

The letter to the editor in scientific publications: writing considerations

*La carta al editor en la publicación científica.
Consideraciones para su elaboración*

A carta ao editor na publicação científica. Considerações para sua elaboração

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Abstract

A letter to the editor is a scientific publication classified as a *short communication*. It allows readers to interact with authors through opinions, criticism, contributions, ideas, hypotheses, and new data. This article presents a literature review on the primary considerations for writing and preparing a letter to the editor. The authors explored articles from the PubMed, Scopus, and SciELO databases from 2010 (January) to date (December 2020). The letter to the editor as a scientific publication has specific writing and preparation features that may refer to an article published in the journal, a contextual topic, or a reader's contribution. It allows the academic community to exchange opinions on the ideas published by the researchers. It has pedagogical value as it enables novel students and researchers to enter the world of scientific criticism and writing. It also helps them familiarize themselves with the editorial process of sending and publishing scientific papers.

Keywords: knowledge, letter, scientific and technical publications, journal paper (MeSH).

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Resumen

Una carta al editor es un tipo de publicación científica que se clasifica como “comunicación corta” y que permite a los lectores interactuar con los autores ya sea a través de opiniones, críticas, aportes, ideas, hipótesis y nuevos datos. En el presente artículo se realizó una revisión bibliográfica sobre las principales consideraciones para la redacción y elaboración de una carta al editor. Se exploró los artículos de las bases de datos PubMed, Scopus y SciELO desde el año 2010 (enero) hasta la actualidad (diciembre del 2020). La carta al editor como publicación científica presenta consideraciones para su redacción y construcción que pueden hacer referencia a un artículo publicado en la revista, así como a una temática coyuntural o aporte del lector. Permite confrontar las ideas publicadas por los investigadores con una comunidad académica. Desde un enfoque pedagógico permite a un estudiante e investigador novel iniciarse en el mundo de la crítica y redacción científica; asimismo conocer el proceso editorial de envío y publicación de artículos científicos.

Palabras clave: Conocimiento; Carta, Publicaciones Científicas y Técnicas; Artículo de revista. (DeCS).

Resumo

Una carta al editor é um tipo de publicação científica que se classifica como “comunicación corta” e que permite que os leitores interajam com os autores e a través de opiniões, críticas, aportes, ideias, hipóteses e novos dados. En el presente artigo se realiza uma revisão bibliográfica sobre las principales consideraciones para la redacción y elaboración de una carta al editor. Veja os artigos das bases de dados PubMed, Scopus y SciELO desde o ano de 2010 (enero) hasta la actualidad (diciembre del 2020). La carta al editor como publicación científica apresenta consideraciones para su redacción y construcción that pueden hacer referencia a un artículo publicado en la revista, así como a una temática coyuntural o aporte del lector. Permite confrontar as ideias publicadas por los pesquisadores com uma comunidade acadêmica. Desde um enfoque pedagógico permite um estudo e investigador de um romance iniciarse no mundo da crítica e redacción científica; asimismo conocer el proceso editorial de envío y publicación de artículos científicos.

Palavras-chave: Conocimiento; Carta, Publicaciones Científicas y Técnicas; Artículo de revista.

Introduction

Scientific communication includes the publication of scientific papers: original works, reviews, essays, notes, clinical cases, etc. Publication is not the last stage of the scientific research process but the beginning of a new process where readers, authors, and the community interact. This interaction is part of a new scientific discourse that can take many forms: among col-

leagues, in scientific meetings, during peer review, and through *letters to the editor*.

A letter to the editor is a structurally *simple* article (at least more straightforward than other types) that favors scientific discourse to interpret studies and guide future research ⁽¹⁾. This interaction between authors and readers is not recent: it emerges in the 15th century when scientists from all over Europe exchanged ideas and challenged

other people's thinking. This was possible because the papers published in a journal are carefully reviewed and selected. However, some errors may not have been detected by the reviewers or the editorial committee. Under these circumstances, readers may send a letter to the editor to express their opinion on a given publication that appeared in the journal.

A letter to the editor is a short form of communication between the author of an article and the reader of a journal ⁽²⁾. It addresses various topics, from comments on local, state, national, and international issues and responses to opinions, stories, findings, and data published in a scientific journal or newspaper ⁽³⁾. These letters are not considered research articles in a scientific journal but communications that revise other articles and offer suggestions, alternative ways of doing things, erase concepts and point out elements that may have been overlooked by authors or reviewers ⁽⁴⁾. The literature shows that the letter to the editor acts as a control measure for researchers as they often include aspects that authors overlooked. However, it can also be used to damage a researcher's reputation ⁽⁵⁾.

