the importance of this wider post-publication review cannot be over-emphasized.6 Various remedies have been suggested. Some believe that acceptance of an article for publication should be subject to a contract by the author to respond to comments made on the article.9 Some have suggested incentives such as response to the letter being accorded a status of another independent publication15. Some have suggested that authors inability or disinclination to respond should be explicitly stated in an editorial note at the end of the online article on the journal website and after the letter that has not been responded to.13 When the authors file an inadequate response by skirting important issues raised in the letter, the editors must point to substantive criticisms and highlight important issues that they have not addressed in the response.9

In today’s world of breaking news and prompt (in fact, instantaneous) comments, publishing letters containing comments months after the primary article has been published is unacceptable.14 Many journals have responded to this situation by creating an online “rapid responses” section, which is akin to an electronic letter section.15,16 Readers can send their contributions to this section just by clicking on the “send comment/rapid response” link available at the end of the online version of an article. These rapid responses are viewed by the journal editors and all except the defamatory, boorish, trivial, irrelevant or unintelligible ones are posted at the journal website within 48-72 hours.1,17 This not only fulfills today’s style of providing immediate comments; and helps journals get over the limitation of available print page space; but is also more democratic with a host of readers being able to post their comments and to see them being recorded within days, if not hours.17

To summarize, Letters to Editor that are timely, have a clear focus, and offer constructive criticism that is expressed with clarity and brevity have a high probability of being accepted. They are important for supplementing the review process, maintaining the sanctity of scientific debate and ensuring accountability of authors and editors to the scientific community. In today’s world that emphasizes communication and dialogue, this form of scientific communication, continues to be relevant.

References
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