

# An Investigation into Undergraduate Students' Readiness for Intercultural Written Communication in a Foreign Language

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**Abstract:** Employees' ability to interact with international business partners in writing determines the success of their work, but difficulties conducting business correspondence in a foreign language complicate this process. The study aims to assess undergraduate students' readiness for participation in intercultural written communication in a foreign language. The initial research data included the English language proficiency level for 169 undergraduate economics and management students and a list of difficulties performing written assignments. The study determined the degree of students' awareness of how to write a business letter and readiness to conduct intercultural written communication. The level of the readiness was divided into high (8.88%), medium (66.27%), and low (24.85%). Such levels are enough for development of the students' writing skills.

**Keywords:** intercultural written communication, foreign language proficiency level, cultural differences, business letter.

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## 1. Introduction

Integration into the global economy has made training university graduates with professional skills a priority for higher education (Afanasyev *et al.* 2019). The demand for skilled employees who are competitive in the labor market and fluent in foreign languages is not disputed. It is not enough for employees to focus on their professional activities or speak a foreign language. It is much more important for them to develop integrated communication skills for conducting business communication with representatives of other cultures (Nikula & Moore 2019). Developing these abilities requires implementing intercultural communication skills.

Foreign language training at university should promote development of intercultural communication skills, along with linguistic and professional skills. This development is incorporated into *content and language integrated learning* (Coyle 2018), which means studying a future profession and mastering a foreign language. If a university graduate is able to communicate in a foreign language, they can overcome difficulties in intercultural business communication.

It is important for employees to improve their ability to speak and write in a foreign language with a view to solving problems of intercultural business communication. Such ability gives them new linguistic and cultural experience, which has a positive effect on their individual development and professional confidence (Council of Europe 2003). They begin to understand cultural differences better, "which in turn is crucial for international collaboration and multicultural workplaces" (Sznajder & Giménez-Moreno 2016).

Effective intercultural business communication can make communication inside and outside an organization smooth and trouble-free (Sharma & Mohan 2016). For that, it is important to improve linguistic and professional skills. While mastering a foreign language, undergraduate students develop foreign language speaking skills in everyday, business and

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professional situations. Their reading skills are enhanced when they extract relevant information on general, business and professional topics from original sources.

Writing skills are an essential part of intercultural business communication; “this is due to technological progress, the development of information and communication technologies and... an increase in the number of contacts between business partners” (Karbasova 2015: 90). Written correspondence between international business partners is used to resolve managerial issues and to organize and maintain business contacts. An employee should be able to write the same texts in a foreign language that an educated native speaker can. Working with business correspondence involves making such documents as proposals, reports, press releases, and product descriptions. An employee must prepare memos, emails and letters on a daily basis (Zorina 2019). No matter what business document is dealt with, an employee makes effective use of language to convey commercial or industrial messaging (Sharma & Mohan 2016).

The most popular business correspondence in the world today is email (Beer 2017) because of its speed and simplicity. It has altered business relationships, etiquette and everyday professional activities. However, electronic correspondence has drawbacks. A central problem for many employees is their inability to adapt to communication formats of their foreign partners (Akbari 2017), which can harm both the personal career of the email’s writer and the company’s reputation. Emails are known for confidentiality and security shortcomings, which can lead to mistaken emails and so-called junk mail. These shortcomings are not typical of business letters.

Business letters are a common form of formal correspondence; employees deal with business letters more than any other type of written communication in a foreign language (Roshid *et al.* 2018). Employees keep business letters for reference (Zorina 2019) when they deal with customers, suppliers, firms, credit agencies, and government officers. They can make a complaint, reminder, refusal or request as a type of business letter. As Dido (2017) observes, in business letters writers express their views and communicate information in writing in their professional life. It is important to understand the appropriate style and outline of the business letter to adapt more effectively to professional activities and be as successful as possible in one's chosen professional field (Sorokina *et al.* 2019).

Employees face various barriers to intercultural business communication (Hurn & Tomalin 2013, Kwan *et al.* 2018, Mosunova 2018) that are mainly attributed to cultural diversity, similarities with their native culture and stereotypes (Kutz 2013, Gulivets 2014). Stereotyping, non-verbal, and language barriers have a negative impact on intercultural business communication. Misinterpretation of a foreigner’s cultural data can lead to misunderstanding of the cultural information conveyed in business writing, which inhibits intercultural written communication in a foreign language.

