Letters, We’ve Got Letters...  

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So, you want to write a letter to the editor? A recent editorial by Golub in JAMA1 prompted us to outline more fully our vision of Annals of Emergency Medicine’s Correspondence section and its place within the journal and the peer review process.

Like most peer-reviewed publications, Annals of Emergency Medicine contains a correspondence section, commonly known as Letters to the Editor. Journals vary considerably with regard to the kinds of articles they publish in their correspondence sections. Unfortunately, Annals has limited print space, and we are able to publish only a minority of the submissions we receive. Accordingly, we would like to outline some of the considerations that enter into the correspondence editors’ decisionmaking process.

SCIENTIFIC INTERCHANGE  
Letters’ most valuable role is to provide an essential component of the peer reviewed scientific process.2 Medical research and progress can be a laborious, halting, inexact, and sometimes messy process. Annals has an excellent group of editors and reviewers who work to confirm the scientific validity of articles published and attempt to screen articles that will have only limited interest for our readers. You, the readership, provide an additional layer of the peer review system through your letters, and such letters provide the backbone of the Correspondence section.

However, some letters may still be given lower publication priority. These include letters essentially in agreement with the article without providing important additional insight, letters that reinforce limitations already addressed in the original article, letters that are mainly self-promotional, and letters written about articles in other publications.

On receipt of a letter, the correspondence editor usually seeks the advice of the original decision editor (the editorial board member who oversaw the submission and acceptance of the original article). If necessary, we may also consult one of Annals’ statistics/methodology editors. If the letter is accepted for publication, the original authors are given the opportunity to respond to the issues raised in the letter.

CASE REPORTS  
Annals occasionally publishes brief case reports within the Correspondence section. However, Annals also publishes case reports in a separate article category and outlines the requirements for such submissions in the Instructions for Authors.3 These requirements also apply to case reports submitted as letters. In general, a submission not suitable for publication as a formal case report is probably not suitable to publish as a letter, either. In most situations, therefore, case reports tend to be given lower priority.

BRIEF REPORTS  
Similarly, Annals maintains a separate and distinct Brief Research Reports article category. Some journals, including Annals, occasionally publish even more abridged studies in their Correspondence section. In general, however, Annals’ correspondence editors tend to give these submissions lower priority as well.

However, an exception occasionally occurs when an Annals decision editor rejects a submission to another category but believes that it may be acceptable if distilled to the size limits of the Correspondence section. They may then reject the article but recommend reformattting and resubmitting as a letter to the editor. In this situation, the original decision editor who made the suggestion then serves as the ad hoc correspondence editor for the new submission.

OTHERS  
As noted in Annals’ “Instructions for Authors,” the Correspondence section may include “discussion, observations, opinions, corrections, and comments on topics appearing in Annals or elsewhere; very brief reports or other items of interest.”4 This broad definition allows the editors valuable editorial flexibility. Some submissions don’t fit neatly into a journal’s predefined article categories but are still considered important. And admittedly, others are simply funny.5 Indeed, “Letters entertain you, letters make you smile.”

So if you still want to write a letter to the editor, the following tips may be of benefit:  
Follow the rules: We advise you to carefully review the...
Instructions for Authors. Correspondence submissions should be limited to 500 words and 5 references. Because timeliness is important to *Annals*’ readers, we also ask that letters be submitted within 8 weeks of the original article’s publication date.

It may be difficult to express oneself in a mere 500 words: “If I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter.” In our experience, however, most letters can be distilled down to this level and inevitably benefit from the effort. We also recommend that authors focus their letters on the most important points. Such focus not only helps with length but also strengthens the author’s message.

Also remember that authors of letters, like any other author, are subject to *Annals*’ conflict of interest policies and disclosure requirements. Any such potential conflicts must be disclosed during submission.

Sleep on it: A common problem seen in the back and forth of scientific discourse is subtle (and not so subtle) defensiveness, anger, sarcasm, and other less desirable forms of communication. Although it is certainly understandable for individuals to be emotional, particularly when they perceive that their work is being attacked, the reality is that those who maintain the highest professional ground in their correspondence usually come out the winners. Accordingly, we advise authors to resist the temptation to retaliate with sarcasm, clever ripostes, or other zingers. These will likely be edited out or lead to outright rejection. In an era of instantaneous e-mail communication, the old admonition to “sleep on it first” is highly advised.

*Annals* encourages its readership to play a role in the postpublication peer review process by submissions to our Correspondence section. Your editors, in turn, will strive to achieve a balance in what we publish through careful prioritization and provide a lively forum for open and professional dialogue.

**Supervising editor:** Michael L. Callaham, MD

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**REFERENCES**


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