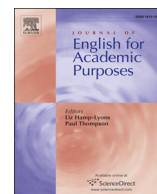


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Submission letters for academic publication: Disciplinary differences and promotional language

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ABSTRACT

One of the occluded genres in academic publishing is the submission letter that accompanies a journal article. Research from the 1990s shows that a wide range of disciplines preferred a simple, concise and modest form. The genre has survived the transition to electronic publishing, and a number of publications by authorities with editorial experience have recommended a more promotional discourse. This suggests that the submission letter may have undergone the 'marketization' process often noted in academic genres.

This article reports a study of the published requirements of journals in various disciplines, the perceptions of senior researchers, and the practices of three informants over the last twenty years. We find little evidence that marketized discourse has actually spread in this genre since the 1990s. Competitive fields, primarily biomedicine, used a promotional discourse as early as 1988, and have continued to do so, and others were more modest at that time, and have not changed. Editorial pressures and standardization of submission requirements might cause change in the expected direction.

Our pedagogical recommendation is that the genre matters in some disciplines, and that its rhetoric has to be discipline-appropriate. More generally the results confirm the importance of discipline-specific conventions, even in occluded genres.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Submission letters as a genre

Some academic genres are not visible in published sources. They were called 'occluded' genres by Swales (1996), who gave a list of examples: request letters, submission letters (also called cover letters), research proposals recommendation letters, reviews of articles, books or grant proposals, evaluation letters for promotion, and external evaluations of institutions. Many of these genres have since been investigated (for example: Connor & Mauranen, 1999; Hyon, 2008; Tardy, 2009) and such investigations can be valuable both in providing an empirical basis for guidance to potential writers of the genres and more widely in providing a better understanding of the whole research writing process of which they are a part. One genre on the list is the cover letter accompanying a manuscript submitted for publication. Two empirical investigations in the 1990s identified a very brief and modest style produced by skilled writers, native or non-native speakers of English, in this type of text (Okamura & Shaw, 2000; Swales, 1996). However, some years later, guidance from experts immersed in research practice recommended a much more promotional type of discourse (Donovan, 2004; Gump, 2004). This is a minor genre in the

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academic process but there are circumstances, and disciplines, in which it could be important. In this paper we aim to investigate what lies behind this apparent disagreement, in the hope of being able to provide reliable research-based advice, and of understanding how perceptions and practices relate to one another.

1.2. Conflicting views on submission letters

The cover letter accompanying an academic article submitted for publication appears to be a separate genre, or at least to be governed by completely different conventions from others called ‘cover letter’, such as the letter accompanying a job application discussed by Crossley (2008). Okamura and Shaw (2000) and Swales (1996) carried out surveys which examined submission letters from a range of disciplines. Swales looked at 65 texts from applied linguistics, and Okamura and Shaw (2000) had a sample of 49 letters, of which 22 came from a journal in civil engineering, and the remainder were individual cover letters from many other ‘predominantly technical’ disciplines including politics, dentistry, applied linguistics, and literary studies. Both papers anticipated effects from general academic acculturation and proficiency type (native or non-native), and both found that the first was a much more significant factor than the second. The conclusion of both papers is that the typical cover letter was and should be based on a rather minimal template for such letters, at that time accompanying a paper copy of the submission. In the sample examined, the skilled writers typically just gave the name of the enclosed paper and stated that they submitted it for publication. Comparable results have been found for more recent email submission letters by Iranian scholars in mathematics and English language teaching (Jalalifar, 2009). All these letters seem to be in the ‘CBS’ style (Lanham, 1983, cited in Scollon, Scollon, & Jones, 2012), aiming at ‘clarity, brevity, and sincerity’. This is a style which Scollon et al. (2012) associate with utilitarianism and the whole development of Western culture since the enlightenment, seeing its rhetorical values as manifested in the plain style of science and, more widely, a business-like approach. In this perspective, information as to the authors’ qualifications, the status of the article, or its contents, was generally typical of less skilled writers.

However, Swales (1996) cites Huth (1982), writing for medical researchers, “you can properly ask the editors not to use as reviewers the persons you specify” showing that thirty years ago there were recommendations for cover letters which go beyond the minimal template, engaging to some extent in the reviewing process. There are more recent authorities who recommend letters which pay more attention to the recipient’s positive face and to the qualities of the current submission. Writing from their own, perhaps narrow, editorial experience (of *Scripta Geologica* and *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* respectively), Donovan (2004) and Gump (2004, 2013) recommend a submission letter which is rather more promotional, aiming to ‘initiate a positive rapport’ (Gump, 2004: 97). Gump suggests the following as part of the content of a letter which he clearly sees as valid across disciplines and journals:

The JSP [*Journal of Scholarly Publishing*] seems an ideal forum for a manuscript addressing, in a how-to format, strategies for writing effective covering letters. Indeed this topic is not limited to any specific discipline but is relevant to all who submit manuscripts to scholarly journals. While I have used the second-person point of view in the manuscript, the resulting text seems to complement the relaxed and conversational tone of the many highly readable articles that have recently been published in the JSP. I trust therefore that you will consider my manuscript to be appropriate for your readership (Gump, 2004: 98).

This is quite far from the ‘clear, brief, sincere’ ideal that the empirical studies cited above seemed to find. Nevertheless, it is endorsed in a response to Gump by Donovan (2004), who adds that writers should include the names of preferred referees in their submission letter, thus again drawing the cover letter into the reviewing process. Hughes (2005), an engineering professor talking to engineering students, quotes this advice with approval.

One very useful piece of advice that Gump provides is to explain to the editor how this paper relates to the scope of the journal [...]. Donovan (2004) adds a further suggestion for covering letters: suggested referees. An editor can be given very useful guidance by an author who suggests two or three referees. Not that they will necessarily be used, but understanding what kind of expertise is best for reviewing a paper will help an editor choose appropriate referees (Hughes, 2005: 6).

Furthermore, Pamela Hines, Senior Editor at the immensely competitive journal *Science*, is said to advise that the cover letter must convey the following:

- Why is this novel?
- Is it a big increment over previous work?
- Why is it of general interest?
- (Plus reviewer exclusions and suggested reviewers) (cited in Raikow, 2009).

An internet search on ‘cover letter academic article’ will produce many recommendations of this sort, and none recommending a minimal alternative. So far, however, this kind of advice has not been documented in EAP research or teaching materials. The values seem to be recognized; for example, Hyland (2010: 91) suggests a similar list of bullet points for novice scholars to consider when they choose a publication outlet for their research. However, although he acknowledges that junior

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