

## Writing to the Editor

### What is a letter to the editor?

You feel strongly about an issue, and you want to let people know what you think. You believe you can even influence people to take some action if you speak your mind. But, you want to reach an audience larger than just your friends or your group membership. Letters to the editor can be an effective way to get the word out.

A letter to the editor is a written way of talking to a newspaper, magazine, or other regularly printed publication. Letters to the editor are generally found in the first section of the newspaper, or towards the beginning of a magazine, or in the editorial page. They can take a position for or against an issue, or simply inform, or both. They can convince readers by using emotions, or facts, or emotions and facts combined. Letters to the editor are usually short and tight, rarely longer than 300 words.

Using a few carefully placed letters, you can generate plenty of community discussion. You can also keep an issue going by preventing it from disappearing from the public eye. You can stimulate the interest of the news media and create more coverage for the matters you're working on. You can also send a "good news" letter to bring recognition to people who deserve it or acknowledge the success of an effort.

### Why should you write a letter to the editor?

Letters to the editor are among the most widely read features in any newspaper or magazine. They allow you to reach a large audience. You can probably think of many more specific reasons why you might want to write to the editor, but here are a few general ones:

- You are angry about something, and want others to know it
- You think that an issue is so important that you have to speak out
- Part of your group's strategy is to persuade others to take a specific action

Or you want to:

- Suggest an idea to others
- Influence public opinion
- Educate the general public on a specific matter
- Influence policy-makers or elected officials directly or indirectly
- Publicize the work of your group and attract volunteers or program participants

## When should you write a letter to the editor?

Letters to the editor can be written any time you want to shape public opinion, tell others how you feel about people, programs, or ideas, or just inform the public on a certain issue. They are a great way to increase awareness of the issues that you or your organization are working for, as well as to advocate for your cause.

Letters to the editor can also be used to start a community conversation about an issue important to you. A planned series of letters to the editor can stimulate public interest and media coverage. It's up to you to determine when is the best time to start writing the letters, allowing time for them to be published.

The larger the newspaper or magazine, the more competition there is for letters-to-the-editor space. This means your letter will need to stand out in order to get printed. The tips in this section will help you write a letter that will be effective and stand out on the editor's desk.

Keep in mind that if you want to inform the public of a certain action your organization is about to take, you may want to think of issuing a press release instead. (See **Chapter 6, Section 3: Preparing Press Releases**). If newspapers consistently ignore your news releases, your best choice may be a letter to the editor.

## How should you send your letter?

At this writing (2008), the reality for virtually every print publication is that they'd prefer to get letters and other material by e-mail, since everything they publish is set up on a computer and printed straight from software. If you send your letter electronically, all they have to do is transfer it directly to the "letters" page in the software in order to print it.

You can still send a postal letter, of course, but someone has to type it into the computer before it can be printed, and so it may not only arrive later than an e-mail, but may wait longer after it's received to be printed.

Another possibility is sending a fax of your letter. It's much quicker than postal mail, but it has the same disadvantages as postal mail once it reaches the newspaper or magazine. In addition, most office fax machines are in a public area and your intended recipient is not necessarily the only person who will read your fax. Make sure you clearly state whom the fax is for on a cover page and keep in mind that the editor may not be the first person to read your letter.

## How do you write a letter to the editor?

1. *Open the letter* with a simple salutation.

Don't worry if you don't know the editor's name. A simple "To the Editor of the *Daily Sun*," or just "To the Editor:" is sufficient. If you have the editor's name, however, you should use it to increase the possibilities of your letter being read.

2. Grab the reader's attention. Your opening sentence is very important. It should tell readers what you're writing about, and make them want to read more.

3. Explain what the letter is about at the start.

Throughout your letter, remember the rule:

**Be quick,**

**Be concise, and then**

**Be quiet.**

Don't make the editor or the general public wait to find out what you want to say. Tell them your key point at the beginning.

4. Explain why the issue is important.

If you are motivated enough to write a letter to a newspaper or magazine, the importance of your topic may seem clear to you. Remember, though, that the general public probably doesn't share your background or the interest. Explain the issue and its importance simply. Use plain language that most people will understand

5. Give evidence for any praise or criticism.

If you are writing a letter discussing a past or pending action, be clear in showing why this will have good or bad results.

6. State your opinion about what should be done.

You can write a letter just to "vent," or to support or criticize a certain action or policy, but you may also have suggestions about what could be done to improve the situation. If so, be sure to add these as well. Be specific. And the more good reasons you can give to back up your suggestions, the better.

7. Keep it brief.

Generally, shorter letters have a better chance of being published. So go back over your letter and see if anything can be cut or condensed. If you have a lot to say and it can't be easily made short, you may want to check with the editor to see if you could write a longer opinion feature or guest column.

8. Sign the letter.

Be sure to write your full name (and title, if relevant) and to include your address, phone number, and e-mail address. Newspapers won't print anonymous letters, though in some cases they may withhold your name on request. They may also call you to confirm that you wrote the letter before they publish it.

9. Check your letter to make sure it's clear and to the point.

A newspaper may not print every letter it receives, but clear, well-written letters are likely to be given more serious consideration.

## How do you get your letters accepted?

How likely your letter is to be published depends to a certain extent on the publication you're sending it to. The *New York Times* probably receives hundreds, if not thousands of letters a day, only ten or so of which make it into print. A small-town newspaper, on the other hand, may print every letter it gets, since it may get only two or three a day.

In general, newspapers and magazines will publish letters that are well-written and articulate, and that either represent specific points of view on an issue, or that thoughtfully analyze complex issues and events. Most publications stay away from publishing rants, although they may publish short-and-to-the-point letters that make the same points as a rant might, but in a much calmer and more rational way. Publications also tend to stay away from attacks on particular people (although not from criticism of the actions of politicians and other public figures), and anything that might possibly be seen as libel.

Legally, libel is the publication of a false statement about someone that damages that person's reputation. Thus to falsely accuse someone of a crime would be libel; to inaccurately print that someone had won an award for citizenship would not be.

Here are a few helpful tips for getting your letters accepted by the editor:

- Keep your letter under 300 words. Editors have limited space for printing letters, and some papers have stated policies regarding length (check the editorial page for this).
- Make sure your most important points are stated in the first paragraph. Editors may need to cut parts of your letter and they usually do so from the bottom up.
- Refer to a recent event in your community or to a recent article – make a connection and make it relevant.
- Use local statistics and personal stories to better illustrate your point.
- Make sure you include your title as well as your name – it adds credibility, especially if it's relevant to the topic being discussed. If you are a program director, your title may lend credibility to the letter.

Including your title is also important to showing that you're not trying to hide your interest in the topic. If you're a program director and you don't mention that in your letter, there may be a letter the next day accusing you of dishonesty for not revealing it.

- Editors may want to contact you, so include your phone number and e-mail address.
- If your letter is not accepted the first time around, try again. You might submit a revised version with a different angle on the issue at a later date.

You do not have to be the only one to write the letter: letters are often published with multiple signers. You also don't have to be the only one to write *a* letter. Several people may write letters on the same topic with the same or slightly different points, and submit them a few days apart, so that the issue stays on the Letters page for a period of time. If you have a talented writer in your group, she might write an editorial article or an "Op-Ed" – that is, an opinion editorial that is usually printed on the citizen opinion page. Most of all, don't limit your communications. Brainstorm for ideas in your group – how can you further your goals by speaking to the readers of your community paper?

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