

Writing an effective and succinct cover letter: A practical guide

Rédiger une lettre de motivation efficace et concise: Un guide pratique

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The cover letter is a critical component of medical journal submissions, often influencing acceptance decisions. However, authors frequently underestimate its importance. This narrative review aimed to provide guidance for authors on writing effective and succinct cover letters.

Methods: We conducted a narrative review of literature on the recommended structure and content for drafting a cover letter.

Results: An effective and succinct cover letter should include the names of the editor in chief and journal, submission details, ethical statements, authors' agreement, and contact information. Additional elements such as declarations of conflicts of interest, funding sources, and permissions may also be necessary. The cover letter should emphasize the manuscript's uniqueness without merely duplicating the abstract.

Conclusion: Cover letters remain pivotal for manuscript acceptance and must adhere to specific guidelines.

Key words: Cover Letter; Editorial Process; Manuscripts as Topic; Medical Writing; Peer Review; Research

RÉSUMÉ

Introduction: La lettre de motivation est un élément crucial des soumissions aux revues médicales, influençant souvent les décisions d'acceptation. Cependant, les auteurs sous-estiment fréquemment son importance. Cette revue narrative vise à fournir des conseils aux auteurs pour rédiger des lettres de motivation efficaces et concises.

Méthodes: Nous avons effectué une revue narrative de la littérature sur la structure et le contenu recommandés pour la rédaction d'une lettre de motivation.

Résultats: Une lettre de motivation efficace et concise doit inclure les noms de l'éditeur en chef et de la revue, les détails de la soumission, les déclarations éthiques, l'accord des auteurs, et les coordonnées de l'auteur correspondant. Des éléments supplémentaires tels que les déclarations de conflits d'intérêts, les sources de financement et les permissions peuvent également être nécessaires. La lettre de motivation doit mettre en avant l'originalité du manuscrit sans simplement dupliquer le résumé.

Conclusion: Les lettres de motivation restent essentielles pour l'acceptation des manuscrits et doivent respecter des lignes directrices spécifiques.

Mots clés: Évaluation par les pairs; Lettre de motivation; Manuscrits en tant que sujet; Processus éditorial; Recherche; Rédaction médicale

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INTRODUCTION

Medical scientific writing is a long process that begins with drafting the manuscript and ends with its publication (1, 2). Between these two milestones, the submission process is a key step (3). During the submission process, the cover letter (CL), also called enclosed or motivation letter, is a document required by most medical scientific journals to facilitate a quick decision from the editorial team (4). The CL is the first document read by the editor in chief (EIC) and serves as the main basis for its decision on whether to reject the manuscript or send it for external peer review (5-25). Therefore, high attention should be paid to writing the CL (5-25). However, many authors underestimate this step, and only a few recognize the importance of the CL and its impact on the final decision (7). The CL is usually the last thing written before the submission step (22).

As the submission process is nowadays, (i.e.; year 2024) fully digitalized, often providing overlapping information with the content of the CL, many authors overlook writing the CL, considering it redundant (4, 7). Underestimating this key step can result in a lost opportunity to demonstrate the manuscript's value to the editors, as reviewers may focus primarily on technical issues (4, 26). Since the CL is an additional tool available to the author to improve communication with the editorial team and provide a brief discussion of the submission, authors need to change their habits and spend more time in writing their CLs. Few papers provide practical tips on writing a CL (5-25). A PubMed search conducted on September 15, 2024, using the keyword "Cover letter[Title]" found only 21 papers (5-25) published between 1985 (9) and 2024 (12, 25).

Since a well-crafted, informative, and effective CL can help the editor understand the research and its significance, and since the CL can give the manuscript the best chance for publication, the aim of this narrative review was to provide a practical guide for authors on how to write an effective and succinct CL.

WHAT A CL AIMS TO?

Box 1 outlines the aims and impact of a CL in manuscript submission. A CL introduces a submitted manuscript to the journal editor (7). A well-written CL aims to:

- i) Highlight the relevance of the manuscript and its potential impact (16);
- ii) Emphasize the originality and novelty of the submitted manuscript in its field (4);
- iii) Demonstrate how the manuscript is appropriate for the journal and relevant to its readers (5); and
- iv) Provide the authors with an opportunity to persuade the editor of the importance of their research, effectively allowing them to "sell" their work (7).

