

# How to write a critical letter and respond to one

*Neville W Goodman*

***Critical letters are important. They correct the published record. To write a critical letter requires tact; to respond to one requires tact — and the humility that comes with the realisation that belief in an observation or an idea does not make it true.***

### **WHY AND HOW YOU SHOULD WRITE YOUR LETTER**

Twenty years ago, Professor Sam Shuster (1981) remarked that published work was accorded almost biblical reverence. Reviewing some books based on conference proceedings, he complained that too many reviewers were uncritical to the point of merely regurgitating.

Doctors all know that journals use peer review to assess articles submitted for publication, but perhaps not all doctors know much about the process (Paice, 2001). Some journals use just one or two referees for each paper; others use a panel of referees with knowledge of different aspects of research, e.g. statistics. Particularly in the more specialist journals, published research may have been approved after little more than a perfunctory scan for significant phrases by a referee during a convenient train journey.

A referee may just decide they like the message of the paper, without carefully assessing the methods. A referee may be unfamiliar with all aspects of the study, or may be uncomfortable with statistics. Unless the authors cite suspiciously few recent papers, a referee is unlikely to check the literature for important omissions. Unless a referee is a truly deeply read expert, relevant papers published long ago can easily be omitted.

All of these errors need correction, and a journal's readers can do this. And even if a paper has been properly and thoroughly reviewed, there may be differences of opinion that are not brought out in the discussion. All scientific journals worthy of the name should publish readers' comments (Maddox, 1990a; Bhopal and Tonks, 1994), which one editor has described as 'the proper dialogue of science' (Horton, 1995).

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Writing a letter is no different from writing anything else: plan, then write. First decide the important error or misinterpretation and describe it succinctly. Then explain why it is an error, giving references if appropriate. Do not fall into the trap of yourself failing to cite a previously published similar criticism. Finally, explain clearly and simply what the authors should have done or written. And leave it at that. Draw the threads together into the coherent letter, which should be as short as possible. Pithy one-liners make the best letters in newspapers; the same is true in medical journals. Short letters are much more likely to be read, because they stand out on the page.

Writing letters is a good way to hone general writing skills (Goodman and Edwards, 1997). In summary, use (don't employ) short words in short sentences, and make every word count (not make a positive impact). Impress with fact not with false erudition.

Do not start your letter with 'I read with interest the article by Smith and co-workers...' but with your main point. Consider making your criticism less personal by referring indirectly to the authors rather than directly by their names. If you want to make it more personal, you can soften the blow with, 'Smith and co-workers make the common error of...' rather than the bald 'Smith and co-workers should have...'

Do not use deliberately provocative language without extremely good reason. In my view that should be only for accusations of serious research malpractice, not just for minor misdemeanours or misinterpretations (although strict definition of where the one merges into the other has defied many committees for many years).

Having written your letter, put it in a drawer for a couple of days: I do not

recommend dashing off critical letters without second thoughts. Show your letter to a colleague before posting it.

Whatever the tone of your letter, you will need to write an accompanying letter to the editor of the journal, explaining why he or she should publish your criticism. There is no need to be repetitive, so 'I enclose a letter commenting on some aspects of a study published in...' may be enough, although it may be worth adding at least one explanatory sentence to avoid immediate editorial 'triage' (Fox, 2000). The more critical and accusatory your letter, the more explanation you need to give the editor, who may anyway ask you — or later take an editorial decision — to tone down your sentiments.

If the editor thinks your letter is worth publishing, it will usually be sent to the original authors to allow them to comment. It is unusual for letters to receive any other peer review; indeed, letters are 'post-publication peer review' (Caswell, 1992; Shahar, 1997; Winker and Fontanarosa, 1999). I usually send a copy of the critical letter directly to the authors as well; that way, you may get an answer to your criticisms, even if not the satisfaction (and reward) of seeing them in print. Do not be too hopeful: in my experience, letters of congratulation for a study well done or an article well thought-out almost always receive replies, but criticisms do not.

