Letters to the Editor: Processes and Pitfalls
Jacqueline K. Owens and Vickie Thaw

Letters to the editor (LTE) offer journal readers the opportunity to engage in continued scholarly dialogue in response to a published article. A previous discussion on this topic considered steps to write a letter and tips for success targeted to letter writers.¹ In this article, our focus is on letter related tasks for journal editors. We will offer process guidelines for editors to consider for letter submissions and thoughts about several potential pitfalls, such as the effect on journal impact factor; possible conflict of interest or bias; and concerns about factual accuracy.

CONSIDERING A LETTER FOR PUBLICATION
Letters to the editor should be reserved for comment or critique of a previously published piece in a journal. Some journals might permit LTEs for a short communication written on a topic of interest to the author and within the scope of the target journal, but we suggest that is better covered under an “Editorial” or “Opinion” article type. It is often the responsibility of the Editor/Editor-in-Chief to review letters and determine suitability for publication. Some potential pitfalls can be avoided with intentional consideration about areas of common concern. Table 1 lists basic questions for reflection and possible courses of action for editors to inform preliminary LTE review.

Table 1. General LTE Considerations for Editors

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<th>Questions for Reflection</th>
<th>Possible Courses of Action</th>
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<tr>
<td>What is the overall value of the letter content to the journal readers?</td>
<td>If the original authors decline to respond, determine whether the letter still warrants publication.</td>
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<td>Does the LTE contain serious allegations?</td>
<td>Consider if the original article needs an erratum or a corrigendum.</td>
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<td>Have the LTE authors raised something of importance, but their LTE is not published?</td>
<td>If the original article is revised in some manner, but no letter is published, determine how the writer who raised the issue can/should be credited.</td>
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<td>Is the tone of the letter constructive and scholarly?</td>
<td>If not, suggest revisions.</td>
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<td>Is the length of the letter a concern?</td>
<td>Consider an exception from published length limit, if warranted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a limit to the number of LTEs that can be published in response to a given article?</td>
<td>Avoid ongoing dialogue. Establish a policy for the number of LTEs. If more than one LTE is permitted, limit letters to one from each responding author(s),</td>
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with one response from original author(s) to any given letter.

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<th>Question</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<td>Is the letter content complex enough to require additional peer review?</td>
<td>Seek additional expertise from external reviewers and/or other members of the editorial team.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are there any potential conflicts of interest? If so, are these transparent?</td>
<td>Require disclosure of any conflicts of interest. Request that the EIC is copied on any author-to-author communication.</td>
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**DEVELOPING A PROCESS FOR LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

Although it is beneficial and desirable to encourage scholarly discourse about published content, difficulties can arise when LTEs create certain types of conversation between the article authors and the letter writers. An example of this is when a letter author circumvents the traditionally accepted process to respond to published content in an LTE and makes direct contact with the article author. This can happen if authors perceive a lengthy delay or barrier to moving forward with publication, and is not without at least some support. However, the rationale for using the editor as first contact to voice concerns is an assurance of impartiality and adherence to processes considered by many as best practice. Unfortunately, there are often instances where LTEs are confrontational and negative and this suggested process helps to monitor and control such exchanges.

Including information as described in Table 2 in the Author Guidelines for a journal should prevent many concerns. Formal processes about authorship and the publishing cycle are useful to consult before or after letter submission to inform the editorial decision-making process. This process is based on best practices developed over time in the experiences of the authors. Journal editors are welcome to adopt or adapt these guidelines, as deemed appropriate.
Table 2. Examples of Letter to the Editor Process Statements for Author Guidelines

Letter Authors

If you wish to dispute or comment on a published article in the journal, that is done via a Letter to the Editor (LTE).

If your LTE is accepted for publication, the author(s) of the article you are discussing will have an opportunity to review your LTE and respond if desired. These author LTEs are usually accepted for publication. You, as the author of the original LTE, will not be given another opportunity to respond.

Publishing Cycle for LTEs

An LTE may or may not be accepted for publication. They are reviewed prior to acceptance, but not necessarily through full standard peer review. The editor/editor-in-chief might choose to accept or reject the letter, consult with board members, or send the letter for full peer review, at their discretion.

The journal reserves the right to select, edit, and condense LTEs for publication.

Author responses to LTEs that dispute content within the original article are usually accepted for publication. However, these LTE responses also undergo the types of review described above.

The journal editor can decide to hold the disputing letter and the author response letter so that they publish online or in print at the same time. They can then go into the same issue; publish online independently and in separate issues; and be published online only, if the journal is still in print.

Corresponding LTEs can also be linked online, publishing systems permitting, to allow ease of access for readers. As such, the letter is communication between the author and reader of the journal.

