

How to Write a Letter to the Editor

The opinion page is one of the popular pages in every newspaper – with ordinary readers *and* elected officials. So Letters to the Editor (LTEs) are a great way to draw attention to the issues you care about. They are also easy to write. Make your voice heard using these simple steps:

Study Your Target Publication

Get to know the publication you plan to submit to. Pay attention to 3 important things:

1. What is their policy on LTEs? Most have very clear directions on how and where to submit, how to format, and the length requirements you must observe.
2. Look for other articles, ads, editorials or LTEs touching on your topic. Reacting to items already featured in a publication makes your LTE more likely to be published.
3. Get to know the editorial perspective of the paper you hope to be published in. What issues does the editorial page routinely cover? Find a way to fit into an established pattern or topic to make your pitch more effective.

Outline Your Letter Before You Write It

1. If you are responding to material already published in the paper, name the article you are reacting to, giving its title, author and publication date.
2. State the problem/topic in a personal way. Why are you concerned?
3. Describe the problem in ways that make it as real and personal to the reader as possible.
4. State the solution you are proposing.
5. Call to action: name names, call for hearings/legislation/other paths to a solution.

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- **Use your own voice.** If you're starting from a sample template provided by an organization or person you respect, be sure to change or add material to it that makes it *your* letter. Papers are unlikely to publish an obvious form letter, copied and sent in by multiple people. Use the facts provided in your template, but write from your heart and your own experience.
- **Respond.** It helps engage both editors at the paper and their regular readers to

reference something the paper recently published about your topic. Mention this at the beginning of your piece, but take care in responding to an opinion you disagree with not to reinforce their arguments by re-stating them.

- **Be Brief.** Most papers have a word limit of 150-250 words for LTEs. And readers are more likely to read short punchy letters than long, rambling ones.
- **Be Local.** If your piece has local significance, it is more likely to appeal to a local publication.
- **Be Specific.** With only 250 words to make your point, it's critical to choose one reason from the many that may have shaped your opinion and craft your LTE to make that point effectively.
- **Name Names.** If you hope to influence public policy, including the relevant decision maker's name in your letter makes it much more likely he or she will read it.
- **Make us care.** As you write, remember that people love stories. As much as possible, use humor, simple facts, and tell a story – and avoid rhetoric. Making your case come alive for your readers is going to make them care.

How to Submit an LTE

Send your LTE to the email address listed on the website or the address given for the opinion section of the newspaper. Include your full name, address & phone number. Then follow up. Call the LTE editor and ask if they received your submission. Ask if they plan to publish it. If not, ask why not. If your letter did not fit their requirements, offer to revise it and resubmit. If you don't succeed the first time, keep trying. Your community needs your voice.