### **RESPONDING TO CRITICISM**

You are unlikely to be shown the authors' response to your letter, but it is unlikely to be satisfactory or complimentary. Anyone who writes a lot of critical letters needs to have a thick skin. With honourable exceptions, authors do not look on criticism as a light to the truth, humbly saying 'Thank you'. Criticism is a challenge to be overcome,

usually by a mixture of semantic wriggings, ignoring the main point but expansively countering less important ones (a practical reason for keeping critical letters succinct and accurate), and sometimes by being implicitly abusive (Goodman, 1996). Maddox (1990b) wrote that even if there is no option but to admit error it is rarely done, and authors may resort to blaming a third party whose work they relied on. While those in the field often know full well what is going on, casual readers cannot.

Sometimes authors are explicitly abusive; for some reason, particularly after criticism of English. Norman (1997) criticized the use of the word 'aggressive', as in 'the aggressive control of pain'. In his reply Chaney ignored Norman's point completely, accused him of being obsessed with semantics, and added snidely, 'However, constructive criticism and comments regarding study design, data analysis, and clinical implications are always welcome' — a moot point. To the editor's credit, a later letter was published suggesting that 'Chaney should have had the courtesy to defend his use of the word' (Goodman, 1998). There was no published response from Chaney.

Some journals do not send letters to the original authors for comment, which I consider unreasonable if the letter is critical; authors must be given the chance to defend themselves. Once, when such a letter appeared some weeks after a paper of mine, the journal refused to publish my rebuttal on the grounds that it would be too long after publication of my original paper — which was entirely the journal's doing.

Whether you are criticized by a letter forwarded to you or an unheralded letter in a journal, the first response should be to take a deep breath. Re-read the criticism dispassionately. Show it to a colleague. If your critic is correct, have the grace to say so, with gratitude; add an excuse or reason for your error if you wish, but keep the error your own. If the criticism is unfounded, your written response should simply counter the presented facts. Make no comments on the motives or character of your critic, and resist the urge to dig up some dirt on them — dirt will make you feel better, but it may stick to you.

## THE EFFECT OF YOUR LETTER

The first effect is that you have a publication for your CV. Traditionally, letters carry little weight compared with more 'substantial' publications, but canny interviewers realize that letters can say a lot about the writer that won't necessarily be apparent in a research publication, particularly one with many authors. Letters are also easy to find and do not take long to read.

Comments on published work are indexed (if not perfectly or completely) in databases: there is a comment field in Medline, although the searcher has actively to retrieve the comment. This allows relevant critical comments to be cited along with the primary research. This happens less than it should: when Bhopal and Tonks (1994) drew attention to it they cited an earlier paper from 1955 — and elicited a comment (Kalla, 1994) reporting a journal editor's admission that it was not normal practice to cite correspondence in editorials. Even papers retracted because of outright fraud are still being cited (Campanario, 2000).

None of this should stop you writing a letter; almost certainly, not enough of us do (Caswell, 1992). Your comment, correction or interpretation will not be cited if unmade, and you cannot then complain if subsequent authors make the same mistake or repeat it.

## THE FUTURE OF THE CRITICAL LETTER

E-mailed comments about published articles appear in the online *British Medical Journal* ([www.bmj.com](http://www.bmj.com)) within 24–48 hours, with little editorial interference. Other journals may follow. In some ways this is good: authors receive and can respond to criticism quickly. People who would otherwise not get round to typing and posting a letter can send an instant (of which: beware!) e-response. Those with a direct interest in a topic can follow the debate. The reward is less clear. All BMJ e-letters are considered for publication in the paper journal, although the acceptance rate is decreasing; but is an e-letter a publication? There is little editorial control, and there are professional e-letter writers. Controversial

articles can attract rambling, illogical and repetitive axe-grinding dialogue: is one obliged to search through this stuff and then have to cite it? The future of the critical letter depends on the future of medical publishing and the rewards that authors obtain from it. The only thing certain about the future is that we do not know what is going to happen. For the moment, if the thought strikes you, write about it. **HM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*

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## KEY POINTS

- Critical letters are an important scientific resource.
- Write your letter clearly and simply.
- Do not be hasty.
- Explain briefly to the editor why your criticism matters and send a copy to the authors you are criticising.
- Be prepared to accept criticism if it is warranted.
- Do not be abusive — implicitly or explicitly.
- Published letters are an easily accessed part of your CV, and are indexed in Medline with the original article.
- e-responses may be the future of 'post-publication peer review'.