Undergraduate students face obstacles writing business letters. Aimoldina and Zharkynbekova (2014) name misinterpretation of national and cultural standards of the business letter outline, which in turn reduces the effectiveness of a business letter. The English-language business letter is typically composed of the following structural parts: the letterhead, date, attention line, inside address, salutation, subject line, body of the letter, complimentary closing, signature, name and job title, reference initials, copy notation, and enclosure notation (Dido 2017, Zorina 2019). The letterhead includes the organization’s full name, address, telephone and email address. The inside address provides the recipient’s name and address. In addition, such parts of the letter as the opening, body and closing should be differentiated. In the opening, the recipient observes the purpose and subject of the business letter, while clarification about the writer’s location and hope for specific response actions in return are typical in closing.

Such a business-letter layout creates difficulties for foreign students due to diverse approaches to teaching. On one approach, the absence of strict or well-regulated rules for writing business letters as well as procedures for designing and structuring their content (Badger 2008, Brieger 2011) create difficulties producing effective business letters (Arputhamalar & Kannan 2017). Researchers explain that each letter is unique and has its own specific features. Another approach suggests that it is possible to work with templates, samples and real documents (Dengel & Shafait 2014, Roshid *et al.* 2018) so that students can study, analyze and use model texts when writing their own business letters. Combining both approaches (Janelli, 2018) to teaching business-letter writing helps undergraduate students grasp the structure of a business letter as well as write their own. Courtesy and consideration for the recipient's interests along with directness, conciseness, clarity and precision make intercultural written communication successful (Sharma & Mohan 2016).

To understand how successfully undergraduate students can write a business letter, it is necessary to assess their level of readiness to participate in intercultural written communication in a foreign language. To do this, their awareness of how to write a business letter must be considered first. Undergraduate students may fail to understand structural parts of a business letter or otherwise find themselves unable to write their own business letters. The level of intercultural written communication reveals the difficulties that university graduates will encounter in the workplace, which can primarily be mitigated in university classes.

Organizational difficulties in particular manifest as inability to present ideas clearly in writing. Insufficient practice of English in real-life situations (Mezrigui 2011) results in communicative difficulties, often as a result of employing writing rules in the native language and not knowing how to apply them in the target language. Analytical difficulties prevent the construction of a well-argued response. Logical difficulties explain obstacles to presenting a business document in which all the ideas are interconnected. Linguistic difficulties are characterized by inability to use vocabulary and discourse structures and consequently perform with lexical and grammatical accuracy. Cultural difficulties illustrate "cultural differences in the way [the] register is perceived and understood in different countries" (Klimova 2014: 433). Business etiquette in various countries influences the choice of language to convey ideas in writing. Foreigners may fail to correctly interpret ideas due to the use of set phrases, which abound in Russian as in English business correspondence. Examples of set phrases include "we thank you for the letter..." and "at your request, we sent you ...".

Teaching the formal style and outline of the standard business letter to undergraduate students should result in improving their intercultural communication skills. The level of skills shows students' awareness of how to write a business letter and consequently how effectively they can conduct written correspondence in a foreign language with international business partners. The purpose of the study is to assess undergraduate students' readiness for participation in intercultural written communication in a foreign language.

## **2. Materials and methods**

The study involved 169 undergraduate students (94 first-year and 75 second-year students) from a public business-oriented university in Russia, where *content and language integrated learning* is practiced in foreign-language classes. The students were trained to conduct written business communication in a foreign language on the basis of blended learning technology. Their completed assignments included determining the type of business correspondence, since a large number of texts can have similar content features as well as structural characteristics. In classrooms and consultations, they grasped the differences using business letters, reports, meeting minutes, and subpoenas as examples.

The students overcame barriers to intercultural business communication with the help of the *Three P's Method*: presentation, practice, production; the method involves presenting new material along with development and creative implementation of the acquired knowledge and skills in written practice (Harmer 2015). It was possible to explain the business letter outline by presenting the structural parts in a variety of documents. Then students had to unscramble parts of one business letter or match parts to different letters. "Production" refers to structuring the business letter as a whole by arranging all its parts in a logical way.

