

Letters to the Editor

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Letters to the editor can be effective in influencing public opinion and legislators' views. The "Letter to the Editor" section is one of the most widely read parts of most newspapers, offering a chance to reach a broad audience. For many public officials, press represents the overall buzz in the community. Letters to the editor can provide readers with information and insights on issues with which they may be unfamiliar, and can also inspire readers to take action.

Pick a Topic

- Pick a single issue you care about and the one point you want to get across.
- You should be knowledgeable about the topic you want to write about. If not, do research.
- The topic should be one that affects people in your community.
- Be timely — For example,
 - Support or oppose legislation when legislators are considering the issue.
 - Respond to a recent article, op-ed, or editorial.
 - Respond to a recent event.
 - React on the anniversary of an important event or landmark legislation.
 - Respond to the release of a new report that has implications on an important issue.

Decide on purpose

- Criticism. Bring attention to a problem created by someone's action or decision. And then to provide one or more solutions to the problem created.
- Persuasion. To persuade the reader to accept what you believe to be a solution to an existing problem or unfulfilled need such as promoting a political candidate or the need for something like more park benches.
- Emotional Appeal. Bring attention to an emotionally compelling ideal that is currently being threatened.
- Education. To educate the readers on a topic or issue that is misunderstood by stating the facts without passing judgement or opinion.
- Commendation. To praise someone or an organization for a job well done.

Pick a style

- Declarative. Render an explanation or opinion based on your acquired knowledge.
- Testimonial. Describe your personal experience with the issue to emphasize why it is important.
- Anecdotal. Use a compelling story to highlight and illustrate the importance of your topic.
- Historical / Pop culture reference. Choose an event, anniversary, movie or song to introduce a topic.

Format

A well-written letter should contain an introduction, body, and conclusion. Doing so will help the reader understand the point you are trying to make and improve the chances it will be remembered and have an impact.

- Introduction
A short compelling paragraph that summarizes what you are going to write in a way that motivates the reader to continue reading.
- Body
Evidence and detail which explains what you know or why you believe what you do.
- Conclusion
A concise conclusion that summarizes what you just wrote, gives the reader something to think about, states positive hopes for the future, or encourages the reader to take action.

Letters to the Editor – Suggested Structure based on Purpose

	Introduction	Body	Conclusion
	A short paragraph that summarizes what you are going to write about in a way that motivates the reader to continue reading.	Evidence and detail which explains what you know or why you believe what you do.	A concise conclusion that summarizes what you just wrote, gives the reader something to think about, states positive hopes for the future, or encourages the reader to take action.
Criticism	Indicate what you are reacting to. Answer 5 –W’s and H if applicable State your position.	State your qualifications (if applicable). Present opposing position first. Quotations from supporters and sources. Your arguments - strongest last.	Ask readers to follow-up, such as calling on policymakers to address the issue or otherwise show what can lead to a positive outcome.
Persuasion	Indicate what idea or candidate you are promoting and the need for doing so.	State your qualifications (if applicable). Explain why what you are promoting is beneficial to others.	Explain what the persuaded reader should think or do in the future.
Emotional Appeal	State an emotionally compelling ideal that most would strongly agree with.	Give a concrete explanation why this ideal is threatened or not being realized.	Provide a positive resolution that would enable the ideal to be realized or protected.
Education	Indicate what is misunderstood and why it is important to do so.	Indicate why it has been misunderstood. Correct the misunderstanding.	Summarize what was learned.
Commendation	List the person or organization and the good works they did.	Describe why what they did was beneficial to the community.	Encourage the reader to be inspired or indicate ways in which they show their appreciation.

General Guidelines

1. Defeat writer's block

Don't wait for the muse: it might not arrive on time or ever. Start writing and keep writing. Once you have something on paper or on your computer screen, you can start working with it and you will find direction and even inspiration. Motivation is not a prerequisite to activity. It is something that comes after the work has begun.

