

How to Communicate with Busy Authors

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How do we communicate with authors who are very busy and not necessarily reading correspondence or instructions carefully? As editors, we want to provide instructions that are as detailed as possible, but in today's world, it is necessary to keep things brief. There might be additional language barriers with authors who are not native English speakers. In addition, our communication with authors is frequently in writing, which can make it challenging to convey tone. Here are some tips on communicating with busy authors.

Keep it light and to-the-point

In college I had a professor who required all essays to be between exactly one and two pages. This was hard for us English majors, who were used to writing long, in-depth essays. It seemed impossible to write **ONLY** one or two pages, including an introduction, argument, conclusion, and references. Although I suspect that it was due in part to the professor's busy schedule, requiring us to write short essays was the most practical skill that could be taught to us. In almost any form of writing, we need to know how to get our point across succinctly.

Subject lines are key!

I never create a vague email subject line like "Question" or "Important!" Try to include the journal name and paper number or a quick descriptor. Examples include "Missing Abstract in Journal Article" or "Odd Equation Symbol in Your Paper." This keeps things organized and shows authors the detail with which you are handling their paper. Many publishing software tools send automated messages, which makes our jobs easier, but it can also make the whole process seem impersonal to the author. They appreciate someone reaching out personally to attend to their article or book manuscript, which they may have spent years working on.

If needed, bold or underline important parts—but don't overdo it

Authors may be reading on their phones or tablets and while in an airport, watching children, or sitting in a hectic

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office during a quick lunch break. While we all want our authors to be sitting in silence reading every word intently, that may not be the case. Everyone is bombarded with text everywhere, and email inboxes are no exception. If some parts of your email or instructions are essential, it can help to emphasize items, if needed, to make sure those parts aren't missed. Too much bold, underlining, or caps can create confusion and defeats the purpose of emphasizing a few parts.

Use the phone when necessary

Editing is a very screen-focused role and it can be tempting to send a quick email instead of taking the time to pick up the phone, but sometimes it is worth it to call. If you send a query and receive a response from a confused author needing clarity, it may help to talk about it out loud instead of starting a never-ending email string where one question leads to another and everyone ends up more confused than they were at the start.

Screen shots and links are helpful if the phone is not an option

For anyone working with authors in another country, or in other cases where the phone may not be the best option, remember that screen shots can help clarify some things and give authors a simple, visual way to understand what is being referenced. This can include screen shots of the article itself, a peer review or submission system, or a webpage describing a particular grammar issue. You can also send helpful links when needed, if there is a good resource that may help an author.

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Unless you know the author, never assume what their level of experience with publishing is

Some authors are well published and may be on their 139th article, while others are first-timers and will not know how to submit changes to their manuscript. In each discipline, there are some well-known names in the field. It helps to know if you are working with one of them; otherwise, provide instructions that would be thorough enough for a novice but to-the-point enough for an expert.

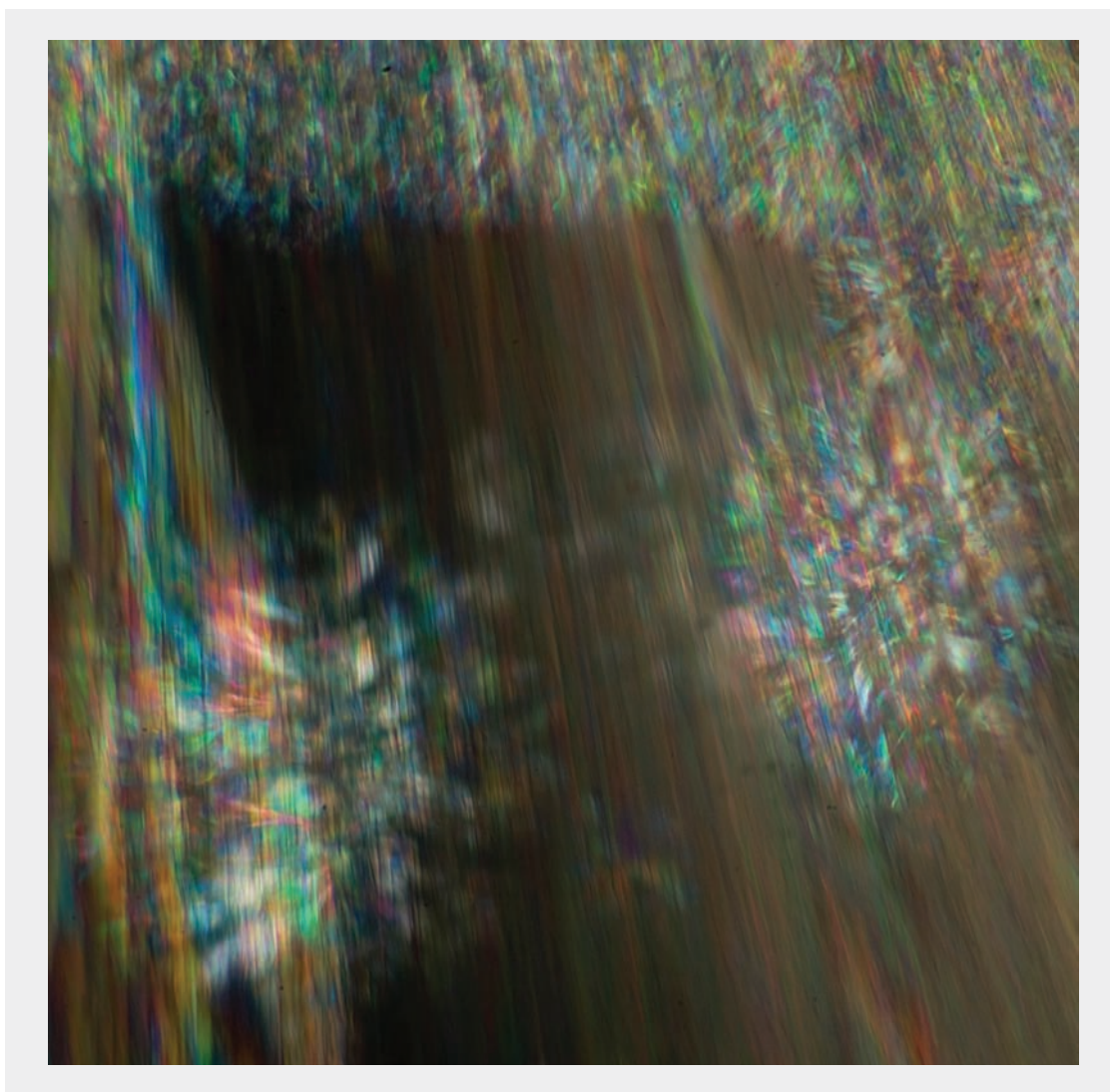
Remember that all authors are equal

As with any job, it is easy to get lost in day-to-day transactions and forget that we are working with people, not just deadlines

or tasks. Each author has a unique story and should be treated respectfully. Remember to treat each author equally, and as you would want to be treated. In this regard, it is important to practice patience and empathy—good skills to have in any profession and in life. We are all working toward the shared goal of publishing research to share knowledge.

Sticking to the point is a learned skill. In a world where our jobs are become increasingly automated (for better or worse), good communication is important and perhaps should be taught more.

Do you have additional tips to help communicate with busy authors? Is it different with ELS authors? Please share with your colleagues and fellow CSE members!



Crystals of the amino acid cysteine. A microscopic exploration of crystals in daily life substances. Transmitted light and polarizing filters are used to provide coloration to transparent crystals in the amino acid Cysteine. Credit: Fernan Federici and Marcia Sartor. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0). <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/arx27c76>