In this issue...

Tips for writing a journal submission cover letter

-- Kathryn Hale

It has long been customary to include a cover letter with a manuscript submission to a journal. While this may seem an outmoded nicety in this age of electronic communication, the cover letter is actually a very important part of any manuscript submission. The savvy author should look at the cover letter as an opportunity to communicate persuasively to the journal editors why *this* paper should be published by *this* journal.

Getting started

When planning the cover letter, the first step should always be to review the author instructions for the target journal. Some journals explicitly ask for a cover letter and in some cases even

outline what should be included. These guidelines should be followed as closely as possible. Most journals, however, make no mention of the cover letter.

Before leaving the author instructions, check these two sections.

- First, review the section that describes the journal's focus of interest. (This is often called the "Scope.") Read it carefully and note key words or phrases that could be used in the cover letter to describe your paper. Explicitly relating these terms to your paper can show the journal editors why your paper is a good fit for that journal.

- Second, note the name and title of the person at the journal to whom manuscripts should be sent. If no other person is named, address the letter to the editor in chief. Double-check this in the current issue of the journal, as online author instructions are not always up to date.

Writing the letter

Overall: Use a formal, traditional letter format, even if the cover letter is being sent by e-mail. Use the official institutional letterhead if printing the letter or copy the institution's authorized graphic logo into the electronic file. The writing style should be succinct but cordial and sincere; be respectful but not obsequious. Avoid invoking the authors' qualifications or previous successes unless they are directly relevant to this work. Focus on the merits of the current work.

Length: Try to keep the letter to one page, single-spaced. Aim for three to five short to medium-length paragraphs. An overlong, exhaustively detailed letter is less likely to be read through and may even create an unfavorable impression.

Address: Address the letter to a named person with the appropriate title ("Dear Dr. Roberts"). Do not write "To whom it may concern" or "Dear sir or madam." If you must use an anonymous addressee, write "Dear editor." If you have discussed this work with an editor at the journal already, that person may direct you to submit the manuscript to their attention.

Opening paragraph: The first paragraph usually gives the full, exact title of the paper being submitted and asks the editor to consider the paper for publication in that journal. If you have already discussed this work with this editor or another editor at the journal, remind them of that discussion.

Summary of paper: Avoid simply copying the abstract or other passages from the paper. In general, do not describe specific experiments or methods (unless these are the point of the paper) or report specific results. Instead, give a brief synopsis of the overall experimental approach, the main conclusions indicated by the results, and the implications of those conclusions. Use strong, confident phrasing and avoid vague, wishy-washy language. Look for any opportunity to apply the phrasing used by the journal in its Scope statement.

This summary should accomplish the following:

- Highlight new information presented

- Indicate why this information is of interest to the journal's readers or why this paper is particularly suitable for this journal

- Put the findings in context with other efforts in similar or related fields

- Emphasize the impact and importance of the work, whether to clinical practice or research in the field

- Suggest anticipated (realistic) future applications of the results

Reviewer suggestions: Some journals request that authors suggest reviewers for the paper. If the journal does not request reviewer suggestions, should the authors suggest reviewers anyway? Unless there is a compelling reason to suggest reviewers, it is probably better not to, since there are many possibilities for missteps here: omitting a prominent or obvious reviewer or naming a reviewer who is out of favor with the journal, for example. Avoid giving offense, no matter how innocent or unintended. Similarly, requesting that specific reviewers not review the paper is open to misinterpretation. Any such requests should be made with the utmost tact and diplomacy.

Assurances: Confirm that the paper meets the journal's authorship policy; this may be as simple as stating that all authors have read and approved the content of the paper. Report any conflicts of interest for any of the authors and address any potential ethical concerns. If there are none, indicate that. Affirm that the research is original and that the paper has not been published elsewhere and is not under review by any other journal.

Closing: Close with a cordial statement thanking the editor for considering the manuscript and assuring further cooperation and assistance.

The cover letter should, first and foremost, persuade the editor that the paper is worthy and appropriate for publication in the journal. These guidelines will help you prepare a cover letter that achieves this objective.