2. Give arguments, not opinions

It's true that an op-ed is a vehicle for the expression of opinion. But remember that no one is going to be impressed by the fact that you have an opinion, even a deeply held one, because we all know people with deeply held opinions who are wrong. What matters is the information and the arguments you present. Make this your focus. Never stress how strongly you feel. Sometimes it's even best to avoid the words "I think."

3. Be clear, be concise

You don't have to be a great writer to produce a great op-ed. But you do have to be clear, and remember that it is your job to ease comprehension. Never make your reader stop and figure out what you are trying to convey.

Use short sentences and small words, and above all short paragraphs. In op-eds, a paragraph can be one sentence. It should probably never be more than three. And no, you cannot assume that longer paragraphs will break comfortably into small ones, if the editor so desires. Writing in short paragraphs changes how you write.

Be sure your letters do not exceed the maximum allowed by the paper. Discuss only one issue in a letter. Focus on what is most important rather than trying to address every aspect of the issue. After you complete your first draft, go back and try to reduce the number of words by 1/3 without changing your main message.

4. Avoid categoricals, never overstate

Here are some words you may be wise to avoid: Always, never, best, worst, most, first, last, etc. These tend to get overused, and are often not entirely true. They may feel to the reader as though you are placing your thumb on the scale to increase the weight of your argument, and hurt your credibility if the reader can think of other or better or sooner whatevers.

Related to this, avoid the adverbs "very," "really" and "pretty" as a rule and be careful about adverbs like "extremely" and "highly" and "greatly" that do more to show your desire to intensify a point than actually do so.

5. Use active, not passive tense

This rule of good writing is sometimes more bluntly expressed: "Smash passives." But that also doesn't provide much in the way of guidance. Think of it this way: When possible, avoid making the subject of a sentence be the receiver of action. Make the subject act.

Thus "A bill that was introduced by Democratic state lawmakers in 2009 would have created a system of restricting that is nonpartisan" could become "In 2009, Democratic state lawmakers introduced a bill to create nonpartisan redistricting."

6. Use little words to ease transitions and improve flow

Feel free to start sentences with “and” and “but,” no matter what your English teacher told you. These are often better than phrasings like “in addition” and “however.” But do be careful not to whiplash back and forth between points with repeated uses of the word “but.” Bonus tip: Often “said” is better than “according to.”

7. Shun academic and other “in-group” jargon

Here are some words that rarely make a piece more inviting: “problematic,” “hegemonic,” “paradigm,” “zeitgeist,” “synergistic,” “indeed,” “irrespective.” And never string together broad labels like “social, economic and humanistic.” Jargon can be puzzling to folks who don’t understand it, confusing if people misunderstand, and it can sound pompous.

8. Never vent emotion

The way to get a reader to feel strongly about an issue is never to use loaded words that stress how strongly you feel. Here are some examples: “preposterous,” “outrageous,” “ridiculous,” “unconscionable,” “abominable,” “contemptible,” “brazen,” “god-awful,” “fascistic.” The reader will react to your rhetoric, and reject your effort to tell her what to think. Let the facts speak for themselves; let the reader supply her own emotional reaction.

Remain calm. Never be sarcastic. Show respect for other points of view that may have been made. Rather than make accusations or antagonize, use facts and observations to get your point across.

9. Do everything possible to ensure accuracy

If you aspire to write for print, you must strive for 100 percent accuracy, all the time. Yes, even the best writers and publications sometimes get things wrong, but then they return to the goal of getting everything right, always.

Don't make claims or broad statements you can't back up. Every person, place or group name should be checked. Every quote should be checked against its source. Every statement of fact should have an authoritative source that you can cite. Link to source documents and substantiating articles when possible. Have someone else check your copy against your source material if possible.

10. Lend it your ear

Read what you have written aloud when you’re done. The ear often picks up or critiques differently than what the eye reads. And phrasings that twist the tongue are often also difficult to read.

References and Acknowledgements

The Progressive Media Workshop, Op-ed Writing Workshop 2015
Characteristics of Editorial Writing, Alan Weintraut, April 2002
Dr. Robert Kraig, Citizen Action of Wisconsin