

TIPS for Writing a Letter to the Editor (LTE) or Editorial (OpEd)

Reasons for Writing

The Editorial section of the newspaper is one of the most widely read parts of a newspaper. Letters can raise awareness of issues, change opinions and outlooks, influence public policy, energize supporters, and mobilize action.

Letters are often printed within a day or two of receiving them making them one of the most effective actions when trying to respond quickly to an issue, event, or public opinion.

Letters reach three audiences:

- a. **Editors.** Whether the LTE is published or not, everything submitted influences them about what people are concerned about.
- b. **Legislators and other government officials.** They and their aides read the papers because they know where the writers are from, unlike social media.
- c. **The wider public.** Newspapers are as close as the peace and other movements get to mainstream thinking and to a broader, wide-spectrum of readers.

Letters send a message to unsupportive lawmakers that their constituents care passionately about an issue and will hold them accountable OR to supportive lawmakers that voters will have their backs when they take a lead on controversial positions.

Choose a TOPIC

Follow your energy and passion. Write on what you care about most.

Be timely and use a hook or peg. Mention something that appeared very recently in the paper. Cite the title and author if possible. Alternately, relate your LTE to an upcoming holiday or anniversary.

Engage the reader. Don't be afraid to address controversial topics. Newspapers might welcome the chance to publish your viewpoint, because it can be voiced through you without their appearing to endorse it and possibly be accused of bias.

Stay focused. Write on a single issue and one or two reasons to support your point.

EDIT Carefully

Be original. Don't plagiarize. Borrow ideas, but not precise language unless quoted with a citation.

Cite a source, statistic, or respected public figure if it strengthens your point. If space is limited, send your source as an accompanying Editor's Note.

Use simple language, not academic or "high-falutin." Picture the folks next door and appeal to their concerns. What can you say that might make them more open to hear your point of view?

Use parentheses and quotations sparingly.

Use a moderate tone but don't be afraid to use powerful language, especially with strong verbs and descriptive nouns. Let your feelings be known, but avoid being shrill, belligerent, or sarcastic. Write short, punchy sentences. Vary their length. Use paragraphs plentifully.

Make sure your LTE is well written and free from errors. Get feedback from others. Ask a trusted friend to edit it. We simply cannot see our own typos or recognize when we haven't made our point clearly.

PERSONALIZE

Speak from personal experience, if possible. How does the issue affect you, your group, or your community?

Be strategic to broaden your impact. If there's a policy angle, mention an elected official(s). This will trigger Internet alerts that will be seen by their staff. (Google Alerts)

Make a call to action. End your letter with a specific recommendation to contact your local legislator or community member.

Always include your full name, home address, and a phone number where you can be reached during business hours. Also include a title or affiliation if that's relevant.

CONTACT with your Newspaper

Check the publication's web site and observe their word limit and deadlines. Research topics the paper highlights in its "Our Views" section, but do not let this restrict what you write about.

Send your LTE in the publication's preferred format, usually filling out a form on their web site or emailing to a contact. Most don't accept e-mail attachments.

If you don't hear from the paper within five days, resend in an email with a note to the editor. You can ask whether it was received and whether they plan to publish it. This calls attention to your letter. Consider sending a revised version.

NOTE: Don't be disheartened if your LTE does not appear. Every letter – published or not – heightens the editor's sensitivity to the issue.

Get Support

Form a letter-writing support group or pair up with another person. Meet regularly in person.

Set goals, for example one letter each month.

Share ideas, information, sample articles, internet sites, or anything else that might inform or spark creativity.

Support each other, offer assistance, lend expertise, give feedback, copy-edit and proofread, boost morale, send congratulations and encouragement, share final letters with other friends.