



Tips on Writing Effective Letters to the Editor

The letters sections of newspapers and magazines present great opportunities for getting your message to a wide audience. In local and regional papers, letters to the editor are read by local activists, government officials, legislators and many community members.

Your letter can support and expand on something already in the news, make a point that was omitted, or disagree with/correct misinformation from a news story, editorial or another letter.

The most effective persuasive writing appeals to both emotion and logic -- incorporate an element of each if possible in the space allowed.

Formatting the Letter:

- Respond directly to an article or commentary published within the previous two days (for daily newspapers) or previous issue of a weekly or magazine.
- Follow the citation format used in the target publication. The typical format is: Re "Talking With the Taxman," (national news, Jan. 13).
- Keep it concise and focused on one important point.
- Follow the guidelines and word count limit of the target publication (100 to 250 words is typical for local and regional papers, many larger outlets have a lower limit).
- Use quotation marks to indicate the title of a book, article, etc.

Writing the Letter:

- Use verified facts. Take the time to check original sources (rather than repeating a "fact" cited in another media outlet, for example).
- Look for ways to create immediacy by indicating how readers will be affected by the issue you address when possible. Give people specific and concrete actions (e.g. ask your state and federal representatives to support the Free Speech for People Amendment).
- Point people to a resource for more information.

Sending the Letter:

- When writing to your local newspaper, follow up with a polite phone inquiry about the status of your letter if it doesn't appear within 4-7 days to ensure it was received.
- E-mail your letter in the body of the email (never send unsolicited attachments) and put "Letter re Your Topic" in the subject line.
- If you wish to copy others or submit to more than one publication, do it in a separate email.
- Include your address and daytime phone number for verification.

Things to Avoid:

- Don't overstate/exaggerate your point. Rather than say “corporations will now dictate who gets elected and control office-holder,” try something like “corporations will enjoy tremendous influence over who gets elected and who chooses to run for office.”
- Don't use pejoratives (insulting your opponents);
- Avoid jargon or acronyms (spell out any name the first time you use it, followed by the acronym in parentheses);
- Omit needless words. Don't say "I'm writing to..." or "I think..."
- Never use all capital letters or bold text to emphasize a word. It may prevent your letter from being considered.

More Resources:

- Strunk and White's booklet *The Elements of Style* is a brief book full of great suggestions to help you write concisely and powerfully.

Thank you!

Don't consider your effort a failure if your letter is not used in larger publications where even the best letters face long odds. Each letter, however, is read and plays some role in molding the thinking and content selection of the editors.

We would love to get copies of letters written by our supporters and we're happy to offer editing help. Contact us at www.FreeSpeechforPeople.org.