Thus, the CL enables authors to promote their article and convince the editor of the manuscript's originality (22). An author guided by a relevant CL can significantly influence the editor's decision on whether or not to publish the manuscript (22).

Box 1. Aims and influence of a cover letter (CL) in manuscript submission (4, 5, 7, 16, 22).

Aspect	A well-written CL:
Main purpose	.Introduces a submitted manuscript to the journal editor
Relevance and impact	.Highlights the relevance of the manuscript .Emphasizes the potential impact of the research presented
Originality and novelty	.Points out the originality of the manuscript .Underscores the novelty that the manuscript brings to its respective field
Appropriateness and reader relevance	.Demonstrates how the manuscript is appropriate for the journal .Illustrates the manuscript's relevance to the journal's readership
Persuasion and promotion	.Provides an opportunity for the author to persuade the editor about the importance of the research .Allows the authors to effectively «sell» their work
Promotion of article and convincing the editor	.Enables authors to promote their article .Assists in convincing the editor of the manuscript's originality
Influence on publication decision	.May influence the editor's decision on whether or not to publish the manuscript

WHAT A CL SHOULD CONTAIN?

Box 2 details the essential elements of an effective and succinct CL for manuscript submission. A well-written CL should be concise, avoid redundancy, and contain the following elements:

- i) Names of the EIC and the journal (18);
- ii) Submission date and manuscript details such as the title, type of manuscript, number of words in the manuscript and abstract; number of illustrations (e.g.; figures, tables, photos, videos), number of appendices (if applicable), and sometimes the number of key words (7);
- iii) Submission information (i.e.; state whether the manuscript is submitted by invitation or is part of a special issue) (7);
- iv) Ethical statement of the paper;
- v) Submission confirmation (i.e.; confirm that the manuscript is not currently submitted to another journal, even as an abstract) (4, 7). If the abstract was previously presented at a congress (or is intended for an upcoming congress), this information must be clearly reported in the CL and on the title page of the manuscript;
- vi) Contact information (mainly email address and main affiliation) of the corresponding author (4, 22); and
- vii) Authors agreement statements (7), confirming that all authors agreed to and approved the submitted version of the manuscript.

Depending on the journal's recommendations for authors, some additional elements can be requested and included in the CL, such as

- i) List of suggested potential reviewers in order to save time and facilitate the review process;
- ii) Conflict-of-interest statement, in which authors must declare any financial interests (22);
- iii) "Declaration of funding source" where authors are required to declare any funding or research grants received in the course of the study (16);

iv) «Permission note» where authors declare that they obtained the permission to use any materials from other sources; and

v) Use of any supplementary materials/files such as videos, Excel files, or figures.

A good CL should highlight the originality and relevance of the work (7). Authors should:

- i) Report the current state of knowledge (i.e.; what is known), and what the manuscript adds to the existing knowledge (i.e.; what the paper adds) (22), and explain the scientific advance reported in the paper and the take-home-message. Authors can add a graphical abstract if recommended, summarizing the most important results (6);
- ii) Show that the manuscript is attractive to the readership and aligns with the aims and scopes of the journal (27); and
- iii) Ensure the CL does not simply repeat the abstract content.

Authors can also mention if they have previously communicated with any members of the editorial team about the manuscript, as this can assist in the assignment process (5). In the footer of the CL, authors should thank

the EIC for taking the time to read the CL and consider the submitted work for possible publication. Finally, if applicable, authors should declare the use of AI in improving the scientific writing of their paper (28-32). Transparency about the use of AI tools in the writing process is important for maintaining the integrity and credibility of the research (28-32). Here is a suggested model sentence to include in the CL and on the title page (or at the end of the paper): “Declaration: The authors wish to disclose that artificial intelligence tools were utilized to enhance the clarity and coherence of the manuscript’s writing”. Including this sentence in the CL ensures that the editors are aware of the methods used to prepare the manuscript, aligning with ethical guidelines and maintaining transparency (28-32). Authors can also provide a general overview of the article, including details such as the manuscript word count, abstract word count, and the number of references, figures, and tables. This information gives the EIC a quick snapshot of the manuscript’s scope and structure, facilitating the initial assessment process.

