

Covering letter

Editors receive tens of papers a day; those working for prestigious journals have even more. The first thing that comes out of the envelope (if you post your document in), or appears first on the screen if the paper is submitted electronically, is the covering letter. What impression will it make?

Who are you?

Status does count... and rightly so. The place that is employing you has a higher status than do you. But it has employed you and so it must feel highly of you. If you are working at a prestigious institution, make sure that that is clear, because it establishes that you are someone worth listening to.

Previously known

In the opening line, introduce the background to your work. In one or two sentences, state what is already known.

Conceptual advance

Then go straight on to establish what you have discovered or concluded. In many cases you may just note down your message. Don't be shy. This isn't the time to hide what you have to offer. The editor will already be deciding whether he or she can be bothered to send that paper out for review or reject it instantly. Help them make the right decision.

Why it should be published in that journal

The editor will also be trying to decide whether you have sent it to the right journal. In a sentence, tell the editor how it fits in with other papers that they have already published. Does it answer questions they have asked? Does it contradict previously published work in their journal? Does it bring a new technique to an area that is frequently covered? Again, don't hold back—make it clear, and do it quickly.

Reviewer recommendations—or exclusions

Choosing reviewers is a tricky task for an editor. They need to find people who are close enough to the work to give informed comment, but sufficiently distant so that their responses won't be biased.

Many journals now ask you to give them some names of people you think would do a fair job, and also mention anyone who you would prefer didn't see the paper. It could be because you don't want them seeing your idea until it is published, or that previous experience at conferences etc causes you to feel these people will be unreasonably harsh.