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors recommends publishing these letters with their responses. If there is no section to include letters to the editor, readers are denied the possibility of responding to the articles published ⁽⁶⁾. Printed journals often have limited publication space, so letters to the editor must be brief (100 to 200 words). In electronic journals, they also need to be concise (between 250 and 500 words) so writing a letter to the editor helps create a succinct but persuasive argument ⁽³⁾.

Most newspapers (not necessarily scientific journals) also include letters to the editor section to write and share views on what the newspaper publishes. This is also a feature of scientific articles, so the reader must write a letter and send it to the newspaper or journal and wait for

it to be approved or rejected. Although there are no guarantees of publication, a well-written, current, and exciting letter is more likely to be accepted by the editorial team.

Letters to the editor must include a reason for writing, and they must also convey their message shortly and briefly, with clearly defined points. They usually go over the unfavorable aspects of an article, making them a control mechanism that facilitates progress after publication. Its characteristics, importance, disadvantages, and writing considerations are specific. Therefore, this article summarizes the main elements to be considered when writing a letter to the editor.

Method

A literature review was conducted to analyze the information published in the letter to the editor from a scientific publication perspective. The search for sources of information was conducted between March and April 2020 and included the following databases: SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online), MEDLINE (Pubmed), ScienceDirect, Google Scholar. A free information search was conducted with a 10-year cap to analyze both older and current sources. Then, the references of each source were reviewed for more information. The following key terms in Spanish were used: *Carta al editor* (Letter to the editor), *Artículos científicos* (Scientific articles), *Publicación científica* (Scientific publication), and *Redacción científica* (Scientific writing). English terms included: *Letter to the editor*, *Scientific papers*, *Scientific publication*, and *Scientific redaction*.

The sources of information were analyzed according to the following categories: defining what a letter to the editor is, importance, disadvantages, and writing considerations. The search located 28 sources of information, all of them scientific articles.

Development

Types of letters to the editor

Letters to the editor are a type of scientific article published in a journal. The editorial committee decides how many letters are published per issue, whether these letters will undergo a peer-review process, and if they, the editor, or the authors will be able to reply. They can be classified in various ways; the main ones are: comment letters and short reports ⁽⁷⁾; there are also common and uncommon letters ⁽⁴⁾ as well as letters relating to previously published articles: case report letters, short reports, and opinion letters ⁽⁸⁾.

Short reports present an original work, so they resemble an original article but are more concise. They are used when authors want to communicate a result quickly ⁽⁹⁾. Letters commenting on other articles are the most common type and include criticism of journal-related publications. Their review period is shorter (between 3 and 6 months, depending on the journal) and is usually related to the latest journal articles. Both types express the author's—favorable or unfavorable—positions on an article or topic published by the journal. Sources of information must often support this position, so a letter usually includes references.

Letters can also be classified as those referring to newly published articles (the two latest issues ⁽¹⁰⁾) and those that mention old journal publications ⁽¹¹⁾. The first is the most common type and focuses on identifying errors, making corrections, putting forward alternative theories, adding important information not considered in the original article, offering additional evidence, and showing ideas that contrast with the main idea in the original article.

The importance of a letter to the editor

Letters to the editor are a quick and effective way to communicate problems that are more

or less known or which were not considered by researchers. They can be used to correct and clarify facts in a news story, article, editorial, or opinion piece. They can also oppose or support an institution's actions, draw attention to a problem, encourage editors to cover a topic that is being overlooked and urge readers to support their cause. When multiple letters are published on a given topic, they can add energy and urgency to the call for greater attention to the problem.

Letters allow writers to develop, discuss and exchange ideas, challenge or support peer-reviewed ideas, rectify errors, and open a dialogue between researchers and readers. They help raise points excluded from a study and provide additional information to support the work ⁽¹²⁾. Letters to the editor, like other media tools, educate readers on a topic, affect public opinion, and influence readers' positions and decision making ⁽¹³⁾. They should not be used to avoid peer-review processes or increase authors' lists of publications in their CV.