Box 2. Essential elements of an effective and succinct cover letter (CL) for manuscript submission (4-7, 16, 18, 22, 27-32).

Elements	A well CL should:
Overall characteristics	.Be concise (<i>i.e.</i> ; avoid redundancy) .Not be annoying to the editor
Editor and journal names	.Include the names of the editor in chief and the journal. If the editor’s name is unknown, address the letter to «Dear Editors”
Submission date and manuscript details	.Include the submission date, manuscript title and type, word count of manuscript and abstract, number of illustrations and appendices, and number of keywords (if applicable)
Submission context	.Indicate if the manuscript is submitted by invitation or as part of a special issue
Ethical statement	.Include information about the ethical statement of the paper
Exclusive submission confirmation	.Confirm that the manuscript is not submitted elsewhere, even as an abstract. If presented at a congress, the authors should mention it clearly in the CL and title page
Corresponding author’s contact information	.Provide the email address and main affiliation of the corresponding author
Authors’ agreement	.Confirm that all authors have agreed to and approved the submitted version of the manuscript
Highlighting originality and relevance	.Emphasize the originality and relevance of the work .Report the current state of knowledge and what the manuscript adds .Explain the scientific advance and take-home messages .Include (optionally) a graphical abstract to summarize key results
Attractiveness to readership	.Demonstrate how the manuscript is attractive to the journal’s readership and aligns with the journal’s aims and scopes
Avoid recopying abstract content	.Not simply repeat the abstract
Prior communication with editorial team	.Mention any prior discussions with editorial team members, which can assist in manuscript assignment.
Appreciation and gratitude	.Thank the editors for their time and consideration of the submitted manuscript
Transparency about the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools	.Include a declaration related to the use of AI in improving the scientific writing of the paper
Additional elements per journal recommendations	.Suggest a list of potential reviewers .Include a conflict-of-interest statement declaring any financial interests .Include a declaration of funding sources .Report a permission note for using materials from other sources .Mention the use of supplementary materials like videos, Excel files, or figures
General overview of the article	.Include some additional details, which give the editor in chief a quick snapshot of the manuscript’s scope and structure, and can facilitate the initial assessment process. .Here is a model of a general overview: <div style="text-align: right; margin-right: 20px;"> Manuscript type: Original research Manuscript words number: 4000 Abstract words number: 250 Number of references: 39 Number of figures: 1 Number of tables: 5 Appendices: yes (n=4) </div>

How to organize a cover letter?

A typical CL can be organized into three parts: Header, body, and footer (i.e.; closing salutation) as shown in Figure 1.

Appendix 1 (33) is an example of a real CL previously sent to a high-ranked journal (34), and Appendix 2 (35) is a copy of the original CL sent to this journal (i.e.; Tunis Med).

Section	Content	Key Point
1. CL header department	Date (DD-MM-YYYY) Dear [Editor's name] Position [Editor-in-chief] Journal's name	1.1 Corresponding author presents himself and his department
2. Manuscript's characteristics	Please find enclosed our manuscript entitled [manuscript title] by [authors' name or first author's name et al.], which we would like to submit for publication as a [publication type] in your prestigious journal [journal's name]. The abstract contains [word counts] words and manuscript includes [word counts] words along with [number of figures] figures and [number of tables] tables. The number of references is [number]. As you will see, we have prepared [appendices' number] appendices to shorten our main manuscript.	1.2 Addressing to editor
3. Main part: Explain why the results are important/original and what this paper contributes to our knowledge	CURRENT KNOWLEDGE (WHAT IS KNOWN) •Studies investigating [disease or phenomena name] among [population name] are limited and present discrepancies. •Although there are studies evaluating [disease or phenomena name] among [population name], to the best of the authors' knowledge, no research has been conducted in this area among [population name]. WHAT THIS PAPER CONTRIBUTES TO OUR KNOWLEDGE (WHAT IS UNKNOWN) •In this paper, we showed that [...]. IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH •Our findings are significant because [...].	3.1 Short description of the study (Why is it important?)
4. Declarations and other statements required by the journal	We feel that the present study is appropriate for publication because the subject of our manuscript complies with the scope of the journal [journal's name] and the findings would be of interest for readers since it deals with... We certify that the manuscript is original, not previously published, not under concurrent consideration and will not be submitted elsewhere until the [journal's name] has made a decision. All the authors approve its publication in your journal. A part of this work was presented at the workshop... or the abstract of the present article was sent to [journal's name]. There was no conflict of interest to disclose. This work was supported by the [institute's name]. The proposal of this study was approved by the [ethic committee's name]. The manuscript contains [tables or figures] previously published in [sources] and permission for publication was obtained from [copyright owner's name]. We would like to express our sincere gratitude for the invaluable assistance provided by the language model, ChatGPT, in the correction and improvement of our scientific paper.	3.2 Significance, novelty and wider impacts of the research
5. Closing salutation	The list of suggested reviewers for this paper is at the end of the letter. Thank you for your consideration of this manuscript. Best regards Name, academic position, affiliation, phone number, postal address, email address.	3.3 How the submitted manuscript would interest the readership?
		4.1 Author agreement statement
		4.2 Conflict of interest
		4.3 Funding source declaration
		4.4 Ethical standards
		4.5 Permission statement
		4.6 Statement regarding English editing (Use of AI tools)
		4.7 Potential reviewers