The initial research data included an assessment of the English-language proficiency level for each student and a preliminary list of difficulties performing written assignments. This assessment tested the undergraduate students' ability to participate in intercultural written communication in a foreign language. Specifically, it determined their awareness of how to write a business letter in an intercultural context.

First, we obtained results from the standardized state exam in English qualifying for the general certificate of Russian secondary education: 73 (43.2%) students passed the exam, which was not obligatory for school-leavers. Table 1 shows the highest, lowest, and average scores on a 100-point scale received by 29 first-year and 44 second-year students. Students must score 22 points to pass the exam. Scoring 84–100 is considered excellent, 59–83 good, and 22–58 satisfactory.

**Table 1:** Results of the standardized state exam in a foreign language.

Class	High score	Low score	Average
first-year	90	65	77.5
second-year	94	48	71

We determined foreign language proficiency level using assignments that correspond to each type of English language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. The levels ranged from A1 (breakthrough) to B2 (vantage), according to the Common European Framework of Reference; see Table 2.

**Table 2:** Results of the foreign language proficiency test.

Class	A1	A2	B1	B2
first-year	0	35	57	2
second-year	4	15	47	9

We then compiled a preliminary list of difficulties that the undergraduate students majoring in economics and management encountered in studying a foreign language. The students did written assignments included in print and electronic teaching materials in English, provided by Macmillan Education, Oxford University Press, and Pearson Education. We observed the students complete the assignments and interviewed them after submitting to find out types of difficulties.

The students mainly faced difficulties of an organizational, communicative, analytical, logical, linguistic and cultural nature. In particular, there were difficulties presenting ideas clearly in writing. They tried to employ writing rules in their native language rather than using them in the English language. There were inconsistencies in constructing well-argued responses. Some of the ideas in their business letters proved not to be interconnected. The documents were characterized by lexical and grammatical inaccuracy. Only a few students considered cultural differences in deciding the relevant content of the letter.

The data from the standardized state exam in English and the foreign language proficiency test showed a varying degree of readiness among the students to learn a foreign language at university. Intercultural written communication could not be fully achieved due to difficulties perceiving cultural differences embodied in the business letter. The degree of

preparedness should be taken into account when determining the students' readiness for intercultural written communication. For us, it was necessary to systematize the difficulties the students experienced when writing business letters.

The study used two main stages to identify students' readiness for intercultural written communication in a foreign language. The first stage used a written test to determine students' awareness of how to write business letters in a foreign language. We developed four written assignments corresponding to the preliminary list of difficulties.

**Task 1** involved skim reading: e.g., "read the letter below and choose the type of document". The students familiarized themselves with the text and, from the proposed options, determined the type of business letter: complaint, reminder, refusal or request.

**Task 2** aimed to identify a general understanding of the business letter outline: e.g., "put the typical paragraphs of a piece of business letter in the right order". To complete this assignment, students had to determine the logical sequence of a business letter: attention line, body, copy notation, complimentary closing, date, enclosure notation, full address, inside address, organization's full name, reference initials, salutation, signature subject line, telephone and email address. We determined if the students completed the task correctly.

**Task 3** involved answering eight questions:

1. Look at the letter above. Does it conform to a standard business outline? Why? Why not?
2. Has the writer used the correct style? Give examples.
3. Does the letter have a good start (opening sentence)?
4. Is the information in a logical order and easy to read?
5. Does the letter express how the company will solve the problem?
6. Will the reader know clearly what to do in response?
7. What do you think the company would do?
8. Is the letter the best way to deliver the information?

These questions aimed to evaluate understanding of the business letter outline, along with the ability to present ideas, employ writing rules, construct a well-argued response, interconnect ideas, and understand cultural differences. Answers were evaluated according to the following criteria: accuracy of the answer, degree of completing the task (high/medium/low), degree of detail (high/medium/low), lexical and grammatical accuracy, presence of a well-argued response, effectiveness of the proposed solution, and availability of examples. The students were welcomed to provide explanations for their answers. Their readiness for intercultural written communication was connected to their ability to analyze business letters when considering cultural differences in communicating in English.

**Task 4** allowed students to employ their writing skills while performing a writing assignment typical of intercultural business communication. Students' readiness for international written communication was revealed in the formal style and outline of their letters.

