

Column: Tips on Research and Publication

LETTERS COMMENTING ON PUBLISHED ARTICLES: LAST BUT NOT THE LEAST

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ABSTRACT

As a part of the post-publication peer review, readers can send comment letters to a journal on the articles it has published. Such letters critically comment on the content of the related article. They allow the readers to see the messages of the article in the context of the criticisms, give the authors of the concerned article an opportunity to clarify their stand, help initiate scientific dialogues, and, with consequent corrections or retractions, even help perfect the scientific literature. Comment letters should be relevant, scientifically foolproof, short, focused, straightforward, balanced, and polite.

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A comment letter (CL) is a letter to the editor that comments on an article a journal recently published. CLs challenge, critique, or support the methods, findings, or other aspects of a published article.

WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Editors and peer reviewers play pivotal roles as custodians of scientific integrity by rigorously evaluating manuscripts to ensure high quality and ethical standards of published articles. However, peer review is an imperfect system, and despite these meticulous processes, errors can occasionally slip through and appear in published articles. In such cases, readers act as an essential check by identifying these errors and communicating them to the

scientific community through CLs. This process provides an additional layer of review post-publication, contributing to the ongoing refinement and accuracy of scientific literature. Articles get corrected or even retracted in response to CLs. (e.g., an article by Bränström and Pachankis got corrected in response to the CLs available at <https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/pdf/10.1176/appi.ajp.2020.19111130>).¹ CLs serve to stimulate intellectual discussions between readers and authors, fostering healthy, moderated scientific dialogue. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) recommends that peer-reviewed journals publish CLs along with the responses of the original authors – an

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endorsement shared by major medical journal editors.

In journal websites, published CLs and the responses to them from the original authors are typically linked to the related article. CLs are indexed in databases like PubMed, and there, too, they are linked to the original article and authors' responses. Thus, the shortcomings and alternative viewpoints the CLs reveal are easily accessible to other readers.

Unlike most other article types, which are typically included in an issue months (or even years) after acceptance, CLs are included in the earliest issue possible so as to inform the readers about the context in which the related published article is to be read.

HOW ARE THEY HANDLED?

Editors often show a greater inclination to accept letters that critically challenge an article (i.e., negative comments) as these may generate more interest among readers compared to those largely in agreement with the original findings (i.e., positive comments). Typically, CLs do not undergo external peer review and are instead internally reviewed by the editorial team, although expert opinions may be sought to assess the scientific content. If the editorial team feels that a CL has important messages for their readers, they will send it to the authors of the related article to provide clarifications or arguments in response. The authors are given about two weeks to submit their reply. Both the CL and the authors' reply are typically published together in the same issue. In cases where the author does not respond, the CL may be published alone, or the editor may choose to respond to such letters. Authors of the original paper have the final say in that once they reply to and refute the arguments of the authors of the CL, the latter do not get another opportunity for further counterarguments.

If a CL merely identifies a minor error in a published manuscript, the editor may have

discussions with both sets of authors and choose to publish the corrections as an *erratum* instead of publishing the CL. (The erratum may acknowledge the authors of the CL).

Most journals publish CLs along with other letters to the editor, which may be about case reports, preliminary research, etc., and the section is placed toward the end of an issue. Some journals, such as the Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine, publish CLs in a section distinct from the letters to the editor section.

COMMON AREAS OF FOCUS

Some common errors CLs often point out are listed in Table 1, with some representative examples. Readers are requested to read the referenced CLs to get more details and also to read the responses given by the authors of the criticized articles.

Less commonly, CLs seek clarifications regarding methodology or findings or request additional analyses. Occasionally, CLs aim to emphasize certain findings with supplementary observations or arguments (e.g., Bhattacharya and Bhattacharya, 2023).¹⁰

CLs need not be necessarily about research papers. They can be about other article types, such as case reports, review articles, etc. (e.g., Ameen, 2019).¹¹

Occasionally, CLs may be in response to studies published in other journals that could be of interest to the current journal's readers. Some journals may allow this in the Commentary section. However, many journals do not entertain this.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

Submit on time.

Most journals have specified time restrictions for submission of CLs, typically within one to three months of the publication of the discussed article. For journals that publish ahead-of-print articles, this timeframe

Table 1: Errors commonly pointed out in comment letters

Topic	Example	Reference
<i>Disagreements with operational definitions</i>	Inappropriate use of the term “emergency psychiatry.”	Santhosh et al. ²
<i>Concerns about research methods</i>	Small sample size.	Singh et al. ³
	Did not collect family history of mood disorders.	Kundu et al. ⁴
<i>Major errors in tables or figures</i>	All except one value in two tables are exactly the same.	Verma ⁵
<i>Errors in statistical analysis</i>	Inappropriate use of Pearson’s Chi-square test. (In their reply, the original authors maintained that the use was appropriate.)	Dcruz et al. ⁶
	Possibility of collinearity in regression analysis.	Pal and Aulakh ⁷
<i>Incorrect interpretations and conclusions</i>	Factors related to treatment adherence may not be relevant when the sample was patients who had been on treatment for at least six months.	Andrade et al. ⁸
<i>Gross errors in referencing</i>	A cited paper has already been retracted, and the citation missed the names of two authors. Another reference had the wrong article title, journal name, and year of publication.	Loadsmann and Stapelberg ⁹

becomes wider.

Have a clear purpose.

Do not write a CL just to increase the number of your publications. One does not build a publishing career solely by writing CLs! Before writing one, ask yourself if your arguments are strong enough and of potential use to the readers. CLs should not only criticize the publication but also add *value* by introducing new points or ideas that stimulate intellectual discussion. (There has been an instance where a CL got retracted due to subsequent criticisms of it!)¹² Check the CLs the journal has recently published and compare them with your idea/draft.

