

## 'Dear Editor ...': advice on writing a covering letter

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In the days before electronic manuscript submissions, most authors sent a covering letter with their article because it was hard to imagine mailing a parcel to an editorial office without one. Nowadays, however, authors find it easy to skip the box marked 'Author comments'. It is a simple matter of clicking on the next screen to get the manuscript uploaded as soon as possible.

Since *Medical Education* moved to electronic submission and review nearly three years ago, we have noticed a decline in the number of authors choosing to send a covering letter when they submit their papers to the editor. During the first 3 weeks of 2005, for example, 68% of papers (34/50) were submitted without comments to the editor. The covering letter is becoming an endangered species.

Yet, from an editor's point of view, the author's letter is the first indication he or she has that the paper may be worth taking further. We receive over 850 manuscripts a year, and around 80% of these will ultimately be rejected. We publish only those we consider to be the best – that is, the most original, educationally important and academically rigorous. It is important, therefore, not to waste an opportunity of pointing out to the editor why your paper meets the selection criteria.

Here is some advice on how to write a covering letter to this journal.

- 1 A simple, but very important point: make sure that you get the editor's name right. If you do not, it is clear that you have not been reading *Medical Education* – an indication to us that you may not be up to date with the latest literature.
- 2 Get the journal's name right. If we see the name of another journal in the covering letter we may become concerned about duplicate submission – did you really mean to submit your paper to us?
- 3 If you previously submitted the paper to another journal but it was rejected, tell us why, and what you have done about this. This can only benefit you, because it will help the editor enormously to know your paper's history and will cut down the time taken to reach a decision.
- 4 Tell us why you are submitting your paper to our journal. Why do you think *Medical Education* readers are the right audience for your work?
- 5 Tell us briefly what your paper is about and why this is important to *Medical Education* readers. Why would our readers be interested in it? What will they do with the information once they have it? What is its 'unique

selling point'? Please remember, however, that the covering letter is not the place for a wordy reiteration of the abstract.

- 6 Ground your paper in the existing literature. Explain what your paper adds to what our readers already know on the subject. If we or another journal have already published work in this area, what new information does your paper add to the discussion? If it is the first study of its kind, we want to know.
- 7 Your paper may in some way fail to conform to our guidelines for authors. If, for example, it is over our word limit, or in an unusual format, or uses an unconventional reporting style, you need to explain why you feel it was necessary to present your findings in this way.
- 8 You may have suggestions for the editor concerning people whom you would (or would not) like to review your paper. If so, the covering letter is the place to mention this.

The editors' job is to select papers that readers of the journal will find interesting and useful. Our editors read hundreds of papers a year but they may not be expert in your particular area, so you can really help us – and yourself – by pointing out your paper's unique value to *Medical Education* readers. We look forward to hearing from you.

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