Figure 1. Organization of a typical cover letter (CL)

Header (Opening salutation)

The top of the page should include the date of submission, the name of the EIC and the exact name of the journal. The corresponding author's affiliation and address can also be included at the beginning of the CL (15).

Body

The body of the CL should consist of three parts (i.e.; sections or paragraphs). The first contains the manuscript characteristics (e.g.; title, type of manuscript). The second part describes the importance of the submitted work, the novelty of the method, main results, the practical value of the proposed approach, its significance, originality and implication statement. This includes a brief explanation of the research context of the study, the question answered in the work, the significance of the study results, an explanation of the scientific advance reported in the manuscript, and the take-home message. The relevance to the potential readership of the journal, indicating why they would be interested and attracted to this study, is also discussed (7). This part can include three subsections (e.g.; what is known, what is unknown, and implications for future research), with the use of 2-5 bullet points for each subsection highly encouraged. The third part contains the authors' agreement, conflicts of interest, funding source declaration, ethical considerations,

potential reviewers, permission statement, declaration about AI tools use, and the authors' confirmation that the manuscript is currently being submitted only to this journal.

Footer (Closing salutation)

In the footer of the CL, authors can thank the EIC and include the contact details of the corresponding author (4, 22). Authors can also provide a general overview of the article as described at the bottom of Box 2.

WHAT ARE THE DOS AND DON'TS IN CL?

When writing the CL, several rules must be followed, and key points must be mentioned and clarified to optimize the writing task (18).

The main dos, largely described in Box 3, are: Do

- i) Address the EIC properly: Ensure you address the EIC by name;
- ii) Include a strong opening statement: For example, "Please find enclosed our manuscript entitled '[Title]' which we believe offers significant insights into [specific medical field or issue];
- iii) Summarize the manuscript: Provide a brief summary of the manuscript;
- iv) Highlight the significance: Emphasize the importance and impact of the research;
- v) Specify why the journal is a good fit: Explain why the manuscript is appropriate for the journal and its readership;
- vi) Mention compliance with ethical standards: Confirm adherence to ethical guidelines and standards;
- vii) Disclose conflicts of interest: Clearly state any potential conflicts of interest;
- viii) Include contact information: Provide detailed contact information for the corresponding author; and
- ix) Proofread thoroughly: Ensure the CL is free of errors and typos.

The main don'ts, largely described in Box 3, are: Don't

- i) Be overly lengthy: Keep the CL concise and to the point (KISS rule: keep it short and simple);
 - ii) Repeat the entire manuscript: Do not reiterate the manuscript in full;
 - iii) Use jargon or complex language: Avoid technical jargon and overly complex language;
 - iv) Forget to personalize: Tailor the CL to the specific journal and EIC;
 - v) Ignore journal guidelines: Follow the specific guidelines provided by the journal;
 - vi) Include unnecessary information: Stick to relevant and essential information only;
 - vii) Submit a boilerplate CL: Avoid using a generic, template letter; and
 - viii) Fail to acknowledge co-authors: Ensure all co-authors are acknowledged and their contributions noted.
- Box 4 provides some practical tips and advice for writing a CL.