DRAFTING THE LETTER

A CL includes a title, a salutation, the main content, and references. Typically, there are no abstract or keywords. Usually, subheadings are not used. Some journals permit one table and one figure in letters, but these are generally not necessary for CLs.

Some directions about preparing the different components of a CL are given below:

Address the editor.

CLs are usually addressed to the editor (and not to the authors of the published paper). Most journals suggest starting with an address to the editor as ‘Dear Editor,’ which is preferred over the gendered ‘Dear Sir.’

Be brief.

CLs should be short and clear. As Shakespeare aptly said, “brevity is the soul of wit.” The word count limit is usually 500-750 for letters in general; however, most CLs can be completed well within those limits. Do not summarize the findings of the article. Instead, provide the reference for the readers to access the original content. Cover only 1-4 main points, even if there are additional minor issues to address. Use one paragraph for each point, and start with the most important point. One can also include appropriate questions for the authors (e.g., “We are curious to know if...”). Avoid anecdotal writing. Ensure that your statements are accurate, objective, and with appropriate citations. Refrain from making general comments (e.g., “This is an important study.” “This is full of mistakes.”). Do not repeat the limitations the authors have already acknowledged in their paper. Before submission, consider seeking feedback from a

peer to ensure the clarity and effectiveness of your letter.

Be courteous and respectful.

CLs should always be courteous, even if you disagree completely with the authors of the article. Maintain a respectful tone throughout. Do not use derogatory language (e.g., “failed to...,” “made the mistake of...”). Criticize the article, not the individuals involved (e.g., “the authors’ incompetency is evident in...”). The best way to avoid such emotive language is to sleep over the letter for one or two days and revise it again.

It would help to begin the CL with some appreciative comments before moving on to the criticism part. For example, SA started a published CL like this:¹¹

“In a first article of its kind, Rao et al. deliberated on the advantages and limitations of the Mental Healthcare Act (MHCA) 2017 with respect to addiction management. The authors correctly pointed out the mistake made by the drafters of MHCA in using the term “abuse” in the Act’s definition of mental illness.”

Also, consider including some positive comments before concluding the letter. For example, Kundu et al. ended their CL like this: “To conclude, we appreciate the efforts of the investigators. However, certain issues, as mentioned above, need to be considered while planning similar studies in the future.”⁴

Make the letter interesting.

Introducing an element of humor or wit can indeed engage and excite readers. Subtle humor, when used thoughtfully, can effectively convey a point. Use exaggerations, quotes, or contradictions in a meaningful way to make the letter interesting. However, it’s crucial to ensure that any humor used remains appropriate, respectful, and aligns with the overall tone and purpose of the letter.

Cite appropriately.

Include a few references to support your perspective. Use only relevant and recent references that directly contribute to the argument being presented. Typically, journals restrict the number of references allowed, often to a maximum of five. Avoid excessive self-citation unless absolutely necessary for substantiating a point.

Use a distinct title.

Do not repeat the title of the manuscript for which comments are being written (e.g., “Letter in response to XYZ”). Instead, use a short, catchy title that reflects the point you are making.

‘Lithium not only stabilizes mood, it is also neuroprotective’ is a title published in response to an article titled ‘Old is gold: lithium in stabilizing the mood.’

‘Is add-on psycho-education effective in the treatment of depression?’ was published in response to ‘Effectiveness of psycho-educational intervention in improving outcome of unipolar depression: results from a randomized clinical trial.’

However, some journals (e.g., Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine) insist on titling the CL “Comments on ...,” followed by the title of the discussed article so that the CL too appears during search engine or database searches. However, this may not be necessary if the CL is indexed along with the main article.

Adhere to the journal’s instructions.

Many journals limit the number of words, tables, figures, references, and authors permitted in a letter. Read the ‘instructions to authors,’ as for other submissions. Disclose the conflicts of interest. Better restrict the number of authors to 2-4.

ELECTRONIC LETTERS (E-LETTERS)

Many journals publish electronic letters that exclusively appear online, sometimes in addition to the regular LTEs in print journals. These electronic letters are not included in the

print version and are generally not indexed. Additionally, certain journals have a system for submitting 'rapid responses' that are swiftly published online alongside the original articles. The advantage is prompt publication of observations associated with the published content. However, the downside is that the less stringent monitoring of the content by the editor might result in unnecessary or less scrutinized letters being published.

PARTING COMMENTS

Some institutions regularly conduct journal clubs where recently published articles are critically evaluated, aiming to enhance the critical thinking skills of residents. During these discussions, if any notable points are uncovered, they can serve as the basis for CLs. However, remember the timeframe restrictions for CL submission.

Not all CLs are accepted for publication. Those lacking scientific merit or raising weak or unsubstantiated objections are typically rejected by the editors. Those that are discourteous and disrespectful may be rejected or returned to you for resubmission after removing such portions. On the other hand, even if a journal rejects a CL, if you strongly feel your arguments have merit, you can post the article on a pre-print server or other article-sharing websites so that it is available to others who are going to read or cite the other article or planning to change their practice or policies based on its messages.

Recognizing the importance of CLs as guardians of science, readers should write letters when necessary, and the editors should encourage such submissions. This fosters a healthy discourse between the readers and authors under the close observation of the editor. CLs serve as a signal to editors that the published articles are being read, understood, and critically assessed by the readers. Some letters go beyond merely criticizing and add substantive value by providing appropriate

interpretations of the study findings or presenting novel ideas. Therefore, authors of these impactful letters deserve due credit from the scientific community for their contributions.

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