

Writing Letters to the Editor

Letters to the Editor are short articles in a newspaper's Editorial Section and generally respond to a previous article in the paper. Letters to the Editor can be very useful tools for advocates to get their message out. Most policymakers read Letters to the Editor regularly as it is an important way for elected officials to track issues important to their constituents.

Gather background information:

- Plan your message. Choose just one. Don't try to pack too much in. If you have a different take or a unique perspective on an issue, it is more likely to be published.
- Choose your target. If you are trying to move public opinion, look for the paper with the largest circulation. If you want to reach a particular legislator, choose his or her hometown paper or one you know that he or she reads.
- Read the paper(s). Find out what kind of issues and writing styles are likely to be published.

Contact the paper and find out their policies:

- How to submit — Email, FAX or regular mail.
- Timing — When you can submit and how long it will likely take to be published?
- Length limitations.
- Do they only take exclusive submissions? Some papers will not accept your article if you are also sending it to other papers.
- Any other rules — For example, do they allow you to use pseudonyms for people in the story or do they allow more than one person to sign?

How to Frame your Message—Use EPIC

Engage—use a powerful, emotional statement; draw the reader in

Problem—get right to it quickly; tell them what is wrong

Inform—tell them about the solution; what can be done

Call to action—make a request; state as a “yes” or “no” question

If you do not know the Letter to the Editor word limit, keep it under 150 words. The most common reason letters are not published is because they are too long. Make your main point early to avoid having key messages edited due to length.

Writing Letters to the Editor

Start writing:

- Comment on a previous article or link it to another topic in the paper.
- Keep it short and do not go over the length requirement.
- Be clear. Big words and lots of statistics do not score more points. They often lose the reader.
- Be direct. Don't use sarcasm or hypothetical questions. Don't make them guess what your point is.
- Real life stories engage readers and can often make a point in far fewer words than a page of statistics.
- Choose words carefully. Do not offend. No personal attacks.
- Use humor, as long as it is appropriate.
- Explain your stake in the issue up front. If you are a health care provider arguing for higher rates or a person with disabilities arguing against cuts in services, say so.
- It can be effective if you bring up your opponent's case and prove it wrong. If you can't prove it wrong, don't include it.
- If possible, offer action steps for the readers.
- Include your name, address, a phone number where you can be reached, any organizational affiliation and a one-sentence description of that organization. However, you do not have to be writing on behalf of an organization to get published.

Send it to the paper(s) in the way they prefer to receive it and follow up:

- Check to be sure that they received it and that the right person got it.
- Call back in a few days if you haven't heard anything. They should call you to confirm that you really wrote the piece before they publish it. You may have to call back a few times before you get an answer. Be persistent.
- They may want you to make some changes or they may make the changes and sometimes they send it to you for approval. Don't take it personally - that's what editors do.
- Do not get discouraged if they don't print your article. Find out as much as you can about why it wasn't printed. Consider sending it to another paper.
- If you do get published, save the clipping. Send it to policymakers in case they didn't see it.

Advocacy is a muscle that must be exercised regularly.

Writing Letters to the Editor is an easy way to advocate for better public health policy.

- It is a cheap (free) way to address public opinion.
- The letter is your words, your message. No misquoting, no chance that the reporter will miss your point. And your opponents have to write their own article to get a response in.
- It is an excellent way to explain a complex issue.
- You can make connections in policy that are more difficult to make in hallway conversations.
- If your issue is not getting press or is now "old news," a Letter to the Editor can revive it.