

Nurse Author & Editor

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Effective Query Letters

Effective Queries Can Save Authors Time and Effort

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Authors often struggle to find time to write, so they usually welcome any strategy for enhancing efficiency. One such strategy is the query letter. Technology has transformed the query “letter” into the query “email,” but the original name has stuck. “Query” is an apt term because the author is “querying” or “asking” the editor whether he or she would be interested in the manuscript the author wants to write.

Query letters provide several benefits:

- If the editor is not interested in the topic, the author doesn't waste time writing a manuscript that is unlikely to be accepted, but instead can seek other avenues of publication.
- The editor may already have an article planned on this topic, so again, the author doesn't waste time submitting a manuscript
- Once an editor responds positively to the topic, the author can then tailor the manuscript to fit the journal, based on author guidelines and past articles, which enhances the likelihood of acceptance for publication. (Caution: A positive response to a query letter does NOT guarantee publication. The manuscript will still undergo the journal's standard peer review process.)
- The editor can provide feedback to the author about how the idea can be adapted to better meet the needs of the journal's readers and the editor.

Not all journal editors see the value of query letters. Editors who receive many submissions may view them as a low priority. Other editors have seen too many badly written query letters or have seen them used inappropriately. Still others are simply too busy to respond. Finally, if a journal has a narrow focus and publishes traditional research articles, which tend to have a standard format no matter what the journal, the editor may view query letters as unnecessary.

Many editors, however, welcome a query letter. Check the author guidelines, posted on the journal's website, for details. As you look at the journal and study the author guidelines, you should be able to determine if a query may be necessary. For example, Leslie Nicoll, Editor-in-Chief of *CIN: Computers, Informatics, Nursing and Nurse Author & Editor* notes that query letters for *CIN* are not particularly useful or necessary, but she appreciates receiving them for *Nurse Author & Editor*.

If nothing is specified, it is still reasonable to submit a query or send an email to ask the editor if query letters are accepted. If you decide that a query is appropriate, here are three steps to help you write a more effective letter.

STEP 1: SEND TO THE RIGHT PERSON AND THE RIGHT JOURNAL

Address the query to the correct contact person, usually the editor or editor-in-chief of the journal. The contact's name and email will be in the journal's author guidelines. Send the letter in the body of the email instead of as an attachment, to reduce the risk of the email landing in the spam folder of the recipient.

Take a professional approach to crafting the letter. Avoid opening with a generic "Dear Editor," which indicates you didn't bother to obtain the person's name. Instead, use the person's name and title. For example, if Mary Smith has a PhD, use "Dear Dr. Smith" instead of "Dear Mary."

Surprisingly, editors receive a substantial number of query letters with the incorrect journal title, which erodes their confidence in the writer's attention to detail, a necessary skill for an author. The error may occur because some authors use a "blanket" query, sending the same letter to multiple editors. Some editors find this practice acceptable, but others do not.

If you decide to send more than one query letter out at the same time, make sure each one is personalized to the editor and the journal, and send it as an individual email. Editors do not appreciate receiving a letter written to "Dear Editor" with a string of 20 email addresses in the "To:" or "CC:" line. To add insult to injury, editors do not appreciate when they receive a reply such as "another journal is already interested" when they express interest. Note that while you can submit

multiple query letters (cautiously), you should only submit a manuscript to one journal at a time.

STEP 2: PROMOTE YOUR TOPIC — AND YOURSELF

Be sure your topic stands out from other ideas by clearly describing it and explaining why it is important to the editor's readers. That begins with the subject line of the email. Rather than a generic statement, such as "Staffing article idea for the *Journal of Nursing Administration*," provide a few more details to entice the editor, such as "*Journal of Nursing Administration*: Query for article on new technique for staffing off shifts that reduced costs by 30%."

In the main part of the query letter, promote your topic idea and yourself.

The Topic

Start the letter with something about the topic that will grab the editor's attention. For example, a query to *The Nurse Practitioner* might start with: "I would like to submit a manuscript that would describe the results of a research study showing how regular follow-ups from a nurse practitioner for patients with heart failure reduced hospital readmissions by one-third." Notice how the writer not only states the topic, but provides the key results of the study.

State why the topic is important and, if appropriate, provide your particular perspective. For example, many articles have been published about assessing chest pain, so a unique angle might be how to assess chest pain in developmentally disabled adults.

