

Science

The AAAS logo, consisting of a stylized 'A' made of three slanted lines followed by the letters 'AAAS' in a serif font.

GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING AN EFFECTIVE COVER LETTER

2016

Introduction

Most researchers know that high impact journals are incredibly selective and their editors reject the majority of manuscripts without review. Although researchers look to the ultimate goal of getting their research published, some do not realize that the first critical step is to get the editor to consider the paper for review and the first document that influences that decision is the cover letter! You should consider the cover letter to be a critical part of the manuscript and spend time to craft it well.

You should always read the journal instructions for authors for detailed requirements for cover letters. However, writing a good cover letter is not rocket science, and the general guidelines below should help you construct a strong and complete document. As you review these guidelines, it will help if you think of your cover letter as

- **A marketing tool** to “sell” your manuscript to the editor by showing not only how your findings advance knowledge in your area, but also how your paper will bring attention and prestige to the journal.
- **An executive summary** providing the busy editor with an overview of the paper, a summary of its main contribution to the field, and a concise statement of fit with the journal’s aims and scope.
- **A reflection** of your (and your co-authors’) credibility and professionalism. This last point is extremely important because the cover letter is the one place that you can use your personal voice in writing to the editor. Write your cover letter in clear, plain, concise English.

You should consider the following basic guidelines each time you write a cover letter.

Always

- Begin by reviewing the **journal instructions** to see what they require in submissions overall and in cover letters in particular. Remember, journal requirements can differ substantially from one journal to another.
- Try to use **institutional letterhead** of the corresponding author, which can help editors verify your credentials.

“*The cover letter is the one place that you can use your personal voice in writing to the editor. Write your cover letter in clear, plain, concise English.*”

- Use the **correct journal name**. Cover letters submitted using the wrong journal name tell the editor that the manuscript was likely rejected by another journal, which immediately indicates that there may be a problem with the paper.
- Include the correct **type of article** you are submitting. Most journals accept a variety of submissions, from full research articles to reviews, news, and commentaries, so you should be sure you indicate what type of paper you are submitting for consideration.
- Include the **title of the paper** in the cover letter. The title should be written so that it concisely conveys the main findings of the paper, critical information for an editor’s decisions about whether a manuscript should be considered for the journal. Many papers are rejected without review because editors feel the topics are outside the scope of the journal.
- Include the **name and all contact information** for the corresponding author.
- Address **conflicts of interest (COI)** by either stating that all the authors have no conflicts of interest or, if one or more authors do have conflicts, concisely stating what they are. Having a conflict of interest is not necessarily a problem as long as you state it fully

in your cover letter. Problems arise when authors do not reveal potential conflicts and editors find out about them later.

- List and briefly explain any Material Transfer Agreements (MTAs) or similar documents related to your paper, if appropriate.
- Concisely state the **main contribution** of the research, and emphasize how the findings are **unique and important** and will **impact the field**. Be careful to be realistic: don't exaggerate.
- Explicitly state why the manuscript is a **good match for the journal**. This means you must carefully read the Mission, Aims, or Scope statement of the journal before you draft your cover letter.
- State why it is important to publish the paper **now**. Why is the research timely?
- State that you have read and understood **all the journal's policies and requirements**, particularly requirements related to **data sharing and deposition**. Journals requirements can differ greatly and can be very specific, so it is important to assure editors that you understand and will adhere to their specifications.
- If author instructions allow, list reviewers you would like included or excluded and reasons.
- List and attach any manuscripts under consideration at other journals that are related to the one you are submitting.
- Edit to keep the letter to about **one page**. If you are not a strong writer, consider asking for help from a colleague or a professional editor. Do not write a very brief note or a very long letter: both waste time and will annoy the editor.

