

Tips for writing letters to the editor

Letters to the editor can be powerful vehicles for influencing or inspiring public debate, making the case for your issue, or responding to related events. It is a way to quickly reach a broad audience. In addition, elected officials always read the opinion pages of their local paper, because it gives them an idea of what their constituents think. The trick is to write a letter that the editors find compelling enough to print. Use these tips to write a letter that is more likely to get printed.

Make it timely. Be sure that your letter is connected with a current "hot" story or topic. Find ways to tie recent news stories in with your issue. Open your letter to a reference to the recent event, and then quickly build a logical bridge to your issue.

Keep it brief. Most Letters to the Editor should be under 250 words. Edit your letter aggressively. Let a few friends or colleagues review the letter before you send it.

Be crystal clear. Avoid dental jargon. It confuses the public. Try to make only one point.

Use word cues to underscore your point. For instance, preface your major conclusion with "The important thing is ..." If you have research that makes your case, preface the facts with "Research shows that ..."

Don't overlook neighborhood weeklies and smaller papers. Often these publications have more room for letters, and community papers have very large readerships.

Include a call to action or solution. If you are illustrating a need or making a case for a specific action, include a line about what people can do to help. If there is a specific bill that you are supporting or opposing, name it.

Don't be afraid to toot your own horn. If you or your organization are involved in work that addresses the issue, include that in your letter.

Be passionate, but not venomous. Avoid sarcasm and arrogance. You want the public on your side. If you're angry, take time to cool off before sending a final version.

Use local or personal angles. All grassroots strategies rely on the "local" angles and the "personal" angles in an issue. Include this perspective to illustrate why readers should care about the issue.

Include contact information. Newspapers may want to verify information or for more information.

Opinion Editorials ("Op-Eds")

On the opinion page of most newspapers you will see long editorials written by guest columnists. Often these columnists are community leaders or individuals with a particular expertise about a timely issue. These are called "Op-Eds" and, if accepted by the newspaper for print, allow for more space to express your views than the standard letter to the editor. To secure approval for an Op-Ed, call and/or meet with editorial boards. The editorial boards on newspapers often meet with community members, and sometimes will either accept an Op-Ed or write an editorial based on information they receive from these meetings. Ask for a meeting with your local paper's editorial board, make a case for your issue.