

The Art of the Cover Letter

I have now served as an Associate Editor at *ACS Nano* for three months. As promised, doing so has provided unique insights into scientific publishing. Interestingly, the biggest surprise has not been something that authors do, but something they frequently neglect to do: constructing a well-written cover letter, including a statement justifying the importance of their work.

Consider the incredible effort that goes into a manuscript. First, an original idea must be generated by the small miracle of human inspiration, backed by years of research and study. To acquire resources to pursue that idea, it must be further refined, put into scientific and social contexts, and explained to other researchers in the form of a grant proposal, often many times over. Once funding and other resources have been secured, the real work can begin. A few courageous graduate students or postdocs must squander a part of their precious youth toiling in fluorescently lit laboratories, repeatedly executing experiments to see if, when, and how the idea works, to see what can be learned from it, or to see how it might be useful. The results of this effort will be analyzed, scrutinized, rejected, and repeated for months on end. Once a cohesive story can be assembled, the text is written, citations are added, and figures are prepared. The manuscript is now ready for submission. A journal is chosen, reviewers are suggested, and the upload button is pressed. The humble idea has become a work of science, yet its fate now rests with the editors and reviewers, who must evaluate its significance.

The editors have not traveled the long journey described above with the submitting authors and are likely hearing about the idea for the first time. In a perfect world, the authors and editors could discuss the manuscript over coffee to be sure the novelty and significance of the work are appreciated. It is likely that the authors could be more persuasive in person than in the formal text of the manuscript. Sadly, such meetings are seldom possible. However, one last chance at such an interaction is available, in the penultimate step missing from the sequence of events above: the cover letter. Among the requested items of information to be included in the cover letter is "a statement of why the paper is appropriate for *ACS Nano*". While this is just one of several requested elements, it is by far the most vital. The cover letter provides the chance for authors to persuade the editors of the significance of their work in a less formal manner than what is written in the manuscript itself. While most authors take advantage of this opportunity, there are many cases where the opportunity is squandered, even though it could be the difference between a manuscript sent for external review and one rejected without further consideration.

Therefore, if you tend to hurriedly prepare cover letters or are overly modest when you write them, I encourage you to allow the submission to be delayed by just one more day. Spend time writing a convincing cover letter and share it with your coauthors for their input. As active researchers

and often on the other side of the publishing process ourselves, the other *ACS Nano* editors and I realize that not every submitted result has the capability to cure cancer or to replace silicon in the semiconductor industry; however, a carefully crafted and straightforward description of the impact of one's work can go a

In a perfect world, the authors and editors could discuss the manuscript over coffee to be sure the novelty and significance of the work are appreciated.

long way toward communicating its significance. This is especially important in a field like nanoscience, with potential reviewers and readers having diverse and interdisciplinary backgrounds. You may even find, as I have, that this final reflection reveals new insights that could strengthen the manuscript.

Finally, if I may make one more suggestion to appease my fellow *ACS Nano* editors, please, *I beg of you*, include citation titles in your reference list! We include these in our published papers to guide our diverse readers (as well as our editors and reviewers) to the sources and topics of the basis upon which the information and discoveries presented are built.



Jason H. Hafner
Associate Editor

www.acsnano.org

Published online May 25, 2010.
10.1021/nn100907e

© 2010 American Chemical Society