Box 3. Some dos and don'ts when writing a cover letter (CL) (15, 36-38)

Do:		Don't:	
1	<i>Address the editor in chief (EIC) properly</i>	.Check who is the current EIC .Start with a professional salutation such as "Dear Dr. [EIC's Last Name]" or «Dear EIC»	1 Be overly lengthy .Keep the CL concise and to the point .Typically, one page is sufficient
2	<i>Include a strong opening statement</i>	.Mention the title of the manuscript and its relevance	2 Repeat the entire manuscript .Avoid repeating the detailed contents of the manuscript .The CL should provide a high-level overview
3	<i>Summarize your manuscript</i>	.Provide a brief summary of the study: research question, methodology, key results, and main conclusions .Use words that highlight the interest of the work (e.g.; important, for the first time, major contribution, original research, to our knowledge this is the first study) .Focus on the key findings .Include limitations and challenges	3 Use jargon or complex language .Write in clear, professional language .Avoid excessive jargon or overly technical terms that may obscure your message
4	<i>Highlight the significance</i>	.Explain why findings are important and how they contribute to the existing body of knowledge .Mention any novel aspects or implications for practice, policy, or further research .Write paragraphs (100-150 words) doing scientific marketing for the article (originality, novelty)	4 Forget to personalize .Avoid generic phrases .Tailor the CL to the specific journal and EIC
5	<i>Specify why the journal is a good fit</i>	.Justify why this journal was chosen .Align the paper's scope and relevance with the journal's aims and readership	5 Ignore journal guidelines .Each journal may have specific requirements for CLs .Review the journal's submission guidelines and adhere to them
6	<i>Mention compliance with ethical standards</i>	.Confirm that the study complies with ethical standards, including institutional review board approvals and informed consent, if applicable.	6 Include unnecessary information .Avoid adding irrelevant details, personal anecdotes, or excessive flattery
7	<i>Disclose conflicts of interest</i>	.Clearly state any potential conflicts of interest related to the study	7 Submit a boilerplate letter .While templates can be useful, ensure your CL is personalized and specific to the manuscript and the journal
8	<i>Include contact information</i>	.Provide the full contact information of the corresponding author (i.e.; affiliation, email address, and phone number)	8 Fail to acknowledge co-authors .Mention that all co-authors have approved the manuscript and agree with its submission to the journal
9	<i>Proofread thoroughly</i>	.Ensure the CL is free of grammatical and typographical errors .Demand help from colleague to critique and proof the CL	

RESOURCES FOR WRITING CLS FOR JOURNAL SUBMISSIONS: SOME HELP TOOLS ON THE WEB

Major publishers offer guidance and examples for writing CLs for journal submissions. Box 5 provides links to resources provided by Elsevier, Springer, Taylor & Francis, SAGE, Wiley, and BMJ. These resources offer insights into the structure and content of a CL, helping to ensure that the manuscript makes a strong first impression on journal editors. Additionally, several helpful tools are available on the web (38-41). As previously reported, we advise authors to avoid using a generic, template letter.

CONCLUSION

The CL is an excellent opportunity to provide important information about the submitted manuscript and explain why it is appropriate for the journal, thereby enhancing

the chances of the article being accepted. A CL should highlight the originality of the study, how it brings novelty, and how it aligns with the scope of the journal and is relevant for the readership. The CL should be written succinctly without redundancy, and in a customized manner according to the target journal. Following the present guide (including Figure 1) will help ensure that the CL is professional, clear, and effective in presenting the manuscript to the journal editors.

As technology continues to advance and learn from human feedback, there is hope for improvement in CL writing and other research tasks. In the near future, by providing comprehensive details concerning the elements of a CL, chatbots (e.g.; Copilot (<https://copilot.microsoft.com/>), Gemini (<https://gemini.google.com/app>), Perplexity (<https://www.perplexity.ai/>), Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer (<https://openai.com/chatgpt/>), and Poe (<https://poe.com/>)) maybe will be able to generate a CL that is precise, informative, and appropriately tailored for submission to a medical journal. Future studies are required to evaluate the ability of such

Box 4. Practical tips/advice when writing a cover letter (CL) (15, 36-38).

