



Significance of the 'letter to the editor' publication approach: an integrated review

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ABSTRACT

Out of many possible approaches to publication; be it an original article, narrative review or meta-analysis; a letter to the editor (LTE) is one of the approaches to publication. Since this approach is not much popular among young researchers, it is vital to understand their role in the dissemination of information. Hence, the present study aims to investigate the significance and limitations of this approach. The review was conducted by searching related information across medical databases and compiling it in the form of a narrative review.

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INTRODUCTION

A letter to the editor, just like any other manuscript is the medium of dissemination of information to anyone and everyone reading that journal.¹ Although a meticulous screening is done before an article is published but given the fact that *to err is human*; flaws might persist in the published articles. In such situations, readers can write to the editor voicing their views on the concerning statement. Such letters are not research articles but an individual's concrete comments on the given topic providing enough understanding, making recommendations, alternate methods of accomplishing things, clarifying the notion, and highlighting elements that the author or reviewer may have overlooked.² International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) have mandated it to keep an exclusive section for inviting replies from readers on the published work.^{2,3} Since these letters often follow free expression and focus on highlighting the unfavourable aspects of an already published article, the committee also emphasises ensuring the valid reason and dignified use of words for such communications to maintain the sanctity and reputation of the authors.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present review is based on the findings of rigorous literature on studies including letters to the editor; retrieved from PubMed, Medline, and Google Scholar.

RESULTS

Significance

As these letters are based on concrete evidence so they help accentuate the already published material and promote data which was not there in the previous study. Even a short and evidence-based critique can be made to improve the existing body of knowledge.⁴ Thus, letters to the editor serve a dual role in the research; they act as a corrective tool as well as build on the existing literature. They assist with post-publication evaluation. They aid in identifying errors that were missed during the publication's initial review. This support preserving the high reputation of journals.⁵ Other benefits of having a letter-to-editor are creative knowledge of significant new or valuable information that is applicable to clinical practice and general remarks on topics of public interest to readers. It offers a study an alternative point of view or experience.

