

# How to write a Letter to the Editor

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## What is a Letter to the Editor?

A Letter to the Editor (LTE) is a brief communication to a journal's editor or editorial team. It is usually written in response to a recent publication within the journal, but can also be on an unrelated topic of interest to the journal's readership. Many journals welcome LTEs within a dedicated section of their journal (e.g. LTEs/Correspondence) to stimulate intellectual discussion between readers and authors. LTEs may be handled by a dedicated 'LTE' team; some may be published online format (e.g. *British Medical Journal* rapid responses) with selected letters chosen for the print issue. In this article, we aim to provide practical tips on writing a successful LTE.

## Why write a letter?

LTEs enable prospective writers to directly interact with a manuscript's authors and the journal's readership and editorial team. LTEs should only be undertaken where there is genuine purpose and merit to readers and to scientific knowledge. LTEs count as publications, which can be a bridge for an early career researcher. These may also be catalogued within public repositories (e.g. PubMed) if an indexed journal selects the letter for their print edition. LTEs are mainly written for one or more of the following reasons:

- to discuss controversial aspects of a recently published paper, e.g. methodological concerns which may affect validity, concerns on study conduct, disagreements with study interpretation or conclusions;
- to seek clarification on any aspect of a paper;
- to enrich the existing knowledge of a recently published paper or hot topic with professional opinions or objective data;
- to share professional viewpoints.

## Do's and don'ts for a Letter to the Editor

According to Cicero, 'brevity is the charm of eloquence'. First and foremost, LTEs should be short and succinct. LTEs should always be courteous, no matter how much you disagree with the authors of the article. Importantly, LTEs should not merely be

critical; they should provide added value and stimulate intellectual debate. Avoid repeating points raised within the original paper, such as unnecessary duplication of results, or raising concerns that have already been reasonably discussed under the study's limitations section. As a guide, they should follow the principles outlined in Figure 1.

## Writing the letter

Letters should be framed according to Figure 2.

### Read

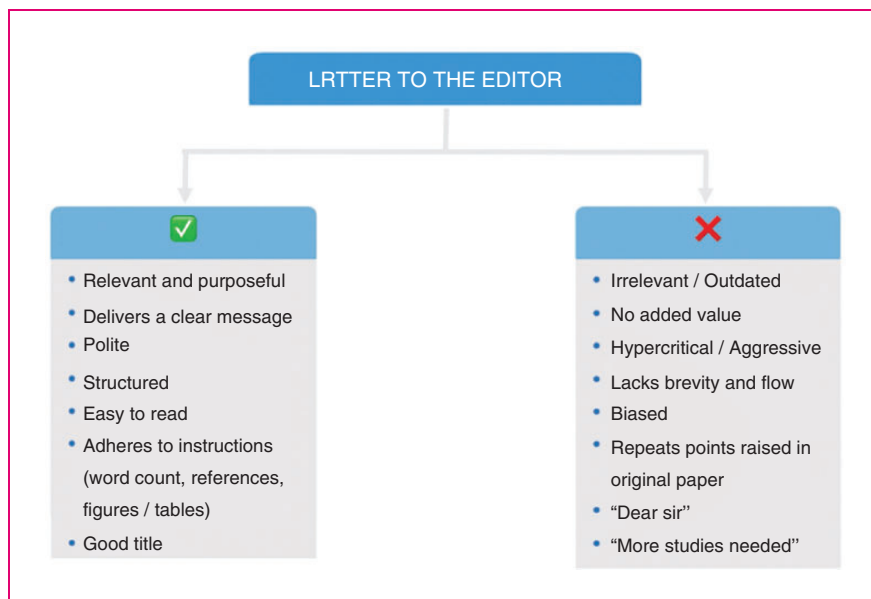
The inspiration for an LTE usually begins after reading a paper. Ensure that the paper or topic in question has been fully read and understood. Think whether an LTE is genuinely needed. Capture the salient points, e.g. strengths, weaknesses and controversies, and ensure that these have not been misinterpreted.

### Plan

Once you are clear on the aim(s) and purpose for the letter, it is advisable to undertake a literature search to gain a wider understanding of the context of the paper and its discussion points. This should determine whether there is a novel angle for your LTE.

Before writing, prospective authors should first ensure that LTEs are accepted by the journal. Familiarise yourself with the manuscript submission guidelines, which are usually found under the 'Information for Authors' section of the journal's website. This may also yield useful information such as limits on word count, and the maximum number of permissible figures, tables and references, which will serve to frame the letter. It is essential that you browse recently published LTEs to gain insight into the formatting, quality and style expected from the journal. This will also inform if LTEs on the same publication or topic have been published in order to avoid unnecessary duplication.

Next, think of potential co-authors to collaborate with (usually up to 3–5 authors). They should be identified early and should contribute enough to satisfy the co-authorship criteria laid out by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICJME).<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1.** Dos and don'ts for writing a Letter to the Editor.



**Figure 2.** Top tips for writing a Letter to the Editor.

### Write

Within the opening paragraph, a salutation to the LTE is optional but may erode into the limited word count. Avoid starting with the antiquated 'Dear Sir', and if necessary, use 'Dear Editor'. Introduce the issues raised or the purpose of the LTE early on. Clearly mention the paper in question and provide a citation to the original paper.

Focus, brevity and flow are key to a successful LTE. Consider drafting in bullet-point format to summarise and prioritise key points, but write the letter in clear focussed sentences. Aim to limit the points raised, e.g. to a maximum of 3–4, depending on the journal's word count. Consider structuring the letter by allocating one paragraph to each key point highlighted, but avoid using subheadings. Cite the literature appropriately using the latest and most relevant references. Avoid citing your own work excessively – LTEs are not a self-promotion exercise.

The final paragraph should provide a concise summary and end with suggestions or future recommendations. The introduction (beginning), key point paragraphs (middle) and final paragraph (end) should be weaved together to ensure flow, while maintaining a respectful tone of writing throughout. Ensure that relevant references are correctly cited and up to date, and that the manuscript complies with the journal's requirements.

Finally, where permitted by the journal, apply a suitable title for the LTE on the cover page. Do not repeat the title of the manuscript in question; come up with a short catchy title instead. The cover page should also contain author details including name, affiliation, conflicts of interest and word count.

### Submit

Submission is the final step. The LTE should be proof-read multiple times and approved by all co-authors

before submission by, or on behalf of, the corresponding author.

### Next steps

Not all LTEs will be accepted – in most cases, these will be subjected to review by the editor-in-chief. For LTEs related to a recent publication, the editor-in-chief may offer the original authors the option to respond.

### Summary

LTEs should offer constructive comments on a recent publication or on a topic of interest to the journal's readership. They should be brief, structured and purpose-specific in conveying a message worthy of publication.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Reference

1. ICJME. Defining the Role of Authors and Contributors, <http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html> (2020, accessed 22 June 2020).

**Keith Siau<sup>1</sup> and Emad El-Omar<sup>2,3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Liver Unit, University Hospitals Birmingham, Birmingham, UK*

<sup>2</sup>*Editor in Chief, GUT*

<sup>3</sup>*Microbiome Research Centre, St George & Sutherland Clinical School, University of New South Wales, Australia*

*Corresponding author:*

*Keith Siau, Liver Unit, University Hospitals Birmingham, Birmingham, UK.*

*Email: keithsiau@nhs.net*