An LTE that is accusatory or is based on conjecture are not typically considered for publication.
Developed from Editage Insights, ICMJE, and Owens

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Effect on Journal Impact Factor

Editors have voiced concerns about the quantitative effect of LTEs on the Journal Impact Factor (i.e., dilution of the factor with publication of many letters). The standard for LTEs is to omit an abstract and many journals permit five or less references. As such, Clarivate will then likely classify the LTE as Editorial Material (in the numerator of the Impact Factor calculation only) versus Articles/Reviews/Proceedings (in the numerator and the denominator) listed as items on their website.

Possible Conflict of Interest or Bias

All published content, including LTEs, is subject to author conflict of interest or bias. The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors acknowledges this potential pitfall and suggests that an actual conflict or bias or a perception of such are of equal importance. This difference becomes important because an actual relationship or activity may not be unethical or of concern, but even the perception of misconduct can diminish trust in scientific evidence. Thus, authors of both the original article and any letters must disclose potential conflicts. Editors should assure this disclosure within the processes related to LTEs. For example, The New England Journal of Medicine offers the following guidelines for authors related to disclosure:

Disclosure of all financial associations or other possible conflicts of interest (to be published with the letter) for each author. For authors of journal articles
who are responding to letters, NEJM publishes only new relevant relationships that have developed since publication of the article.

The reviewing editor(s) should also disclose any potential conflicts and withdraw from participating in the publishing process of this content.

The Council on Publication Ethics (COPE)\(^8\) describes a conflict of interest as a situation with a potential to impact the motivation of an individual or organization in an unethical way. Examples could be financial or other competing interests such as personal relationships or academic competition. Conflicts of interest are present whether or not there is misconduct. COPE recommends a transparent policy related to disclosure of potential conflicts of interest. Potential conflicts by letter writers should be disclosed with the publication of the letter.

**Factual Accuracy**

Letters go through rigorous review, but often internally with evaluation by the editor or editorial team. An LTE is typically reviewed for factual accuracy, writing tone, and criticism based on established scientific evidence, such as conflicting findings from other publications. If an LTE does undergo peer review, the process may include fewer reviewers than used for an article.\(^9\) However, peer review is always an option; if the editor has concerns about the factual accuracy of a letter under consideration, seeking additional peer review by experts is appropriate. Another course of action is to request citation support from the letter author for the content in question.

Concerns related to LTEs are not uncommon. Resolving or preventing potential pitfalls can be time consuming. Personalities can quickly become a factor. Managing the timeline to address concerns quickly is of benefit. Editors have
noted that it can be difficult to resolve complex concerns. Table 3 offers additional considerations and actions for editors to avoid potential pitfalls.

*Table 3. Considerations to Avoid Potential Pitfalls*

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<th>Nature of Concern</th>
<th>Considerations</th>
<th>Possible Editor Actions</th>
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| Inappropriate LTE Content | Does the letter focus on the article content, as opposed to inflammatory or anecdotal information, or comments about the authors or funders? | • Seek consultation from the legal department of the publisher.  
• Suggest revisions to the letter to remove content of concern.  
• Reject the letter if concerns are not resolved. |
| Lack of Supporting Evidence | Does the letter offer data to support the critique of the original published article? | • Inquire of authors about evidence to support their assertions.  
• Require citations if appropriate/possible.  
• Consider peer review for additional expertise. |
| Assertion of Fraud or Data Fabrication | If this assertion appears valid, when and how is it appropriate to communicate this to relevant persons, such as institutional administrators? | • If the letter asserts fraud or data fabrication in the original publication, refer to COPE guidelines.  
• Collaborate with publisher and legal team. |
| Author Disputes | Have the author(s) of the letter been in contact with the author(s) of the |  
• If author-to-author contact has not occurred, traditionally the editor serves as a  |
original publication? Has the contact been collegial in nature? If the parties cannot reach consensus, does the editor or editorial team still feel that publication of the LTE is valuable to readers?

mediator and unbiased reviewer for LTE assertions. As such, the editor usually manages the communication process.

- If author-to-author contact has occurred, and is collegial, all parties can reach consensus on a potential amendment such as a corrigendum correction or retraction. In this case the LTE is typically not published.
- If author-to-author contact has occurred and there is no resolution, transparent communication about the procedure for review and potential publication of the LTE and any amendments to the original article is warranted.
- If author-to-author contact is appropriate, an anticipated timeline for the process can be useful to prevent delays in the process by the original authors.

CONCLUSION

Intentional inclusion of processes related to publication of LTEs can offer guidance and a helpful framework, especially if multiple editors are responsible for this decision. These processes are journal or publisher specific but should reflect best practices about who can author letters and the LTE publishing process. Editor concerns about potential pitfalls such as bias or content accuracy can also be addressed with careful attention to established guidelines from committees such as ICJME and COPE.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Vickie Thaw is a publisher at Wiley, Inc. and is the team leader for the company’s nursing journal portfolio. Prior to this position, she has served in various professional health science publishing roles since 1990. Particular areas of interest are the continued growth of digital publishing and how that intersects with journals that are also still in print, and how she can generally support nurses – the largest professional segment in the health sciences.

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