Write a similar letter [to the one you have just reviewed]. You should provide a clear description or explanation of what is wrong with the project, delivery, product or service. You should describe the steps you expect the company to undertake to solve the problems: replace defective products or correct the errors without delay, etc. The language and tone in the letter should be firm, reasonable, and courteous.

Evaluation was based on the criteria that we had elaborated. They included the presence or absence of the business-letter outline, ability to solve a cultural problem, presence or absence of sequence markers, textual flow, degree to which punctuation and spelling rules were

followed, lexical accuracy, grammatical accuracy, appropriate style, and presence or absence of excess information.

The second stage of the study involved data analysis, assessing the degree of students' readiness to participate in intercultural written communication in a foreign language. We arranged the test results obtained from the four tasks according to degree of readiness: high (86-100%), medium (60-85%) or low (0-59%).

### 3. Results

When describing the results of the written assignments, we present the undergraduate students' examples and explanations without any stylistic, grammatical or lexical corrections.

Almost all the students were able to establish the type of business letter (Task 1). The number of students who answered the questions in Task 1 correctly was 151 (89.35%) while 18 (10.65%) failed this task.

No student obtained high scores for Task 2; 92 (54.44%) received average scores and 77 (45.56%) low. Ninety-two (54.44%) students were aware of the logical sequence of the business letter outline and its generally accepted structure. The main difficulties concerned such structural parts of the letter as copy notation, complimentary closing, enclosure notation, and reference initials.

**Table 3:** Students' analysis of the business letter outline.

Question in Task 3	"Yes" answers	"No" answers
1. Does it conform to a standard business outline?	130	39
2. Has the writer used the correct style?	101	68
3. Does the letter have a good start (opening sentence)?	96	73
4. Is the information in a logical order and easy to read?	70	99
5. Does the letter express how the company will solve the problem?	70	99
6. Will the reader know clearly what to do in response?	70	99
7. What do you think the company would do?	111 (47+64)	58 (56+2)
8. Is the letter the best way to deliver the information?	96	73

Table 3 presents the data regarding students' readiness for intercultural written communication (Task 3), where each positively answered question demonstrates their readiness. High scores were assigned to 69 (40.83%), medium to 63 (37.28%), and low to 37 (21.89%). One third of the students were unable to give a well-argued response to several

questions in Task 3. The students explained: “I didn’t completely finish”, “I lacked time”, “I did not understand the task”, etc. Regarding the lexical and grammatical accuracy of their answers, 139 (82.25%) assignments received a positive assessment, while 30 (17.75%) contained errors that did not significantly affect the intercultural written communication.

For the first question, 130 (76.92%) students offered a well-argued response. In some cases, the students simply rephrased the question in the affirmative: for example, “I think the letter corresponds to the business format”.

All students answered the second question; 101 (59.76%) gave a well-argued response with examples, while 68 (40.24%) did not provide any examples or explanations. Some students offered phrases from the letter as examples of the appropriate formal style: “we have been doing...”, “have not been...”, “let us know...”, “company intends to do to rectify this situation”. Some simply said that the writer had used the correct style. Some attempted to analyze the text and its structure, indicating the absence of abbreviations, noting the use of complex verb forms and set phrases. Overall, the students demonstrated an understanding of the general rules for writing business letters.

For the third question, 73 (43.2%) students indicated yes or no without explanation, while 96 (56.8%) students tried to answer reasonably. To explain their position, a number of them drew attention to violations of the structure or logic of the business letter: for example, “the letter has a good start, but it was possible to write differently / more fully”, “no, the letter doesn’t have an opening sentence”.

For questions 4, 5 and 6, 97 (57.4%) students answered yes or no without commentary; 70 (41.42%) answers contained various kinds of explanations, some of which did not quite correspond to the task:

No. There are no clear instructions how to solve the problem. I think the reader doesn’t know clearly what to do. May be the reader will know clearly what to do in response.

In some cases, the students appeared to understand the situation but were unable to adequately explain it. Two students (1.18%) did not provide any answers at all.

For Question 7, 47 (27.81%) answers offered highly effective solutions, 64 (37.87%) offered average effectiveness, and 56 (33.14%) showed low effectiveness. Two students (1.18%) made no comments, even though one of those students obtained 70 points on the state standardized exam in English.