It is essential because many of them detect methodological or interpretative defects in a study and sometimes report findings from other studies that were not considered by the original publication. They make it possible to report a clinical or experimental result not yet described in the biomedical field. They communicate observations and findings that do not fit the format of an original article on account of length and importance ⁽¹⁴⁻¹⁶⁾. They also allow authors to develop opinions, ideas, novel methodologies, and hypotheses and present them to the scientific community ⁽¹⁵⁾.

A letter in response to a published study should support or criticize the study's methods, results, analysis, or outcomes. Furthermore, the letter to the editor has a dual role in literature. It can be a corrective tool and also disseminate and share knowledge and experiences ⁽⁵⁾. A criticism letter should be brief and evidence-based, using

references from a previously published article to justify your claims ^(12,17).

They help find errors that were overlooked during the pre-release review. This helps maintain the quality of the journal. Some letters may also give opinions on the journal's style and editorial policies, which helps editors, and their committees value their practices and editorial quality. This is the "second point of view" role of letters to the editor.

Pedagogically, letters to the editor are a starting point in research and publication for young researchers and students. This is possible because of their uncomplicated structure, which allows them to integrate into scientific activity and strengthen their writing and critical reading skills, among other things ^(7,18). This is how letters to the editor become a strategy for training researchers. Students can demonstrate that they can read and criticize a scientific article, pose new research questions, and write consistently. They bring students closer to the work of researchers and writers of scientific articles ^(19,20). The letter's pedagogical roles allow students to become familiar with the process of sending articles, interacting with a journal's editor and its protocols. These experiences will allow them to write articles of greater complexity.

The disadvantages of a letter to the editor

Letters to the editor may be written to discredit researchers or entail abuse by those who falsely support or criticize an author. It is therefore recommended that letter writers avoid this type of confrontation or attempt to discredit another author.

Some journals charge a certain amount of money for publishing their articles. This can sometimes become an obstacle for readers to forward their letters to the editor, send their comments or views. In addition, many journals only receive letters sent within a prescribed period, which limits the sending of letters ⁽⁵⁾.

A few of the disadvantages of letters to the editor: many of them are unrelated to the journal's articles or topics, some repeat information already known or covered by the source, their message is unclear, they may include excessive description and detail, they lack new or helpful information, they contain too many tables or figures, they use references to increase the author's citations and impact, they give biased opinions ⁽¹⁷⁾ and are used to improve the scientific production of one author, several authors, universities and countries.

Considerations for writing a letter to the editor

A letter should have no more than 500 words (although this will depend on the journal's guidelines) and is addressed to the editor of a newspaper or journal. It is advisable to deal with a current or somewhat controversial issue. If you wish to start a discussion on a specific topic or respond to a letter or article in your newspaper, mention which article you are responding to and the date it was published, so readers and the editor know what you are writing about.

If you are unsure how to begin, find letters to the editor previously published in the journal. This can help produce ideas and visualize the journal's style. This search also allows you to identify questions such as: Which topics do articles address in the journal? Which are the most popular topics addressed? What is said about the problems? What do writers think about that problem? Do you agree with what has already been said, or do you have a new contribution? When you are clear on the issue to be addressed, review other articles that will underpin your writing. Referring to a recently published article or column will increase the chances of your letter being published (Table 1).