<i>Authors should</i>	.Write the CL once the entire article is finalized and the choice of journal has been made	<i>Authors should avoid</i>	.Using informal language, complex sentences, devices, acronyms and abbreviations
	.Check that the CL contains the essential elements		.Overloading editors with too much information and detail
	.Make sure to spell the name of the journal correctly		.Exaggerating the novelty statement or overstating the findings of the study (<i>i.e.</i> ; any conclusion stated should be completely supported by the data provided in the manuscript)
	.Use sentences with active verbs		.Repeating information that is already present in the abstract and introduction
<i>CL should</i>	.Be honest about their qualifications	<i>CL should not be</i>	.Certain information such as endorsements from other researchers, statements exaggerating the proposed approach and blunt comparisons with other articles (<i>i.e.</i> ; the focus should be on scientific arguments to explain the importance of the research)
	.Indicate whether or not they have engaged in discussions about their work with one of editors (<i>e.g.</i> ; this can be used by the editor in chief (EIC) when assigning a primary editor to the manuscript)		.Overhyping the work, but also do not underplay it
	.Relate manuscripts under consideration or in press elsewhere, in addition to provide these studies for the EIC's perusal		.False claims
	.Mention (if requested) reviewers or editors whose author does not wish to revise their manuscript for reasons of conflicts of interest or rivalry		.Including unrelated personal information or glorifying previous research articles or any of their academic honours
<i>CL should</i>	.Add the mentions requested by the journal (refer to the instructions to authors)	<i>CL should not be</i>	.Being rude towards the editors or paying too many complement the editor's accomplishments
	.Be clearly written, simple, concise, and short (<i>i.e.</i> ; no more than one page, like an introduction or a brief overview)		.Getting the name of the EIC wrong, which is an embarrassing mistake
	.Be written using black type, a conservative font, white paper, 2.00 cm, and an easy-to-read format		.Proposing reviewers
	.Be written on the authors' institutional letter head to display professionalism and reliability		<i>i)</i> Having conflicts of interest with the study,
<i>CL should</i>	.Show sincere interest and motivation	<i>CL should not be</i>	<i>ii)</i> Having collaborated in its production,
			<i>iii)</i> Without a scientific level allowing them an appropriate critical analysis, and
			<i>iv)</i> With whom the authors have published with in the past five years
			.Neglected by the authors and considered as a formality
			.Reduced to a summary of the study or a rewriting of the abstract
			.General but should be custom-written for the target journal
			.Rushed and planned ahead

Box 5. Resources for writing cover letters (CLs) for journal submissions.

Publisher	Resource description	Link
Elsevier	Detailed guidelines and tips for writing effective CLs, available on their 'Author Services' page	https://service.elsevier.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/155/c/10527/supporthub/publishing/
Springer	Comprehensive tutorial on CLs, including examples and common mistakes to avoid	https://www.springer.com/gp/authors-editors/authorandreviewertutorials/submitting-to-a-journal-and-peer-review/cover-letters/10285574
Taylor & Francis	Guidelines and examples for writing CLs, provided as part of their author services	https://authorservices.taylorandfrancis.com/publishing-your-research/making-your-submission/writing-a-journal-article-cover-letter/
SAGE	Instructions and tips for writing a CL for journal submission, available on their 'Author Gateway'	https://journals.sagepub.com/author-instructions/JSR
Wiley	Resources and examples to help authors write compelling CLs, available on their 'Author Resources' page	https://authorservices.wiley.com/home.html
BMJ	Writing a CL	https://authors.bmj.com/writing-and-formatting/writing-a-cover-letter/

To take home message

The cover letter for a scientific article is the guiding voice that leads editors through the motivations, unique contributions, and strengths of the study. It brings the data to life, transforming a simple document into a compelling case for publication.

DECLARATION

The authors wish to disclose that artificial intelligence tool (*i.e.*; ChatGPT 3.5) was utilized to enhance the manuscript's wording, readability, and language quality. The tool was used only for language refinement and

not for generating text (43).

APPENDICES:

Appendix 1 (33). Example of a real cover letter previously sent to a high-ranked journal (Biology of Sport).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13308075>.

Appendix 2 (35). Copy of the original cover letter sent to Tunis Med.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13765976>.

chatbots to generate such letters (25, 42).

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