



Better letters to the editor

By Richard Clark

Most of us reading *The Write Stuff* like writing in one form or another, which is probably why we ended up as medical writers. Two recent events have made me think about how I go about writing. The first was the threatened closure of a school that my niece goes to, which triggered a request by my sister to write a 'protest' letter¹. The second was being asked to write a chapter on how to write a letter to the editor for a book about medical writing [1].

I'd never thought about *how* to write a letter before—it's never seemed to be difficult. Maybe I've just been on autopilot? Then again, I began to wonder how good some letters to the editor I'd written had been. Looking through my files I read one I'd written quite a long time ago to the *Lancet* and wasn't best pleased [2]. It was trying to make too many points, some of which were quite complex, and it wasn't very convincing as a result. I remembered it had gone through 13 drafts, thanks to various authors, and had changed out of all recognition from my first draft. This made me feel a little bit better, but not much. Clearly I needed to give the matter of how to write a letter a bit more thought, both for the sake of my niece's school, as well as the book chapter.

I've always found that asking yourself questions is a good place to start, and often the stupid (i.e. obvious) questions are the ones most worth asking. My favourite question is 'why?' To put this in context, as a doctoral student at the Department of Biochemistry at Oxford I was forced to spend several hours every week listening to what I can only describe as the most exceedingly dull lectures, all given by eminent visiting scientists. Without exception they gave a detailed account of their last 30 or 40 years' research in a muddled, often chronological order, and I burned to ask the question 'why have you done all this?' I never did though. Ever since I have been making up for lost time with my 'why' questions. So, the first step in writing a letter to a journal is to ask yourself why you are doing it—and not just because someone is paying you! The main reasons would be disagreeing with a published article, praising or supporting a paper published by someone else or exercising a 'right of reply' to letters criticising an article you have published. A letter may cover several of these categories, but I feel that it's important to know which aspect will form the main focus.

The first step in writing a letter is to ask yourself why you are writing it

The next steps to think about are how to get the letter past the editor so that it is published and how to make sure your letter is worth reading. Essentially, these can be dealt with in the same way – one main focus, keep it short, make it persuasive, and back-up your opinions with facts from good sources. I'm sure that as medical writers we all know about how to achieve these, so I won't dwell on them.

One further factor to consider is the structure of the letter. There are many different types of structure, and no one of these is always the best. However, it is a good idea to think before you write and then make a very brief plan of what you are going to say and how you plan to order the content of your letter. This imposes a style that hopefully makes your letter easier to read, clearer in your communication of your points and more persuasive, as your evidence will be presented in a straightforward and understandable manner. One favourite when dealing with a response to another letter or published study that you disagree with is the classical 'sandwich' structure.

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For example, the first paragraph might briefly refer to the article, and then refer to something complementary about the study, before stating what it is about the study that you disagree with (i.e. communicate the point of the letter). The middle section might expand on why you disagree with parts of the article in some more detail. Here, you can use published or unpublished data, personal anecdotes or statistics that support your views. This is the longest section, but is still concise. Finally, restate your major point, and wrap-up with a succinct conclusion.

Another structure that is useful is the so-called EPIC style, which can be used to develop a defined and persuasive structure to your letter, regardless of the type of response (supportive or negative). This has the following elements:

- **Engage** the reader with a startling fact, or a strong statement of a serious problem or unmet need.
- **Propose** a specific action in which this need or problem can be dealt with.
- **Illustrate** how the proposal would work and why it's important. Maybe give a few details or examples, either from your own experience or from published studies.
- **Call to action** for the readership to undertake specific measures to deal with the problem along the lines of your proposal.

¹ The school has been saved - which is very good news. Apparently there were thousands of letters in support of the school, and not one in favour of the closure, so people power works sometimes.

>>> Better letters to the editor

Here are a few more tips for writing a good letter. Keep sentences short. If you write long sentences, each making several points, the reader may have to re-read parts of your letter to understand what you've written. The use of abbreviations should be kept to a bare minimum. Again, these can make your letter less readable. Avoid sounding pompous and using flowery, pseudoscientific language. Thus, 'administered' can become 'given' and 'utilise', 'use'. If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out. (e.g. ~~past~~ history, ~~forward~~ planning, ~~close~~ scrutiny). Avoid the rather meaningless (or at least easily misunderstood) 'buzz words' such as 'proactive' and 'stakeholder'. Avoid dissociating authors from results. This can lead to statements such as 'these data suggest', which is not accurate. Data show and writers suggest. Most importantly, if you gave your letter to a well-informed person with little or no experience of medicine, pharmacology or science, would they understand the main point(s) you are trying to make?