If it's not obvious, you may need to link the topic to journal's readers. Here is an example: "Readers of *Home Healthcare Now* who provide diabetes care to

pediatric patients could benefit from our clinic's education program, which we would show how to adapt to the home setting.”

Briefly describe the content of the proposed manuscript, but don't go into too much detail. For example, a query letter about a manuscript on email management from Kristy Chunta to *American Nurse Today*, contained the following, “This article will focus on how to review and handle email using an organized system. Suggestions for improving time management when reviewing email, especially when using multiple electronic sources (computer, iPad, Smartphone technology), will also be included.”

The Author

After describing the topic, explain why you should be the one to write the manuscript. Although this can sometimes be difficult for nurses, the editor needs to know that you are qualified. For example, if you plan to submit a manuscript on transcatheter aortic valve replacement, you might include, “I have more than 15 years of experience in critical care, including 5 years in the surgical ICU, where I have been caring for patients undergoing this procedure. [If the volume of patients is high, it would be good to include the average number per month or year.] I also presented a program on this topic at our local chapter of the American Association of Critical-Care Nurses.”

It is helpful to mention any past writing experience, for example, “I have had two articles published in critical care journals.” If you have not been published before, do not mention the fact, which simply draws attention to it.

What is not helpful is to say that you wrote the manuscript as a class assignment and would like to submit it to the journal. A class assignment differs from a published article. Editors receive many manuscripts which don't meet the editorial

goals of the journal or adhere to author guidelines, which makes them skeptical when a proposed manuscript started as a student paper. Do not add statements such as, “I got an A on my paper,” Or “My instructor said I should publish my paper,” (Steefel & Saver, 2013)—that is definitely a negative red flag for many editors.

Editors differ on whether an author should state that the topic is based on a PhD dissertation or a capstone project completed for a doctorate of nursing (DNP). Many feel that it is unnecessary to mention this, believing the idea should stand on its own merits. Others even feel making this link is detrimental because of the frequent failure to adapt the work for a journal. It’s probably best to omit. If you do choose to mention it, add that you will be adapting the information to be suitable as a journal article.

STEP 3: CLOSE IT CORRECTLY

Close the query letter by letting the editor know when you could submit the manuscript, such as, “I could submit the manuscript by November 14.” Note if you have flexibility with that date, such as, “I could submit the manuscript by November 14, or potentially sooner if that would better meet your needs.” Most importantly, do not give a deadline you cannot commit to; editors count on manuscripts arriving on time.

Wrap up by asking if the editor is interested in the manuscript topic, and end with your full name and credentials, title and affiliation, email address, mailing address, and phone number(s). Too often, editors receive query letters simply signed “Mary” or “George,” which is too informal in style for professional correspondence.

Before submitting the query letter, complete a spell check and proofread it one last time. It may be helpful to copy and paste the information into a Word document,

which has a more robust spelling and grammar tool than typical email programs. Keep in mind that the editor is judging your writing. Submitting a letter with incorrect capitalization and misspelled words does not give the editor confidence in your ability to write the manuscript (Morton, n.d.).

Keep in mind, you want to pack all this information into a short letter which the editor can read and respond to quickly. Use this old guideline: letters typed and printed on letterhead should be no more than one page, which includes the date, salutation, and closing. An email message might not look the same, but the rule for length still applies. If you need a primer on writing business letters, Nicoll and Chinn (2015) provide guidance. [The Online Writing Lab at Purdue University is also a useful resource.](#)

Last but not least—do not send a draft of the manuscript as an attachment and ask the editor for feedback. If you want to send the abstract, then I suggest you paste it in the email and not add it as an attachment. But if you have described your topic clearly, the abstract may only be redundant and not necessary.

[Click here to access Figure 1, which contains a sample query letter for a fictitious topic.](#)

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

Editors typically respond to query letters fairly quickly, within 2 to 3 days, unless the editor is traveling. If you haven't heard back after 3 to 5 days, it is acceptable to resend the email. If you don't receive a response a day or two later, you should move onto another journal. Be sure to adapt the query letter to that journal, rather than simply changing the name of the editor and journal.

The editor may decline your idea, accept it, or suggest a modification. If the idea is declined, you can now approach another journal. If a modification is suggested, respond promptly as to whether you are willing to do so.

In the case of a positive response, editors will send you the link to the author guidelines (which you should have already read) and confirm the deadline with you. The editor may also remind you that acceptance of your topic is no guarantee of publication because the article will still need to undergo peer review.

If you receive good news, you are now ready to write the manuscript, confident that the editor is interested in the topic.

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