New biosketch instructions and samples provided by the NIH

-- Laura Russell

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) recently posted updated biosketch instructions and samples, along with a new biosketch form, on its website. The new instructions include a number of clarifications. For example, the instructions now state that figures, graphics, and tables are not allowed and that publications and research products may be cited in both the "Personal Statement" and the "Contribution to Science" sections.

Here are some helpful tips to keep in mind as you write your biosketch:

- Provide one paragraph of text and up to four citations in the "Personal Statement" section, in which you "briefly describe why you are well-suited for your role(s) in this project." The instructions and samples mentioned above will be very helpful to you as you prepare this section.

- List up to five of your most significant contributions to science in the "Contribution to Science" section. We recommend presenting these contributions as subsections and

creating a summary subheading for each. For example, "Discovered a gene that predicts familial pancreatic cancer" and "Developed a surgical technique for the treatment of advanced liver cancer" are good subheadings that will allow your grant reviewers to determine your strengths quickly.

- Provide as much detail as you can on any past accomplishments that relate to your grant proposal, but if you are a relatively new investigator, don't worry if your biosketch is shorter than the allotted five pages.

- Make the most of the NIH resources available to you, such as a transcript from a short March 2015 podcast, All About Grants, an FAQ on biosketches, and a YouTube video on the free online tool Science Experts Network Curriculum Vitae (SciENcv), the NIH's preferred means of creating and sharing biosketches.

- Learn more about the NIH's biosketch requirements and recommendations by watching a 30-minute YouTube video, NIH Biosketch Writing Tips, produced by The University of California, Los Angeles' Clinical and Translational Science Institute.

- Visit the Research Medical Library for a free consultation regarding starting your grant application. For more information, contact Laurissa Gann at lgann@mdanderson.org or 713-794-4111.

- The Department of Scientific Publications is happy to edit biosketches. For more information, please contact Scientific Publications at scientificpublications@mdanderson.org or 713-792-3305.

You can read more about biosketches in the Summer 2014 and Winter 2015 issues of *The Write Stuff*.

Good luck on your grant applications.

Tips for shortening grant proposals through document and text formatting

-- Stephanie Deming and Amy Ninetto

Often, early drafts of grant proposals exceed the page limits set by the funding agency. If you need to shorten a too-long proposal, you may be able to omit or streamline text, omit figures or tables, or redesign figures or tables to make them more compact. You might also find that some formatting adjustments are helpful. The following formatting techniques can help you maximize the amount of text that will fit on each page and maximize the space available for text and graphics. (The notes in parentheses indicate where to find the relevant commands in Microsoft Word 2013 for PC and Microsoft Word 2011 for Mac.)

Use the narrowest margins allowed. The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) requires margins of at least 0.5 inch on all sides; at least one other major agency requires margins of at least 0.75 inch on all sides. *(PC: Page Layout tab → Page Setup box → Margins) (Mac: Format menu → Document → Margins tab)*

Use the smallest font size allowed. For NIH applications, the font size in the main body of the application must be at least 11 points, but "smaller text in figures, graphs, diagrams and charts is acceptable as long as it is legible when the page is viewed at 100%" (1). To check whether text is legible when the page is viewed at 100%, view the page in Microsoft Word with the zoom set to 100% *(PC: View tab → Zoom) (Mac: View menu → Zoom)*, or print the page on which the text appears and examine the printout. *(PC: Home tab → Font section → Font size box) (Mac: Home tab → Font size menu)*

Use a space-saving font. NIH recommends using Arial, Garamond, Georgia, Helvetica, Palatino Linotype, Times New Roman, or Verdana (1). However, other fonts are allowed as long as the font is 11 points or larger, there are no more than 15 characters (including spaces) per horizontal inch, and there are no more than 6 lines of text per vertical inch (1). Of NIH's preferred fonts at 11-point font size, Garamond and Times New Roman are the smallest. *(PC: Home tab → Font box) (Mac: Home tab → Font menu)*

Turn on automatic hyphenation. Allowing Word to automatically hyphenate words at the ends of lines may shorten each page by several lines. Turning on hyphenation automatically hyphenates the entire document. *(PC: Page Layout tab → Page Setup box → Hyphenation → Check "Automatic") (Mac: Tools menu → Hyphenation → Check "Automatically hyphenate document")*