Anyway, I hope that these tips have been useful. Returning to the problem of writing my own protest letter to the Local Education Authority, this was eventually completed using the principles I'd written about in the book chapter. I'd like to think that these helped me to write a more persuasive letter. Maybe someone will read it, and I hope the letter may help, albeit in a small way, to make (or change) opinions! I guess that's the main reason for writing a letter to the editor too.

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References

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The question 'Why?'

Perhaps the suggestion of asking 'why?' made by Richard Clark in his article about letters could also be extended to published studies. The following is a genuine email sent by a Taiwanese researcher to an author of a journal article.

"Dear Professor...

I have read your article...in the journal of...I read the article again and again. Your examinations are fine, but I cannot find out the most important reason why you wanted to do the research on this topic and why this examination means a lot. Would you tell me about it? Thank you and hope your research goes on smoothly and successfully."

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Why is Yahoo called Yahoo?

Although his book *Gulliver's Travels* was never widely read some of the words Dean Jonathon Swift made up have become well known. H.G. Wells in the *Time Machine* borrowed from Swift and wrote about the Eloi providing meat for the repulsive Morlocks. The *Planet of the Apes* films have dark aspects taken from Swift. The search engine Yahoo took its name from a vile and savage humanoid creature with unpleasant habits that Lemuel Gulliver encountered in Book IV of his travels.

Dean Jonathon Swift, whose chair remains in St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, had a strong social conscience. He was appalled at the privations of the poor and remonstrated with the British authorities over their inaction. He turned his attention to political satire and wrote *Gulliver's Travels*, set in 1699-1709.

Gulliver's Travels has never faced the same scrutiny as *Alice in Wonderland*, probably due to Swift's archaic, and ponderous style of writing, he wrote as though thinking out loud. There are four parts to the book, all have different themes. Book I is acclaimed as a children's story, that is all. Book IV is savage and virtually unknown to the modern world.

The work was intended to attack the corrupt political party (Whigs) in power which had displaced Swift's Tories in London. This early political satire highlighted the universal human tendency to abuse political power, manipulate others and deceive ourselves. Thus the Lilliput setting is a microcosm where man is 15 cm tall, their squabbles are petty, their pomp and ceremony ridiculous. Lilliput selected persons for high Government jobs by the length of time they could dangle on ropes. Brains and ability had no place in politics. Only lunatics study politics.

It all started in Book I when Lemuel Gulliver signed on as a ship's surgeon, dreaming of adventure. In Book IV he was set to shore by an angry crew. There he is attacked by hairy animals with goat-like beards; he was rescued by two Houyhnhnms (horses) who told him, by gesturing, that his attackers were called Yahoos. The Houyhnhnms were orderly and rational and travelled in sleds drawn by four Yahoos. The Houyhnhnms kept Yahoos in sheds. Gulliver met the King of the Houyhnhnms, to whom he explained money and the English Constitution. The King said money led to avarice. He found the actions of man difficult to comprehend, honour is more important than net worth. The King could not imagine war with another country. The Houyhnhnms had a language without trace of political and ethical nonsense, perhaps also reflecting Swift's concern about the corruption of the English language, which he believed was in need of reform.

In Book IV Swift evaluates the human condition. The gentle Houyhnhnms are compared and contrasted with the horrible Yahoos as with the dichotomy between reason and unreason, sanity and insanity and fairness and unfairness. Swift implies mankind is neither a rational intellect nor wholly passionate, neither Houyhnhnm nor Yahoo. Man inclines to bestial behaviour. At the end of the final book Gulliver returns to England where he is revolted by his countrymen and sees them as Yahoos. He lives in stables to be near horses. Swift abandons Gulliver to despairing visions of reality between the dreamy utopia and ironically ideal society of Houyhnhnms and the abyss of Yahooism.

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