

WRITING TIPS SERIES

Effective writing and publishing scientific papers, part XI: submitting a paper

1. What you should know

Uniform requirements exist for papers submitted to biomedical journals (www.icmje.org). Moreover, each journal has its own specific requirements for paper, which can be found in the author instructions on the journal's Web site. Every journal has slightly different requirements. It is advantageous to be aware of such requirements at an early stage of writing because you want your coauthors to read, comment on, and accept these additional text elements.

The cover letter accompanies the submission of your paper and may be the first that an editor reads. Therefore, it should stress the significance of the paper for the field of research and the relevance to the specific journal. The cover letter also confirms adherence to the journal's author requirements and contains any additional information that may be of interest to the editor.

Most journals want you to suggest at least two or three potential reviewers for your paper who are experts in their field and will be able to provide an objective assessment of the paper. A journal may contact these but will often invite additional reviewers to receive at least two good-quality reviews. Some journals also specifically ask for nonpreferred reviewers, who in your opinion may not be able to provide an objective assessment of the manuscript.

A journal's online submission system will guide you through the submission process step by step. Well-prepared manuscripts can be submitted within an hour or so, but if you cannot finish the submission in one go, the system usually allows to save information and resume the submission process later.

2. What you should do

Ask yourself if you are fully satisfied with the manuscript. Have you taken sufficient time for reflection since you finished the last bits? Read your full manuscript carefully one last time, preferably after it has rested for a couple of days. Ask yourself: Is the story line obvious, logical, and interesting? Is the text clear but also concise? Have I been consistent in the use of terms? Is the language correct and are there zero typos left?

Consider having your manuscript proofread by a trusted peer. This is a researcher or a nonscientist with editorial experience who you know well, who has the basic scientific knowledge you would assume from the readers of the journal

you are about to submit your manuscript to, but who has not been involved with your research study and writing of the manuscript. Such a peer is able to identify the "blind spots" in the manuscript, which you and your coauthors have overlooked and to give valuable feedback for final improvements of the manuscript. Furthermore, in case your mother tongue is not English, it can be useful to have your paper checked by a native speaker or a professional language editing service.

Use the cover letter as an opportunity to "sell your paper" to the editor, who will ultimately decide on it. Include the following basic elements. (1) Your request: to submit the paper (mentioning its title) for publication in the journal. (2) A summary of the paper's significance (in 2–3 sentences): which relevant problem it addresses, the main finding, and a message why this finding is important. (3) A statement of the paper's relevance to the journal's audience. A good reason would be that related work was published in the same journal earlier. Make sure that you cite that work as this shows your knowledge of and interest in the journal. (4) Any information required by the journal such as a statement that the material has not been submitted elsewhere or a statement about conflicts of interest. In addition to these basic elements, you can articulate specific issues related to your paper.

Once you have finished your submission, you should archive all information from the submission process. Monitor the status of your submission regularly and contact the journal if the status is unclear or when a decision is taking too long (eg, when you have not heard from the journal in 2–3 months).

Checklist for submitting a paper

- Read your full paper from beginning to end carefully one more time.
 - Check whether you have adhered 100% to the journal's specific author requirements.
 - Write a convincing cover letter including the following elements:
 - the paper's title and your request to submit for publication;
 - significance of the main findings for the field;
 - relevance to the journal's audience;
 - information required by the journal; and
 - additional issues related to the paper.
 - Follow the steps of the journal's online submission system.
 - Archive all relevant data from the submission.
 - Monitor the processing of your paper by the journal from time to time.
-

Daniel Kotz and Jochen W.L. Cals

E-mail address: d.kotz@maastrichtuniversity.nl (D. Kotz)