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Finding a good fit faster

Tips for writing query letters to LIS journals

For many librarians, the idea of publishing in a scholarly journal is intimidating, especially for those pursuing tenure or promotion. You may have an idea for an article or even several, but you're not sure what journal would want them. When we hear such uncertainties from our colleagues, we ask, "Have you considered writing a query letter?" Almost always the answer is "no," but after people try it, they seem to appreciate the benefits we've come to enjoy from this simple practice. In this article we offer practical advice based on our experiences with query letters, supplemented by findings from a survey of more than 50 LIS journal editors. We have extensive publishing and reviewing experience in LIS journals. We define a query letter as an informal email to the journal editor concerning the suitability of a manuscript for publication in a given journal.

Before you begin

Regardless of whether you decide to write a query letter, we urge you to take a fresh look at your work to see it as something *covetable* by journal editors. It may help to know that low journal acceptance rates are due in part to rejected submissions that were nowhere near acceptable. LIS journals receive submissions that are completely out of scope for the journal, have significant grammatical or formatting issues, or both. Some journals count resubmitted revisions as additional submissions, meaning the first submission counts as a "rejection," even though if the revision gets accepted, the author counts the whole experience as an acceptance. If your article matches the scope of the journal, if the topic hasn't recently been covered by the journal, and if it is reasonably well-written, your chances of acceptance are much higher than the published rate. Consider

changing your mindset from "Who can I get to publish this?" to "Where is the best place for me to publish this to reach my intended readers?" and "Which journal do I prefer to work with?"

Why write query letters?

Writing query letters saves time for everyone. Even thorough research into journals usually raises questions about where your article might find the best fit, and you may identify several options. Submitting your manuscript to multiple publications simultaneously is considered unprofessional, but waiting for-two-six weeks for a full peer review just to learn the article isn't a good fit is frustrating. Some editors find submitting simultaneous query letters to be acceptable,[1] but even if you submit query letters sequentially, responses will come far more quickly than peer reviewer responses would.

Responses to your queries will help you decide where to publish. In addition to gauging the editor's enthusiasm for your topic, you can learn how long the peer review process and/or submission-to-publication process might take. We usually ask how soon a piece could be published if it passes muster. Such questions aren't rude. Most editors responding to our survey thought questions about peer review turnaround time and upcoming publication schedules were appropriate. Finally, the

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improvements you make in response to query letters improve your chances for acceptance and possibly a faster review time.

When might you consider writing a query letter?

It can be useful to submit a query letter when beginning research. In fact, of the editors who responded to our survey, 40 percent were open to receiving query letters during the ideation and research phases. At this stage there is more editors can suggest about methods, topic refinement, scope, or conceptual issues. As the research is progressing, you may realize the work could go in several directions. It's good to ask a local colleague or mentor for their thoughts, but after the options are clear in your mind, it's time to see what your chosen journal's editor thinks. The editor may have advice concerning topical directions, the potential for a series of articles, or even about alternative venues for publication.

The most common time to write a query letter is just before submission, to clarify requirements. Most of the information you'll need is found on the information for authors page of the journal's website. You can spot check some of the requirements by reading a few articles from the journal to check style and tone. While 74 percent of the 46 editors' responses to our survey were that their journal websites were "very accurate," we have experienced cases where the website was incorrect, unclear, or out of date. Some examples we've encountered include: a change in the editor, a change in the style used, word count guidelines that don't match reality, article formatting guidelines that are very specific but upon submission are revealed to be incorrect, unclear information about submitting tables and figures, and the omission of format guidelines for URLs and DOIs.

Should you always write query letters?

No, it is not always appropriate to write a query letter. In the early stages of your research and writing, for example, you should rely on colleagues for initial feedback and advice on your project instead of using a journal editor as a sounding board. When researching publication venues, sometimes the website clarifies all of your questions, making a query letter unnecessary. Other times, the place you're considering for publication has a specific process for submitting ideas spelled out. For example, the entire *Code4Lib* editorial committee votes on every article proposal before an assigned editor works with the author to get the article ready for publication.[2] Remember that you are taking someone's time, so make sure you've already done your due diligence.

General approach to writing query letters

Think of a query letter like a cover letter for a job. Just as you would customize the cover letter for each position, do the same for a query letter, putting your questions in the context of each journal. Clarifying questions are fine, but be clear that you looked at the journal's website. We often provide URLs or quotes from the website to ensure the editor sees what we were seeing.

Use the query letter to make a good impression and be sure to write professionally. Remember that you're applying for your article to be published. Your query letter is your chance to "sell" yourself before the formal peer review. Be sure to respond to all your correspondence courteously, including the journals you decide not to submit to.

On a logistical note, journal submission portals may not provide an easy way to send comments to the editors. Sending query letters through a portal may not allow for formatting or may only provide a web form. In those cases, look for an email address on the journal's website. If there is none, indicate on the form that you would like to send a query letter, and ask for an email address.

Query letter content and structure

We have drafted a few query letter examples[3] illustrating how the content might differ depending on timing, context, and personal style. We wrote these based on our own experiences and after reviewing Michael Marinello and Rodney W. Hicks's editorial about query letters in the nursing field. You might send the first example to multiple editors in order to see which journal is the most promising fit. Having an idea of which journal would be your first choice means you can shape your writing and citation style to that journal's requirements. The second letter is an example seeking advice on

how to translate a long-term research idea into a potential series of publications. Because it asks for more in-depth engagement from the editor, we might not send this to multiple editors simultaneously. Example 3 assumes you didn't write earlier in the process, and are trying to clear up just a few questions before submission. Finally, example 4 illustrates a common scenario where you are clarifying final questions prior to submission.

