

## Dos and don'ts in a cover letter



### How to write an effective cover letter.

**W**hen authors submit their papers to *Nature Computational Science*, they have the option to upload a cover letter to accompany their submission. Interestingly, while most authors choose to upload one, many of the cover letters that we receive lack the sort of information that we are often looking for. Hence, we would like to use this Editorial to provide guidance to our authors and readers on what to include – and on what not to include – in a cover letter.

The cover letter provides an excellent opportunity to briefly discuss the importance of the submitted manuscript and why it is appropriate for the journal. While our editorial team consists of professional, full-time editors with diverse scientific backgrounds and PhD degrees, and who are fully capable of assessing various types of work, we encourage our authors to provide more information that can help us to further understand the importance of the problem being addressed, the novelty of the method and results, and the practical value of the proposed approach. Of course, it goes without saying that the manuscript itself should be clear on these aspects, but the cover letter provides more space for authors to point

out related work and to explain in more detail the scientific advance reported in the paper.

It is important to note that cover letters are visible to the editors but not to referees. Accordingly, authors can (and should!) use cover letters to provide confidential information, such as conflicts of interest and suggestions of referees, and to identify any related manuscripts that are in press or that were submitted elsewhere. Authors can also indicate in the cover letter whether or not they have engaged in discussions about their work with one of our editors; this can be used by the chief editor when assigning a primary editor to the manuscript, for example.

Considerations regarding data and code availability are also useful to include in a cover letter. At *Nature Computational Science*, we see both data and code as essential aspects of a manuscript, and as a matter of fact, we perform code peer review. On that account, if there are any limitations on sharing data and code that editors should be aware of, this can be brought to our attention in the cover letter.

Of course, cover letters are not only used during the first stage of submission. When working on a revised version of a manuscript, authors can reply to our revision requests in a cover letter; they can also better explain which reviewers' requests they addressed and which requests were not addressed

(and why) in a more confidential manner. If authors decide to appeal against our decision on a manuscript, the cover letter should be used to explain in detail the scientific arguments for reconsideration.

Some words of caution are worth highlighting. While there is no specific word limit for cover letters, authors should be mindful to not overload editors with information. The text should be concise and lay out the main points that complement the submitted manuscript: authors should steer clear of repeating information that is already present in the abstract and introduction. In addition, there are some pieces of information that should be ideally avoided in a cover letter, such as endorsements from other researchers, statements overselling the proposed approach (no paradigm shifts, please!), and blunt comparisons with other papers published by the Nature Portfolio family: the focus should be primarily on the scientific arguments when explaining the significance of the research.

While some may consider cover letters an archaic form of communication, at *Nature Computational Science* we deem them to be an important asset to the submission process, and we encourage all of our authors to consider writing one when submitting their manuscripts.

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