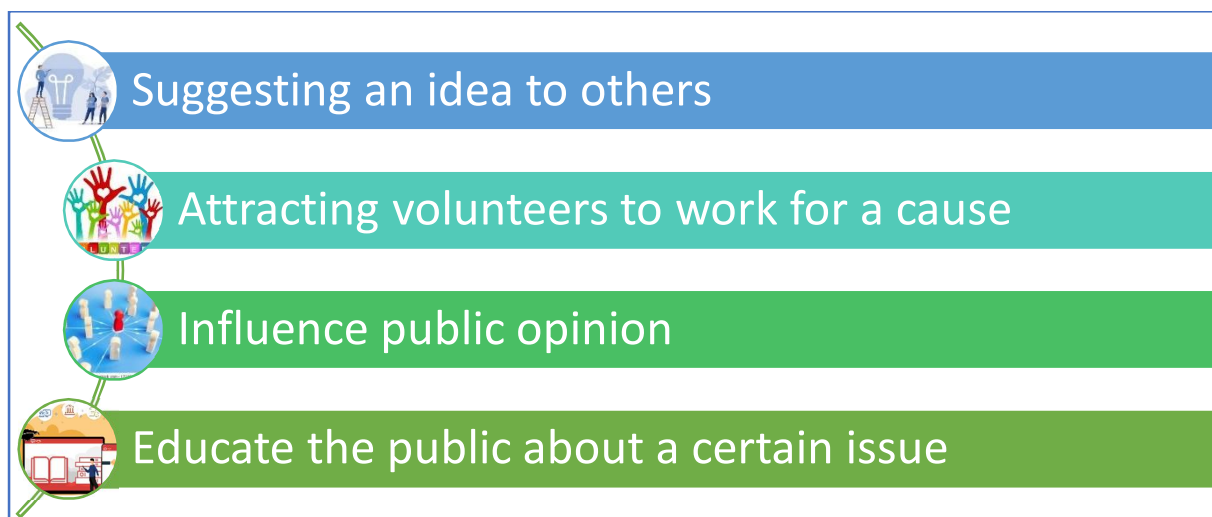


Figure-1: Significance of LTE approach

LIMITATIONS

Letters to the editor can be used in a variety of inappropriate ways by persons who unjustifiably promote or disparage an opponent. It is quite evident that the acceptance rate of such letters is better and higher without having a significant research profile of the author. Thus, the inputs mentioned in the letter may not be always authentic and reliable. Also, these letters may not be impressive enough to neutralise the effects of misleading/ incomplete information. The information provided in the letter may be biased and lacking direction.⁶ **The Why, When and How of writing a letter to the editor** The majority of scientific journals have a section specifically for such communications; as a result, precise rules should be followed to ensure its proper use. Communications that are poorly thought out can damage the relationship between the journal and its readers. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend this approach's fundamental design. The primary reason for conceptualising and building the LTE is in reaction to an article that has already been published (methodological concerns, disagreement with interpretation or conclusion, or controversial aspects). A response to another LTE can be made in a letter to the editor. An LTE can also be created to define a notion, offer arguments against it, suggest a different theory, or promote fresher viewpoints. Original research that isn't long enough to fill an entire article can occasionally be written as a brief communication. Some publications welcome letters that offer suggestions for improving their tone, layouts, or specific sections. Rarely is it a communication intended to request assistance or access to research materials.

General considerations

- When the idea of an LTE comes to mind, consider whether it is necessary.
- Will it considerably benefit the readership?
- Carefully read the paper and comprehend every potential point made.
- To comprehend the notion effectively, stick with it.
- To have a complete understanding of the subject, conduct a literature search.
- learn about the requirements for the journal as well (format, style, word limit etc.).
- Reading a few recently released LTEs in the targeted journal is a smart idea.
- In order to avoid confusion or questions later, clarify everything with the journal right away.
- Include a cover letter outlining your goals and disclosing any potential conflicts of interest.
- Be explicit about the LTE's goal and the issues that will be brought up.
- The points should be pertinent and appropriate.
- Keep it short, to the point, and simple.
- Support your arguments using the most recent references.
- Arrange the LTE so that each paragraph covers a different important topic.
- Subheadings should only be used in extreme cases.
- The summary and concluding remarks or recommendations should be in the final paragraph.
- Be polite in your letter.
- Avoid making any personal or disparaging remarks.
- Be sure to carefully read the restriction section of the original article to avoid bringing up points that the original writers have already addressed.
- Avoid repeating what is already said in the original post.

- Once the LTE has been written, it is a good idea to read it again after a day or two and make any necessary changes before submitting it.
- Ask for assistance from dependable co-workers when necessary.
- Send the LTE within the allotted window of time, which may vary for each journal.

Response to the LTE-To reply to an LTE is an art. The following recommendations may assist in creating a strong response:

- The accuracy of the data and interpretation should be checked against the original article after thoroughly studying the LTE.
- Check the LTE's content for any repetitions of information that the original article may have already covered.
- If a person believes that the LTE makes their work clearer and there isn't much to say in response, they should communicate the same to the editor-in-chief.
- If one decides to reply, start by expressing gratitude to the LTE authors for reading the post and their efforts in bringing up well-intended issues. Additionally, thank them for giving you the chance to elaborate or clarify certain topics.
- If the argument put out is sound, have the courage to accept it. Explain the initial reasoning for the plan and any additional actions being considered to overcome the study's limitations.
- Offer refutations of the arguments made when appropriate, and support them with data.
- Keep your letter's tone polite at all times.

CONCLUSION

Research publications are liable for errors in terms of statistical analysis, misquotation of references, and missing citations in the given text. Although care is taken to address these issues during the peer view and review process, these tend to be missed somehow. Thus, letters to editors serve as the mainstay for disseminating correct/ updated information to the readers provided they are written with the right purpose and intention. Letters to the editor are considered to be a specific form of the manuscript and must be submitted using the same processes as regular articles. For instance, in journals that allow online article submission, writers submitting letters must register, log in, track their manuscripts, and then submit modifications online. Some journals have a fee, while others don't, both for submission and the review process. This can occasionally prevent certain people from contributing their insightful opinions or experiences. Many journals would only consider letters written within a certain time period, which could range from weeks to months, after the paper's publication, for comments made about previously published research studies.⁷ The major responsibility lies on the editors and publishers to keep a check on the criticism and use of offensive words towards authors, and personal unfair remarks on one's integrity and competence.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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