Across all potential query letters, elements *may* include the following:

• brief self-introduction and background, to "instill a sense of competency,"[4] and to help the editor understand your motivation for publishing;

• working title and abstract (no longer than the journal's abstract length requirement);

• information about the status of your project, and expected timeline for completion;

• questions about how to translate your research project into one or more publications (see letter #2); and

• the specific questions you have remaining after reviewing the journal website, including

• alignment of content to the journal,

• questions about whether there are guidelines for the type of piece you are writing (e.g., annotated bibliography, case study), or if the journal has sections, what section might be most appropriate (e.g., "article," "practical communication," "feature"),

• typical time for peer review,

• how soon your article might be published,

• details about submission formatting that are unclear on the website (e.g., how to include tables/figures, how to format DOI numbers in the references), and

• questions about copyright or institutional repository deposit options.

One query letter will not likely include *all* of these questions, but try to think ahead about questions to avoid peppering editors with isolated questions.

The surveyed LIS journal editors generally supported any kind of clarifying question, but also identified several inappropriate topics, including questions about credentials of peer reviewers, asking about publication without peer review, offering to pay to speed through the review process, and questions about going against style guidelines of the journal.

Responses to query letters and next steps

Not every editor will write back with a warm and friendly response. Some will be terse. If editors do not think your article is a good fit or that the topic has been covered sufficiently, they may recommend alternate publication venues. A few may not reply at all. An outright "no thank you" is still a helpful response—it saves you time. We've gotten responses suggesting that we would need to significantly change our topic or project in order to be of interest to the journal. If they don't seem excited about your article, don't take it personally. Try to remain open to what the editor has to say. If they have detailed feedback or critique, that likely indicates they think you have something worthwhile.

When to send a follow-up to your query letter

If you submitted a query letter but haven't heard a response, it's reasonable to send a follow-up after a week. If you still don't get a response, that may not be a journal you want to work with (although we'd try to contact another editorial staff member first to be sure we have correct contact information). Correspondence with editors may continue throughout the process after submission. If your article has been under peer review for longer than the expected timeframe, it is reasonable to check in. After peer review, you may have questions for the editor about how to respond to reviewer comments. After acceptance, you may need to follow up about when your article will actually be published. Rapport built during query letter interactions can make these follow-ups easier.

Conclusion

Query letters are a way authors can take a

display, and students did not look at it unless it was pointed out. Items that we displayed on the table were not near our wall of pictures, and the table was not nearly as popular.

Salisbury: Taking a pop-up from proposal to exhibition is a lot of work. It requires a lot of thought in regards to almost every facet. We had to choose a time for the exhibit and the tables, as well as research the topic and find relevant materials that required little effort to understand on the visitors' part and capture their interest quickly. I also had to think about the items we chose from the perspective of someone [who] doesn't work in the archives and special collections. They may ask, "Why would I care about this item? Does it make me want to know more? Why is this more interesting than the free doughnuts they are giving out in the lobby?"

Conclusion

Through this experience, we learned several lessons. The student curators offered unique perspectives for attracting their peer audiences, as we saw with their understanding of student interest in local skiing and the good response that we had to the older ski posters. In planning, we learned that special collections units need to draw on the expertise of staff who work in areas of the library, or any location, where the pop-up will be located to learn the traffic and space usage patterns. While we planned well for the exhibit, we learned that we need to stay flexible if things do not go as planned, such as the use of different tables, and that trial and error helped us learn how to improve our presentation for the next one. For our next in-person pop-up exhibit, we will use fewer items and concentrate on visual ones displayed vertically on exhibit walls or easels. We will also plan to hold an exhibit at a time when students have more free time to stop and view the items, such as in the first few weeks of the semester or during a popular thematic time, such as Halloween.

In a virtual environment, we think that a student-curated exhibit could take the form of a ThingLink interactive virtual exhibit, the creation of Zoom backgrounds or Pinterest exhibits from the collections, or working with archivists and curators to develop mini-talks about items in the collections that would appeal to a student audience. Many of the lessons that we learned from the in-person pop-up could apply to these virtual "exhibits." Whichever method of delivery, we believe that student curation is a valuable perspective to incorporate in outreach events, not to mention a real-world learning experience for all involved. ℛ

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more proactive role in the scholarly publication process. While your work does actually need to be relevant and well-written to be published, editors have a vested interest in helping you find a good fit—whether in their journal or another. Finding a good fit increases the odds your article will be read by the people who will make use of the information, cite your study, or both. Query letters are also timesavers, offering the opportunity to clear up questions informally before officially submitting an article for peer review. Although this article was based on a substantial base of experience and a survey of journal editors, query letters aren't a widespread practice in LIS publishing, so we expect real life to vary and change over time. We value different experiences and perspectives, and hope you will send us feedback.

Notes

1. Meris M. Longmeier and Jody Condit Fagan, "Library & Information Science Journal Editors' Views on Query Letters," *College & Research Libraries,* 82, no. 6 (2021): n.p., https://kb.osu.edu/handle/1811/92311; Michael Marinello and Rodney W. Hicks, "Reemphasizing the Value of Query Letters in the Digital Age," *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners* 31, no. 3 (2019): 147-148, http://doi.org/10.1097/JXX.0000000000000200.

2. "Process and Structure," *Code4Lib,* https://journal.code4lib.org/process-and-structure (accessed November 9, 2020).

3. Meris M. Longmeier and Jody Condit Fagan, "Query Letter Samples for Library and Information Science Journals," last modified January, 2021, https://kb.osu.edu/handle/1811/92283.

4. Marinello & Hicks, 147. ℛ