In a document with hyphenation, hyphenation can be turned off in an individual paragraph. *(PC: Select paragraph, then Page Layout tab → Paragraph box → click right arrow at lower right of box → Line and Page Breaks tab → Check "Don't hyphenate") (Mac: Select paragraph, then Format menu → Paragraph → Line and Page Breaks tab → Check "Don't hyphenate")*

Turn off "widow/orphan control." When the first line of a paragraph appears at the very end of a page and the rest of the paragraph appears on the following page, the single line at the bottom of the first page is known as a *widow*; when the last line of a paragraph appears at the very top of a page, that single line is known as an *orphan*. Documents are most attractive when paragraphs are not split like this. However, when you need more space, practical considerations may be more important than aesthetics. *(PC: Select paragraph or entire document, then Page Layout tab → Paragraph box → click right arrow at lower right of box → Line and Page Breaks tab → Check or uncheck "Widow/Orphan Control") (Mac: Select paragraph or entire document, then Format menu → Paragraph → Line and Page Breaks tab → Check or uncheck "Widow/Orphan Control")*

Set line spacing to single spacing. The default line spacing in some versions of Microsoft Word is 1.08 (2) or 1.15 lines, which is slightly larger than single spacing. Ensuring that line spacing is set to single spacing will help you maximize the amount of text that fits on each page. Some authors set line spacing to exactly the number of points as the point size of the font (e.g., line spacing of "exactly 11 pt" for 11-point Garamond), but we do not recommend doing this as it impairs readability. *(PC: Page Layout tab → Paragraph box → click right arrow at lower right of box → Indents and Spacing tab → Line Spacing menu → Single) (Mac: Format menu → Paragraph → Indents and Spacing tab → Line Spacing menu → Single)*

Reduce the amount of space between paragraphs. Inserting white space between paragraphs can make text-dense grant proposals easier to read. Furthermore, if the first line of each paragraph is not indented, space between paragraphs is essential to show

reviewers where one paragraph ends and the next begins. However, if you need more space for text or graphics, you can reduce the amount of space between paragraphs. If the first line of each paragraph is indented, you can reduce the amount of space between paragraphs to zero. *(PC: Select paragraph, then Page Layout tab → Paragraph box → click right arrow at lower right of box → Indents and Spacing tab → Use the "Before" and "After" boxes to enter the desired point size of the space) (Mac: Select paragraph, then Format menu → Paragraph → Indents and Spacing tab → Use the "Before" and "After" boxes to enter the desired point size of the space)*

Please keep in mind that while the NIH requirements listed here were current as of July 2016, the requirements may change in the future.

References

(1) National Institutes of Health. Format Attachments. http://grants.nih.gov/grants/how-to-apply-application-guide/format-and-write/format-attachments.htm#font. Updated June 28, 2016. Accessed July 7, 2016.

(2) GCF LearnFree.org. Word 2013 Line and Paragraph Spacing. http://www.gcflearnfree.org/word2013/line-and-paragraph-spacing/1/. Published 2016. Accessed July 7, 2016.

Fall schedule for the Research Medical Library webinar program

-- Jill Delsigne-Russell

The Research Medical Library will be updating its calendar with new webinars that offer great opportunities to hone your research skills. The library also has an extensive archive of past webinars. You can participate in live webinars or access past webinars from the library's "Classes & Webinars" page.

Recent and upcoming webinars:

Digital Tools for Educators
Presented May 24, 2016

This webinar demonstrates some practical technologies that can be used to enhance your classes or training sessions. The webinar focuses on tools for modifying digital images and creating screen captures and videos; it also covers copyright and fair use of online materials. In addition, the webinar reviews tools for detecting plagiarism and for developing asynchronous presentations and training sessions, polls, and quizzes.

Quality Health Information Resources for Your Patients
Presented May 25, 2016

Millions of patients search the web daily for health information. Sometimes they find just what they need. At other times, however, they retrieve inaccurate or even dangerous information. This webinar identifies quality health information resources that you can share with your patients.