Table 1. Considerations for writing a letter to the editor

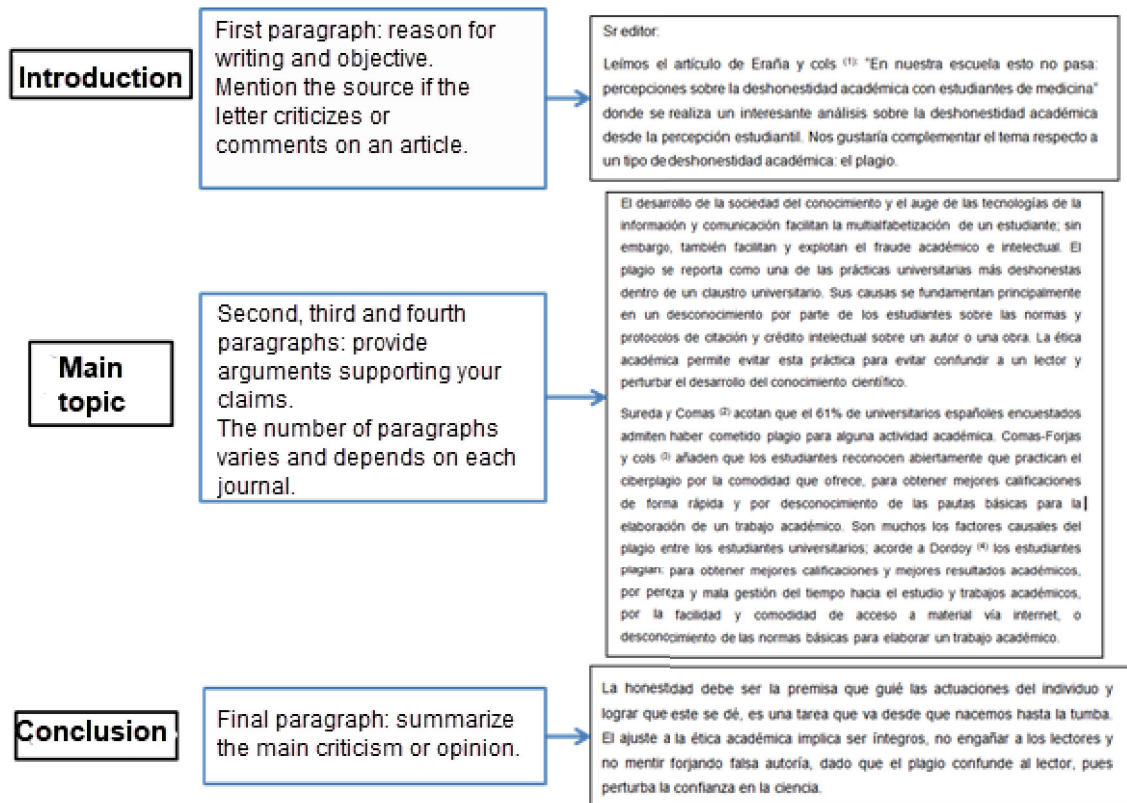
Recommendation	Consideration
Review the guidelines for authors	The length of a letter to the editor varies from journal to journal (between 250 and 500 words is a usual length). Please note that journals accept submissions either via email or a platform. Check that the journal accepts letters to the editor and any considerations regarding the type of letter accepted. Review the letters already published for length, topic, and style.
Write an eye-catching title	The title should reflect the topic of the letter and be brief (see the number of words the journal accepts for the title). Typically letters to the editor may feature titles in exclamatory or question format or include puns.
If possible, choose a context-related topic	Readers will be more interested in the issues that affect their life and community, whether economic, political, or social. Provide facts and data that increase the relevance of the problem.
Make it relevant	Make it clear that your topic is relevant and important and support that importance.
Do not assume	Do not assume that your readers are informed about the topic. Provide an introduction and information background. Include citations and sources that show you have researched the topic. Do not be afraid to express your opinion clearly; however, emotional language should be avoided.
Be consistent and cohesive	Raise your position in the first paragraph. Write short paragraphs. Support your position with clear facts. Preferably, a paragraph should raise only one idea. Avoid long sentences as they cause the reader to lose interest. Write cohesive paragraphs linked by the idea you are considering. Keep your writing active and persuasive so that the public wants to read on.
Be respectful and ethical	Avoid expressions that harm someone else's honor: criticize the idea or method. Use standard or superstandard language, taking care of spelling and grammar. Do not personify your criticism.
Identify yourself	Provide your personal data and affiliation, so your readers and other authors will know who is criticizing or commenting on their work.
Be timely	Letters to the editor are usually a response or reaction to an article that appeared in the journal at a specific time. Most journals accept letters addressed to articles published in the latest issues.
Use sources of information	If the letter criticizes a methodological aspect, data, or hypothesis, the arguments should have the necessary theoretical support.
Use your authorship and affiliation	If you are an authority in your field of study, consider signing with that title to help the letter have more significant support and impact.
Start strong	The first paragraph should attract the reader's and editor's attention: present the problem, your position, or a reflection.
Provide solutions	If this is a problematic issue, provide potential solutions and try to call for action.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Several biomedical journals recommend that the letters and their responses be brief (between two and three paragraphs) and include a maximum of five references. However, this varies according to each journal. If possible,

avoid presenting figures and tables (unless imperative). The title should be informative, while the content should appear progressively to end with a final concluding comment⁽²¹⁾ (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Diagram of a general letter to the editor.



Source: Prepared by the author.