For Question 8, 96 students (56.8%) offered well-argued responses; 73 (43.2%) gave one-word answers.

Almost all students (165; 97.63%) performed **Task 4** albeit to varying degrees of success; four failed to complete the task, without any explanation. See Table 4.

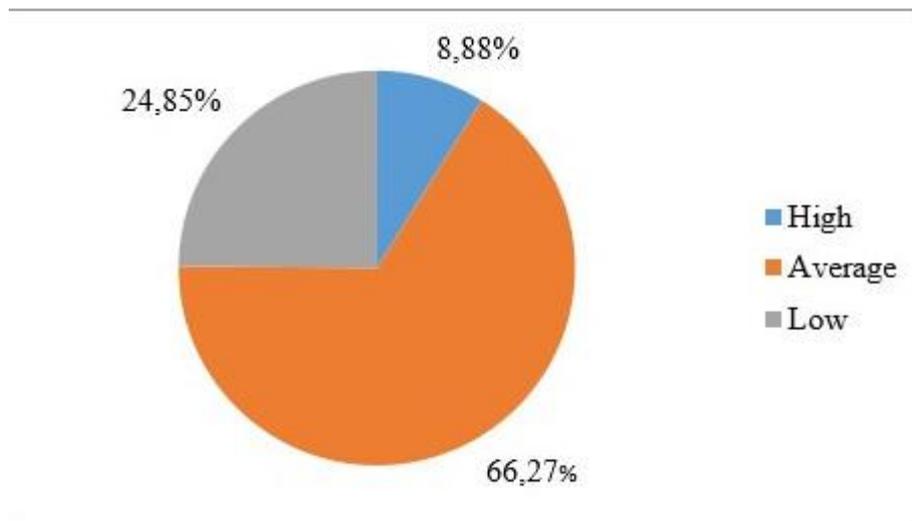
**Table 4:** Analysis of students’ own business letters (Task 4)

Criteria	Successful	Unsuccessful
general understanding of the business letter outline	53 (90,53%)	116
solution to the cultural problem	137 (81,07%)	32
clear presentation and interconnection of ideas	147 (86,98%)	22
following punctuation and spelling rules	138 (81.66%)	31
lexical accuracy	138 (81.66%)	31
appropriate style	132 (78.11%)	37
absence of excess information	162 (95.86%)	7

Clear presentation and interconnection of ideas was achieved via sequence markers and textual flow. Seventy-five students (44,38%) followed punctuation and spelling rules to a high, 63 (37.28%) to a medium, and 31 (18.34%) to a low degree. Seventy-six (44.97%) were

lexically accurate to a high, 62 (36.69%) to a medium, and 31 (18.34%) to a low degree. Eighty-one (47.93%) were grammatically accurate to a high, 60 (35.5%) to a medium, and 28 (16.57%) to a low degree.

Of the four tasks, Task 3 proved the most difficult; 43 (25.44%) responses showed a low degree of task completion compared to 18 underperformers (10.65%) for Task 1 and 29 (17.16%) for Task 4. Overall, the results show the students' readiness for intercultural written communication, corresponding to their English proficiency levels: 15 (8.88%) received high scores (Level B2), 112 (66.27%) average (B1), and 42 (24.85%) poor (A2); see Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Students' readiness for intercultural written communication in a foreign language.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings show that the undergraduate students can carry out intercultural written communication to varying degrees. High, medium and low scores illustrate sufficient, insufficient or lack of readiness for such communication. Despite the range of scores, most students can recognize the English business letter outline with its introductory (opening), main (body) and final parts (closing). They are able to indicate a summary of the main content in the subject line.

However, the difficulties determining the business letter structure, which almost half of the students encountered, indicate their misunderstanding of cultural information. Failure to understand the content of a business letter completely is a sign that effectiveness of their intercultural written communication may be questionable. Many students do not quite grasp what information the foreign recipient should obtain. Pikhart (2019) writes that ignoring students' cultural differences and preferences for discussion leads to problems in intercultural business communication.

When preparing their letters, the students are able to identify the introduction. They indicate the purpose/subject of the letter, such as responding to a letter, expressing gratitude, providing additional information on an issue, or requesting information. In the final part of the letter, the students are able to indicate their location and express hope for specific response actions in return.