Open Access Journals and Choosing a Journal for Publication
Presented June 21, 2016

This online class covers publishing in open access journals. Topics discussed include benefits and costs, open access mandates, and free tools that can be used to find the best open access journals for your research.

Embase – Reviewing the Literature Beyond MEDLINE
August 29, 2016, 12:00 pm-12:30 pm

Comprehensive literature searches require searching in more than one database. Embase, a biomedical literature database, indexes more than 6 million records and 2,900 journals that are not covered in MEDLINE and provides coverage back to 1947. In addition, Embase includes 2 million abstracts (dating back to 2009) from more than 6,000 drug and biomedical research conferences. This 30-minute webinar will teach you how to search Embase using the Ovid interface and find the best literature for your research. Attend, ask questions, and receive helpful input from an experienced librarian from the Research Medical Library.

To register for a webinar, please visit the library's Class Calendar. Webinars are color-coded red. When you click on the link for the webinar, you will be directed to the registration screen.

Unusual terms used in scientific writing and publishing: Structured and unstructured abstracts

-- Bryan Tutt

The two main types of abstracts for medical and scientific journal articles are *structured* and *unstructured*. A structured abstract is divided into sections—typically Background, Methods, Results, and Conclusions, although these section headings vary among journals. An unstructured abstract is written in paragraph form without section headings.

To determine whether your abstract should be structured or unstructured, check the instructions for authors for the journal to which you plan to submit your article. Some journals require structured abstracts for all types of articles; others require unstructured abstracts. Many journals prefer structured abstracts for some types of articles (e.g., original research, systematic reviews) and unstructured abstracts for others (e.g., case reports). The journal's instructions will also tell you how long your abstract should be. This is important to check because the length requirement can vary widely. Structured abstracts are usually longer than unstructured abstracts.

For tips on writing an effective abstract, the Department of Scientific Publications offers an online tutorial, Writing Abstracts. You also may want to read these articles from past issues of *The Write Stuff*:

Writing abstracts for review articles

Writing stronger abstracts

How can I shorten my abstract?

Source

AMA Manual of Style, 10th ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2007:20-24.

Upcoming events for authors

Please see the [Scientific Publications](#) website for more information on our educational courses.

Writing and Publishing Scientific Articles (WAPSA). WAPSA is a structured, practical, and in-depth writing-education program for postdoctoral fellows and clinical trainees of MD Anderson taught by the Department of Scientific Publications. This 16-contact-hour course provides an excellent opportunity for advancing participants' skills in writing and publishing research articles while developing their in-progress manuscripts under the guidance of scientific editors.

Locations and times to be announced. Registration required through the Department of Scientific Publications. Details: John McCool (jhmccool@mdanderson.org), *713-792-3174.*

> **September 14 & 21, 2016**
>
> **November 1 & 8, 2016**

Short Courses in Scientific English for Non-Native Speakers of English. Courses last 7 weeks and meet twice a week for 1 or 1.5 hours each day. Classes are held early in the morning, during the lunch hour, or late in the afternoon. Classes are free of charge. Participants must speak English at the intermediate or higher level and be familiar with research and general biomedical terminology. Dates are subject to change. Details: Mark Picus (*mapicus@mdanderson.org*), 713-792-7251, or John McCool (*jhmccool@mdanderson.org*), 713-792-3174.

> **Session 5 – September 26 through November 17, 2016**
> **Pronunciation 1, Conversation 1, Conversation 2, Writing 2, Making Presentations**

Friday Conversation Group. The Friday Conversation Group provides an informal atmosphere for non-native speakers of English to practice their conversational abilities, learn more about American culture, and meet new friends. The class meets every Friday in the Mitchell Building (BSRB), room S3.8003, from 12:00 to 1:00 pm. No registration is required. Details: Mark Picus (*mapicus@mdanderson.org*), 713-792-7251, or John McCool (*jhmccool@mdanderson.org*), 713-792-3174.

Writing Scientific Articles (WSA): A Workshop for Faculty. WSA is a structured, practical, and in-depth writing-education program for clinical and basic science research faculty of MD Anderson taught by the Department of Scientific Publications. This 1-day, 8-contact-hour course provides an excellent opportunity to advance your skills in writing research articles with focus and clarity.