Discussion

Publication research is prone to errors, misuse of statistics, selective citations of published works, incorrect citations of references, often unknowingly, which may escape peer review before the article is published ⁽⁵⁾. Only after publication is the article more open to critical review. Letters to the editor allow readers to communicate with journal editors and help verify the peer-review process ⁽²²⁾. Publishers appreciate those letters, not only because they prove that someone is reading the journal and taking it seriously, but also because they usually provide the editorial work with thoughtful criticism.

This review described the features, functions, types, and structure of a letter to the editor. We

found that scientific journals included different letters: some letters describe interesting cases, while others express opinions. In addition, many editors publish short papers that do not qualify as a complete original article in the form of letters. Some letters pose a new hypothesis, describe a novel adverse event, or a point relevant to clinical practice, as well as responses or comments to articles published in the journal. Letters typically refer to articles recently published by a journal. However, journals may require them to address thematic points of interest in a given community. A letter to the editor can also provide new and scientifically important information, regardless of previous publications. For example, short reports may

be published or research whose content justifies sharing but whose length does not allow it to be published as a complete original article ^(22,23). Including the letters to the editor section in a scientific journal allows readers to communicate with the editorial team and the article writers. It provides a space to ask questions, make comments, criticize articles, or request clarification. It creates an environment of communication between authors and readers, serving as a forum for dialogue and debate when new findings are published. This includes methodological or statistical observations, interpretation of results, and operational definitions. They also make it possible to communicate any previously undescribed clinical or experimental findings or even to express opinions on aspects of a journal's editorial policy, among other things. They also allow authors to explain (reply to) the elements that have been questioned, which is one of the recommendations of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors ^(24,25). It should be noted that when writing a letter to the editor, you should think about the reader and not the editor. Letters are often addressed to editors so that they "do something" or take into consideration the author's position. Authors should not do this as the letter is supposed to express thoughtful criticism on a topic, article, or editorial policy rather than praise the editor. The main task of both the publisher and the author is to communicate with the reader, not with each other. Bidirectionality between authors and readers facilitates the dissemination of knowledge. It submits the published information to a new test, enabling the comparison with a new reality; it also allows us to posit new questions and ideas for research ⁽²⁶⁾. The interaction between researchers, academics, readers, and students helps a field of study develop, so writing and publishing letters to the editor is essential for teaching and transmitting scientific knowledge. Letters to the editor and the subsequent interaction between authors and readers favor

the journal's impact factor because it increases the number of citations on an article being criticized and analyzed. Journals usually accept many letters to the editor to achieve a more significant impact factor and therefore have a high acceptance rate ⁽²⁷⁾. This review found that most letters to the editor are written to criticize an article: correct an inaccurate statement, point out errors, or comment on the methodology. Their primary purpose is to start and continue a significant debate, so letters that simply agree with everything the authors have done and reported are unlikely to be published. While letters to the editor allow readers to interact with authors, they remain controversial because some readers use them to criticize and settle the score with authors, in some cases affecting researchers' honor. Sometimes letters with false names are sent to support or criticize an author. It is also well known that letters to the editor are more readily accepted than other types of scientific articles. They can be a gateway for authors with no scientific merit to be included in high-impact journals and increase their scientific output ⁽²⁸⁾. Often these letters are not answered by the authors addressed, so the essence of bidirectionality is lost ⁽²⁹⁾. These comments could have led to an exciting breakthrough but ignoring them leaves a gap in research knowledge. Once published, these letters can be cited as publications in other articles and used to support applications for grants and employment. Letters in reputable journals may also gain the respect they may not deserve.

Conclusions

A letter to the editor is a type of scientific publication based on the interaction between authors and readers. Its structure and wording are simple but must follow a straightforward approach and offer clearly expressed constructive criticism. This will increase its chances of being published in the journal. They are classified as comment letters and short reports. Short

reports are original works: they resemble an original article but are more concise. Comment letters are the most common and aim to criticize journal publications. The purpose of these letters is to express opinions for or against the authors' findings and ideas. From an educational perspective, they allow students and novel researchers to enter scientific writing and com-

munication. These publications enable authors and readers to exchange opinions, and in some cases, the letter to the editor is just as interesting as the original article. They also enable researchers to report novel clinical events quickly, such as when the adverse effects of thalidomide in pregnant women were first reported.

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1. Conception and design of study
2. Acquisition of data
3. Data analysis
4. Discussion of results
5. Drafting of the manuscript
6. Approval of the final version of the manuscript

YC has contributed in: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

Acceptance note

This article was approved by the journal's editor, MsC Dr. Vanesa Pereira-Prado