



EDITORIAL

Editorial —How to write a good letter for EPL

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Editorial —How to write a good letter for EPL

EPL is owned by 17 Physics Societies and reinvests its profits in the Societies and the physics community at large. Our central vocation is to be useful to this community by publishing high-quality letters.

We would like to share with prospective *EPL* authors some tips on how to write impactful scientific letters. For more technical manuscript preparation guidelines, refer to *EPL*'s instructions for authors: <https://www.epletters.net/how-to-prepare-a-manuscript>.

Authors may have different reasons to write a letter rather than a full-length article. Traditionally, a letter was meant to communicate urgent results, or announcing something briefly to be developed later. Modern publication processes such as e-only publication, and publishing accepted manuscripts ahead of publication, reduce this incentive. Authors may have selected *EPL* on the basis of metrics or other considerations, without paying enough attention to the letter format. This may result in cramped and unreadable manuscripts. Indeed, *EPL* strictly enforces a 7-page limit for letters.

So, why write a letter? We can make an analogy between letters/papers and short stories/novels. Both are useful schemes with different goals and features, but a short story (letter) should not necessarily lead to a novel (paper) later on. It should rather be meaningful *per se* and impact the reader with a concentrated intensity and high-quality content.

The following discussion is mostly about “formal” or “presentation” aspects.

- *Title*. To make researchers outside of your immediate field want to read your letter, the title should be short, easy to read and catchy, sufficiently clear for a non-specialist. Several studies point to the fact that shorter titles attract more citations, the ideal length being under 12 words [1]. If possible, we recommend using “declarative” titles. These are titles that include a verb, and state the main findings or conclusions of the article. For example: “Sentiment contagion dilutes prisoner’s dilemmas on social networks” [2].
- *Abstract*. Although there is a size limit for letters in *EPL*, this should not be at the detriment of the abstract. A good size abstract for a letter in *EPL* is around 150 words. Many letters have much shorter abstracts, lacking background which would make the reader understand why the research was conducted. The abstract should cover all four main parts of the article: background, materials and methods, results, and discussion/conclusion. A good example is the abstract of “The role of syntax in the formation of scale-free language networks” [3]. It covers all parts of the article, including one sentence of background. It includes transition words and phrases such as “however”, “to answer this question”. It makes good use of the active (“we show”, “we propose”) *vs.* passive voice (“is determined”) to clearly indicate the original contribution of the article. The passive voice is used to discuss results that have been previously published. The active voice is used for the methods and results of the present study.
- *Writing style*. Motivate the work, put it in context, compare, make connections, spend time reading some more related papers than the ones you already know, in particular for the introduction and the discussion. A letter should be clear and readable, not cramped just because it is short. Use plain language, as if you were talking to colleagues so that they understand. Avoid or minimize jargon. Tell a comprehensible story interesting for a broader audience than strict specialists. Some cautious speculation on possible applications or impact is fine, but do not overdo it. Avoid hype and grand statements. Be honest and tell limitations.
- *English language*. *EPL* provides free language editing after acceptance, however this is often too late, as editors and reviewers may be unfavorably biased against poorly written papers. If you are not a native English speaker, we recommend that you get help to edit the English of your manuscript before submission.
- *Graphical elements*. If data or figures are included, provide an interpretation. Figures should be self-contained: the figure and its caption should provide sufficient information for the reader to quickly understand what it depicts, without having to search for this information in the text. Be very careful with details. Are all symbols defined? Are the figures reproducible with the data provided? Do they have proper units?

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- *Supplementary material.* Supplementary material (SM) should not be used as a backdoor way to squeeze a full-length article into the letter format. SM has a number of drawbacks: while in principle accessible, in practice it is often not read, or not printed, and the references there are not counted as citations for the authors. Referees tend not to look at it and the quality of presentation is often poorer. In *EPL*, all SM should enhance a reader’s understanding of the associated article without being essential to that understanding.

The substance of a letter is of course its content, and no polishing can fix results that are erroneous, not new, or not very exciting because they only provide minor extensions to existing knowledge. Yet, if you have found something new, important, and relevant to colleagues, a good presentation will greatly enhance its impact and dissemination. Take your time and improve the manuscript in several rounds. Ask colleagues for a critical reading. Set ambitious goals for the quality of the paper, beyond “just publishing”. Make it memorable and inspiring to others. We look forward to your next letter!

J. Gonzalo Muga
Editor-in-Chief

Anne Ruimy
Executive Editor

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