

## Editorial

## Judging a manuscript by its cover (letter)

One of the most diverse components of submissions that we handle at *Matter* is the content of the cover letter. A frequent lament of the modern academic is how many hoops and hurdles need to be navigated during the submission process—all co-author information, suggested reviewers, original figure files, crystallographic data, checklists, conflict of interest disclosures, funding sources and grant numbers, etc. For *Matter*—and common among most journals—one of the necessary files to upload upon submission is the “cover letter”; the function, value, and utility of which is debated among authors.

The cover letter is indeed a leftover product of a different era. Imagine a time—pre-broadband and pre-dial-up—when manuscript submission was accomplished by post. I know, it’s hard to picture, but it’s true. Multiple copies of a manuscript draft were sent via mail to the editorial office of the journal of choice. It would be inexpedient to simply include four stapled manuscript copies in a manila envelope, so custom dictated that relevant information was included in an accompanying cover letter. The letter had a purpose—to convey the necessary information to the handling editors, such that peer review could be facilitated. This included information such as editor’s name, journal to which you are submitting, article type, article title, suggested peer reviewers, funding disclosures, and (most importantly) the return address and contact information of the corresponding authors. These items (and a few others) still appear in web searches for “how to write a cover letter.”

The cover letter, as intended, was *functional*; it was a means to provide necessary information upon submission. Perhaps it contained a quick description of the work, or background and motivation, but the primary purpose was to provide info/metadata, as well as the paperwork to track enclosed documents/materials (perhaps there was supplementary information included with the manuscripts, or film negatives, or physical floppy disks). It could be considered almost like a receipt. Today, all of this information (metadata, supporting materials) is required to be input and uploaded into an online submission system. Yet, we still require an anachronistic cover letter. Why?

You may think, with this intro, that I may now argue against the inclusion of a cover letter. A relic from the past that is no longer necessary, and simply adds yet another hurdle during submission! This is false, as I find cover letters *extremely informative* in assessment of a manuscript. But why? What function a cover letter serves in current academic publishing?

Consider the cover letter as an advertisement for your paper—i.e., a piece of marketing material—one of the few opportunities you have to “sell” your work. It should not be squandered. It is pretty much the written equivalent of an *elevator pitch* for your manuscript: a short description of an idea, product, or company that explains the concept in a way such that any listener can understand it in a short period of time. The goal is simply to convey the overall concept or topic in an exciting way. The name “elevator pitch” reflects the idea that it should be possible to deliver the summary in the time span of an elevator ride, or approximately thirty seconds to two minutes. It should not be confused with the Uber- or Didi-pitch (usually lasting



5 to 10 minutes). Your research paper contains the science, your cover letter should contain the excitement. Sell me the story behind your work.

Now, like most things, this is easier said than done. Moreover, there are multiple opinions on how to structure the cover letter. Before getting into the weeds, remember to follow your target journal's guide for authors. No matter what the editor of *Matter* says, make sure you prioritize the format requested by your target journal (while not our policy, failure to include required cover letter elements may lead to automatic desk rejection at other journals).

I like to see three elements in a cover letter. The most basic structure is one paragraph or so per element but that choice is really up to the author. Remember, sell your work. Point out the best aspects and key findings and frame it for your intended audience. What I like to look for includes:

- (1) *Background/motivation*. Write a few sentences giving context and framing your research. We handle a lot of different materials at *Matter*—point us in the right direction. List some prior citations in the field (yours if relevant); match the journal's target readership, i.e., don't cite more technical journals if you're aiming for a general audience! Maybe provide a short list of similar articles previously published by the journal, or relevant works by you or your co-authors that have been previously published or are under consideration by other journals, including preprints. If we're interested in the paper, the editorial team will look for such works anyways. First, we want to see what is already known and demonstrated in the area, as a benchmark for innovation. Again, it helps us assess the novelty of the work. Is it a culminating study resulting from years of prior findings? Or is it brand new? If there are no related articles, state that too!
- (2) *Contributions/summary*. Briefly summarize methods and results (e.g., "Here we show..."). If it helps, use bullet points or enumerated lists. Stress the novelty (e.g., "For the first time..."). This is where some abstract stuff can be included, but don't copy it—editors will read all the abstract anyways. Never copy and paste ANY SENTENCES from the abstract. Highlight where the work differs from prior efforts OR this complements prior efforts. Too many times it's simply phrased as: "*Here, for the first time, we did* [insert focus of study]. *The novel approach presented herein will pave the way for future innovations and understanding in* [relevant field]." Great, you didn't tell me anything. You just knew you had to state "first time" and "novel" and "innovation." Say it directly, in one succinct sentence—what did you find and why does it matter?
- (3) *Interest/impact*. Sell, sell, sell! Why are your results important? Who will care? What will it lead to in the future? Don't overstate the results but do state who will be most interested. Highlight novelties or findings that may be of interest to different groups beyond your particular material case. You can hype the findings a little but be realistic in your claims—the work must live up to it. A good rule of thumb—if this paragraph or section is longer than the background or contributions sections, it's overkill.

Close with the required boilerplate stuff ("We have included a list of potential peer reviewers," etc.). A thanks for consideration helps but is not necessary.

A good editor will never base their decision on the cover letter alone. If you just include the necessary information, it technically doesn't hurt the chances of review, but you've missed an opportunity to excite the handling editor. Some authors may

consider cover letters a vestigial document, losing their intended information-providing function. However, as they are still currently necessary and very much a standard of the submission process, you might as well use them to your advantage. Just including the requisite parts with a version of the abstract is a wasted opportunity. Try to convey your excitement in the work. Make me want to read your research in the cover letter, and I'll be excited to read every word.

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