The English norms for addressing the recipient and closing the letter differ significantly in Russia. Russian salutations typically include exclamation marks, which are untypical in English (Aimoldina & Zharkynbekova 2014). The English "dear" might be misinterpreted due to its meaning "sweetheart" in Russian. In Russia, the choice of a complimentary close does

not depend on the presence or absence of a name in the salutation, as in the typical English business letter.

The students demonstrate partially, but not entirely, successful attempts to switch to a formal style of intercultural written communication. Nonetheless, they are generally aware of such a style of business correspondence and are ready to use complete grammatical forms (“I am”, “you are”, “it is”, “we will”), complex clauses (“I would appreciate it if you could send...”, “we would advise you to...”), and the passive voice (It should be done), which is preferable to the active voice.

Other researchers pinpoint similar difficulties that undergraduate students' experience in international written communication in a foreign language. The Japanese researcher Nixon (2018) observes that the skill of understanding business letters is considered more passive than productive due to the lack of direct contact with business partners overseas. The Chinese researchers Qian and Pan (2019) clarify difficulties in writing business letters by referring to their formal style and stress a polite tone in intercultural written communication. Akbari (2017) from Australia discusses linguistic means for expressing her students' viewpoints when writing business letters. She claims that subjectivity and direct judgments are characteristic of students who speak a foreign language at a low level.

As a result, students are aware of the business letter outline but do not always manage to take into account its specifics in for example writing their own business letters. The data we obtained indicates that the undergraduate students are generally not ready to maintain intercultural written communication in a foreign language. Such results were to be expected, and the students will have the opportunity to master their writing skills in further university classes. Still, the level of their readiness for intercultural written communication can be considered at best average, albeit enough for the development of their skills in senior years of studies.

The results obtained correspond to the A2–B1 level of the students' English proficiency. Their proficiency level and linguistic experience as gained in secondary school allows them to implement a rational approach to solving cultural problems when writing business letters. That rational approach implies not only selecting appropriate linguistic forms, but also following the typical letter structure and otherwise observing business etiquette.

Blended learning technology contributes to students' achievements due to its ability to teach formal style and the business-letter outline; students can be “totally satisfied with extra materials and sources provided through the web-based platform” in practicing their writing skills (Pikhart 2018: 44). Moreover, it offers an opportunity to provide feedback to support further development of writing skills (Khakimova & Mikhaleva 2012). Blended learning technology “improves both learning curve and experience for the participants” in intercultural business communication (Pikhart 2018: 44) as well as encouraging initiative and independence, increased motivation, open learning, taking an individual approach, and developing creative skills (Smallhorn 2017, Legan 2017).

By assessing students' readiness to participate in intercultural written communication in a foreign language, this study makes a significant contribution to assessing the level of intercultural communication skills in undergraduate students and university graduates. Their generally high skill level explains their ability to express their thoughts clearly and correctly, persuade insistently and present effectively (Klimova, Klimova & Dubinka 2019): the main skills needing implemented in the workplace.

## 5. Conclusion

Our study revealed the undergraduate students' awareness of how to write a business letter effectively, as well as the level of their readiness to participate in intercultural written communication in a foreign language. The results show that they are able to perform simple

writing assignments relevant to business letters. The difficulties identified do not cause serious communication barriers but can prevent students from maintaining intercultural business communication successfully when they encounter cultural differences.

Development of writing skills in intercultural business communication improves foreign language training and contributes generally to the quality of university education. Our recommendation is to develop assignments aimed at writing various types of business letters - - complaint, reminder, refusal, request -- in both formal and semi-formal styles. We further recommend using blended learning technology and the Three P's method.

It is advisable to provide tasks that not only relate to university graduates' professional activities but also target the logics of presenting information, clarifying letter content and writing in accessible language. It is important to provide checklists with questions about the layout and content of a business letter: its style, grammatical forms, etc.

University graduates should understand that a well-structured and linguistically accurate letter is a significant tool for making effective business contacts when conducting intercultural written communication. Employees can be enrolled in training programs that help them overcome difficulties dealing with business letters and understanding culturally-specific information: to whom, for what purpose, and in what format the letter is written; what information is critical and what details should be omitted; and how to write to achieve the desired result.

### Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the reviewers for reading the article carefully, offering relevant criticism, and contributing to its improvement.

### About the authors

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