Locations and times to be announced. Registration required through the Department of Scientific Publications. Details: John McCool (jhmccool@mdanderson.org), *713-792-3174.*

> **October 18, 2016**

Writing Persuasive R01 Proposals. This newly developed grant-writing workshop for clinical and basic science research faculty at MD Anderson focuses on the content, organization, and structure of an R01 grant application. Taught by senior editors in the Department of Scientific Publications, this 1-day workshop includes lecture, discussion, and guided grant outlining and development.

Locations and times to be announced. Registration required through the Department of Scientific Publications. Details: Teasha Barker (tsbarker@mdanderson.org), 713-792-6019.

October 20, 2016

Grant Writing Advice. The Department of Scientific Publications now offers grant writing suggestions (Writing R01 Grant Proposals) in the Writing Advice section of our website. This information, stemming from the Grant Writers' Seminars and Workshops (developed by Drs. Stephen Russell and David Morrison and presented annually at MD Anderson) and from the NIH's SF424 (R&R) Application Guide, focuses on R01 grants but can be applied to other types of NIH grants as well.

Writing the Specific Aims Section of a Grant Application. In this video, Scientific Editor Sunita Patterson presents a summary of the National Institutes of Health's grant-review process and how it affects the grant proposal, an overview of the structure of an R01 grant proposal, and a model for writing the Specific Aims section. The video is available on the Scientific Publications website.

Writing Abstracts Online Tutorial. Writing Abstracts, an interactive, Web-based tutorial, covers the most important aspects of writing good abstracts. The lesson includes many examples and an optional self-assessment.

Improve Your Chances for IRG Funding. This PDF presentation by Walter Pagel, the former Director of the Department of Scientific Publications, guides researchers through the process of applying for institutional research grants.

Anatomy of a Research Article. In this video, Senior Scientific Editor Stephanie Deming presents advice on writing the parts of a research article: Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, title, and abstract. The slides shown in the presentation and the presentation handout can be downloaded as well.

Classes Presented by the Research Medical Library. More classes will be posted on the Research Medical Library website once they have been finalized. Classes are located in the Research Medical Library classroom in the Pickens Academic Tower (FCT21.6008). Details: Laurissa Gann (*lgann@mdanderson.org*), 713-794-1111.

> **August 2**, 11:00 am, EndNote Basics (Pickens, Floor 21)
> **August 3**, 10:30 am, Literature Reviews: Searching for Evidence (Pickens, Floor 21)
> **August 4**, 12:00 pm, Library Essentials for Administrative Assistants (Pickens, Floor 21)
> **August 9**, 11:00 am, EndNote Advanced (Pickens, Floor 21)
> **August 24**, 11:00 am, PubMed Basics (Pickens, Floor 21)
> **August 29**, 12:00 pm, Webinar: Embase – Reviewing the Literature Beyond MEDLINE
> **September 8**, 11:00 am, Library Essentials for Administrative Assistants (Pickens, Floor 21)

September 15, 9:30 am, Systematic Reviews: Planning the Literature Search (Pickens, Floor 21)
September 20, 2:00 pm, EndNote Basics (Pickens, Floor 21)
September 22, 1:00 pm, PubMed Basics (Pickens, Floor 21)
September 27, 2:00 pm, EndNote Advanced (Pickens, Floor 21)
October 5, 1:00 pm, PubMed Basics (Pickens, Floor 21)
October 18, 12:00 pm, Library Essentials for Administrative Assistants (Pickens, Floor 21)
October 20, 1:00 pm, EndNote Basics (Pickens, Floor 21)
October 27, 1:00 pm, EndNote Advanced (Pickens, Floor 21)
October 28, 9:30 am, Literature Reviews: Searching for Evidence (Pickens, Floor 21)

All Research Medical Library classes require preregistration through the "Classes & Webinars" section of the [Library's website](). MD Anderson employees should register through the Education Center. For class descriptions and printable handouts or calendars, go to the Research Medical Library's Library Classes page.