

The Anatomy of a Rejection-Proof Cover Letter

One of my chief responsibilities as senior proofreader in my previous post involved reading and writing dozens of cover letters on a weekly basis. Over time, I grew acclimated to identifying the most common mistakes and error patterns that emerge from such letters.

Let's go over a few of them here.

Noting the Date

Let's start with the most basic point: The date. This point is nonessential, but it does lend a nice touch, one your journal editor may appreciate:

Ensure that the date you write is *not* the date on which you write the cover letter, but the approximate date when the editor is to receive it. (The date goes on the right-hand side of your letter.)

Getting the Addressee Right

One of the most common mistakes in cover letter writing involves the author introducing the letter simply with "Dear Editor:" or even "To whom it may concern:".

Many such letters are almost always tossed into the bin intuitively or passed around the editorial office of an academic journal, orphaned from department to department, simply because the letter failed to specify an addressee.

That's because no individual editor wants to assume responsibility over your letter. After all, not responding (i.e., rejection without consideration) is easier than having to read a document thoroughly, consider all the content in terms of whether it has publishing potential, seek out a couple suitable reviewers, and write a lengthy review letter.

That's why it's critical that you address your cover letter to a specific individual, most commonly the chief editor, identifying them by their title and

full name. You can usually Google a specific journal title to find out the name of the editor-in-chief. Remember: title and full name.

For instance, if you find, “Jeffrey Hunter Knowles, PhD”, you should write “Doctor Jeffrey Hunter Knowles:” However, if the middle name (i.e., Hunter) is only initialed (i.e., “H.”), leave it as is, but still include the “H.” (Although it’s a rare occurrence, it’s been known to happen that two editors sharing a name work in the same office, so why risk it?)

Giving Your Cover Letter Some Flesh

Regarding your letter’s content, I offer only a few words of advice here because this part hinges heavily on your own content:

The first paragraph should begin with an introduction to a problem in your field; that is, cite your motivation for having conducted your study. Afterward, you can explain how you conducted your study and present your research findings, and maybe even mention an implication or two if it’s sufficiently pertinent and engaging.

The second paragraph should present details on the implications of your study and indicate your target audience. Identifying this group should be easy because it’s obviously the same audience that reads the target journal.

Just ask yourself, “Why would they be interested?” This question should give you some guidance. For instance, your response might read, “We believe our findings will be of particular interest to the readers of [*insert journal’s name in italics*] because...” When you complete this sentence with your explanation, this will persuade the journal editor that your article is worth sharing with the journal’s readership.

Ending Your Cover Letter on a Satisfying Note

You may end the letter by providing the contact details of the corresponding author (most likely yourself). Take this opportunity to briefly thank them for their time and consideration.

Your cover letter should typically be no longer than a single double-spaced page. It should be succinct and demonstrate your ability to summarize the most important parts of your study. Unfortunately, many journal editors reason that if you can't write a 1-page letter, how could you ever write a full-length study?

Although this may seem harsh and unfair, the cover letter is, as I've shown here, actually fairly easy and fun to write. Do you have any tips or tricks up your sleeve on how to improve acceptance rates for cover letters? Maybe you've got more questions after reading this article. Feel free to leave a comment below and let me know.