Have You:

- ☐ Carefully read the **journal instructions** to see what they require in submissions, including in cover letters?
- ☐ Presented the letter on **institutional letterhead** if possible?
- ☐ Used the **correct journal name**?
Included your **paper's title** and listed the **correct paper type** (*research article, review, or other*)?
- ☐ Included the **name and all contact information** for the corresponding author?
- ☐ Addressed all **conflicts of interest**, or stated there are none?
- ☐ Listed and explained **MTAs**, if needed?
- ☐ Stated the **main contribution** of the research, emphasizing how the findings are **unique and important**?
- ☐ Stated how the manuscript is a **good match for the journal**?
- ☐ Stated why it is important to publish the paper **now**?
- ☐ Stated that you have read and understood all the journal policies and requirements including those related to **data sharing and deposition**?
- ☐ Listed excluded reviewers and recommended reviewers and why?
- ☐ Listed and attached any manuscripts related to your paper that are under consideration at another journal?
- ☐ Edited the letter for length, style, and readability, striving to keep it to about one page?

For more information about the guidelines here, see:
advances.sciencemag.org/content/information-authors

SAMPLE COVER LETTER



1

Sea Studies University
1 Sea Slug Street
Sea Slug, Maine

Dear Dr. Jones, 2

Enclosed please find our manuscript “**Changes in sea slug communities across a natural pH gradient**” submitted as a **research report** to *Science Advances*. 3 4 5

This study **builds on a 2011 paper in *Science*** by Smith and colleagues that reported the increasing acidification of waters around the Hemlock Islands, and identified the hydrodynamic, biological and climatic processes involved. Our paper has two new components, the first of which is a comprehensive statistical analysis of community composition across Hemlock’s steep natural gradient in pH. Our analysis reveals that communities dense with sea slug species can persist under record-breaking levels of ocean acidification but that bioerosion rates increase as much as **ten-fold** as pH declines. This result draws attention to a **previously unknown critical** role of sea slug species in mediating the impact of ocean acidification on reef structural integrity in situations like Hemlock where the benthic community is able to persist under extreme conditions. 6 7 8

We then compare community responses across all naturally low pH sea slug environments studied to date. This comparison reveals that the ecological and physiological responses of sea slugs to similar levels of pH are unique to each system, implying that the responses of different slug communities to future anthropogenic acidification **may be less predictable than previously thought**. Despite these differences, however, *all* environments studied showed increased rates of disease among slugs with increasing natural acidification. **Our data strongly supports our conclusion that slug community responses to 21st-century ocean acidification, although likely to vary, are likely to lead to an unavoidable escalation of the bioerosion of slug environments that may in turn have a devastating impact on the global slug community.** 9 10 10

The topic we cover is of interest and relevance to scientists across a broad range of disciplines, as well as to conservation organizations, policymakers, and governments locally and abroad. Publication in *Science Advances* will ensure we reach this broad readership as quickly and effectively as possible, supporting much-needed actions to preserve slug communities. 11

All authors have read the manuscript, agree with the journal’s data deposition requirements and to our submission in *Science Advances*, and have no conflicts of interest, although we do have a related Material Transfer Agreement (MTA). In addition, through your submission site, we have provided a list of suggested and excluded reviewers, and uploaded a related manuscript under consideration at the *Journal of Ecology* as well as the MTA related to our paper. 12

Please feel free to contact **me as the corresponding author** to discuss any questions you may have about our team’s research, our findings, or this manuscript. 13

Best regards,

Prof. John Smith
Department of Oceanography
Sea Studies University
1 Sea Slug Street
Sea Slug, Maine
222-333-4444 (office)
555-666-7777 (cell)
Jsmith@seaslug.edu

1. A letter on institutional letterhead is not necessary but if included can support the credibility of authors

2. Letters addressed to specific editors show that authors have done research to find which of the journal editors handles papers in the area of the research

3. Includes name of paper

4. Notes the specific type of article

5. Includes correct name of journal!

6. Sets context, establishes credibility

7. Statement of dramatic finding

8. Establishes novelty and importance of findings

9. Again indicates a new finding

10. Additional statement of the impact and importance of the findings

11. Establishes interest to readership of journal and timeliness of topic

12. The information in this paragraph shows that authors understand journal requirements

13. Author provides multiple ways that editorial office can contact him or her.

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