

What's in your cover letter?



What are the dos and don'ts of cover letters and how can authors maximize their value?

Accompanying a submitted manuscript with a cover letter is not mandatory at this journal, meaning that a *Nature Cancer* editor would not reject a study because of a missing cover letter, but including one is customary and in some cases it is essential. Considered more generally, a cover letter is an additional tool at the author's disposal to enhance communication with the editor and provide important information about the submission. From an editorial perspective, a well-written, informative cover letter can be a useful add-on when assessing a manuscript.

A cover letter is essential when important information must be conveyed directly to the editor in a confidential manner. For instance, if the authors have related manuscripts under consideration or in press elsewhere, they are required by our policy to disclose this in the cover letter and provide these studies for the editor's perusal (and, if deemed essential, also for the perusal of the referees). This does not apply to preprints of the submitted manuscript, but authors are welcome to state in the cover letter whether they have deposited a preprint ([a practice we encourage](#)).

Also essential to raise in the cover letter are cases of manuscripts co-submitted to our journal, explaining the arguments for their co-publication. Although at *Nature Cancer* each submission is evaluated on its own merits for its potential to be published as a stand-alone study, we always strive for editorial consistency in our decisions and consider ways in which to enhance a paper's message and visibility. Co-publication of two individually strong, independently confirmatory or conceptually complementary studies can be a powerful argument for further editorial consideration.

If an author opts into [double-anonymous peer review](#), the mechanism that allows reciprocal anonymity between authors and referees, the cover letter is where authors should include the full author names, order and affiliations, and the mandatory acknowledgements section, author contributions statement and

competing interests declaration, for the submission record. This information can be moved to the manuscript after successful completion of the peer review, while the study is being prepared for publication.

Filed under essential, but sometimes overlooked by authors: cover letters are the place to raise editor-confidential issues of a more sensitive nature. Chief among these are situations of direct and active competition in the form of similar manuscripts by other groups that are in preparation or under consideration elsewhere. The cover letter is where authors should mention any such cases and relevant specifics, to enable the editor to successfully navigate the competitor landscape facing the manuscript and direct the peer-review process speedily.

The cover letter is also a place to summarize information that could be collected in other parts of the manuscript submission form, to simplify editorial handling of the study. For example, authors can state any prior interactions with *Nature Cancer* editors in the cover letter. In addition, at this journal we permit up to three referee exclusions, and the cover letter is a good place to note which researchers the authors would prefer were not contacted as referees. It is also a good place to list referee suggestions. Even though the editor is not bound by them (after all, referee selection is a critical part of an editor's job and involves careful vetting for expertise and potential conflicts of interest, among other things), we always welcome suggestions for potential experts in different fields, as we continuously aim to expand our pool of reviewers.

Beyond these practical uses, a cover letter becomes particularly valuable when authors use it as a written substitute for an in-person interaction with the editor through which to give a high-level pitch of the study and share their enthusiasm about it. Editors are scientists, even if we have left the lab. Beyond identifying the papers we consider suitable for our journal on the basis of their scientific merits, their level of advance in light of the published literature, their depth of experimental and analytical development and broad interest and relevance to the cancer field, our job involves sharing in the excitement of scientific discovery and championing the papers we peer review and publish. Through the cover letter,

authors can communicate directly to us why their study is exciting, why it is important for the field and why it should be published in our journal and no other. This should not be done by reiterating the information included in the abstract – the editor will read not only the abstract but also the full manuscript, in detail – or through platitudes and vague statements about research that is paradigm-shifting. All work published in *Nature Cancer* aims to further knowledge and cures for this family of diseases, be it through fundamental scientific discovery, preclinical investigations, or translational or clinical work. Stating in the cover letter that a manuscript contributes to the field in this broad manner amounts to a truism as far as this journal is concerned. Editorially, we are more interested in the 'how'. How is this study furthering the understanding and treatment of cancer in an important, impactful way that will advance or alter the way the field thinks?

Thus, the cover letter is the author's opportunity to share not only the salient points of their work – its main message and key findings – but also their candid perspective on the major points of advance and importance. It goes without saying that this information should be presented in detail in the manuscript itself and that ultimately the editor will determine which aspects might weigh for further consideration of the paper at this journal. However, a cover letter with the authors' clear point of view – a snapshot that zooms into the essentials – can aid the maturation of the editorial perspective on the study. In the cancer field, papers can be interdisciplinary, with multiple threads that come together into one complex story. Do the authors consider the key advance to be foundational, translational or clinical, or is there a technical point of major interest? Is the study answering an important open question or going against long-held ideas? Is the take-home message a much-needed cancer drug, model or method, or a new layer of fundamental knowledge? Focusing on specifics, mentioning key literature and highlighting implications for the field, while flagging limitations and steering clear of hype, are important for getting across the authors' view on the implications of their work. Although not mandatory, if not already present in the manuscript figures, a graphical

abstract can be included in the cover letter to summarize the key findings in a visual manner.

In outlining this information, it is important to be succinct. The editor will assess the full manuscript in depth, so lengthy repetition in the cover letter is not helpful. Ideally the cover letter should be about a page long.

To summarize: do include a cover letter with your submission. Do not rehash the abstract. Focus on the key findings. Do not forget to include limitations and challenges. Convey the importance of your work – do not underplay it, but also avoid overhyping. Include information for the editor's eyes only. Flag prior

interactions with editors. Keep it short and to the point.

We hope these pointers are helpful and look forward to reading your submitted manuscripts and their accompanying cover letters!

Published online: 27 April 2023