

We've got mail

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The letters section of the *British Dental Journal* has always been one of the most popular sections, confirmed yet again by our latest Readership Survey. This is possibly because letters are an instant reflection of popular opinion as well as an opportunity for research to be checked and questioned by those in the field.

Looking back through the Letters column is a rich and rewarding experience. If you go back to those early letters when the *BDJ* was first published in 1880 it is fascinating to see how similar the subjects were then to those today. The same topics and concerns come up again and again, usually involving matters of principle and politics (including the familiar subject of dentists being allowed to refer to themselves as 'Doctor' which has been going for some time). Scientific differences of opinion have been expressed (at times with passion) and perceived injustices debated. The Letters column has also seen the emergence of discovery as in the case of the 'cracked tooth syndrome' which was first expressed as a letter.

Despite all of this we do not receive as many letters as perhaps we could, and I suspect there are three main reasons why relatively few letters are submitted. The first is that people feel that their own views are 'not important enough' to be published, and I am always sorry to hear this as I feel everyone has the same opportunity to publish and the right to express their own opinion. The second barrier to submitting a letter to the *BDJ*, I expect, is because people feel that letters need to be somehow 'better' to be published in a scientific journal. The third, and possibly the most common, is that people think we get so many that most never get published.

While this is flattering to the Journal, it is not strictly true. I publish approximately 90% of the letters we receive, and only turn down the abusive, irrelevant, misleading and inaccurate. Incomprehensible letters are returned asking for a revision to help readers understand what the letter-writer is trying to say, and as a result of this I am often asked for a simple guide to getting published.

The essence of success is to be very clear and focused about what you want to say and to stick to a single subject. If you want to write about more than one topic then write more than one letter. A good test is that you should be able to express the subject of your letter in a single, short, understandable sentence. You should always write the letter in simple terms, using short sentences and short words where possible. There is no need to use words like 'utilise' and 'comprehend' when 'use' and 'understand' will do. Next you should check the text and remove superfluous sections, and make sure the paragraphs link up with each other in a manner that makes the flow easy for the reader. Authors often assume that readers know the subject as well as they do and jump from topic to topic without explaining the link.

Finally, you need to get someone else who does not understand the topic and is not afraid to upset you to read it through to check understanding. A relative or friend will often not tell you the truth when something is badly written. The result could be a letter that is rejected simply because someone thought they were being kind by not telling you what they really thought. Many is the time I receive a letter or article with the suggestion that I should seriously consider it for publication because all the friends of the author 'thought it was very good'!

If you follow the above guidelines and you have something interesting and relevant to say then your letter has a good chance of being accepted. There is nothing that beats seeing your name in print, and I still remember how inordinately pleased I was many years ago when my own letter was published in the *BDJ*, long before I even thought of becoming an editor.

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