

How to Write a Letter to the Editor

The name "Letter to the Editor" is a misnomer. You are, generally, not so much writing to the editor as you are to the readership of the paper. True, the editor is the person with the discretion to print your letter and you obviously want to catch his/her interest. But the primary aim is to communicate with readers. Writing a letter to the editor is a good way to reach thousands of people and urge them to take action on an important issue. Surveys show that the letters to the editor page is one of the most widely read sections of the newspaper.

And what is it you want to communicate? In a word: an argument. You want to change the readers' position on some issue.

Here are some suggestions to help get your letters to the editor in print:

- Read your newspaper's guidelines for letters to the editor (normally found on the editorial page). Be brief and to the point. Most editors prefer letters no longer than 200 words, and you want to be sure that important points in letter are not edited out for space considerations.
- Be timely. Ideally the letter should touch on a subject that is currently a news item. Refer to a recently published article, opinion column, or another letter.
- Think through your purpose in writing. Do you want to change readers' opinions on an issue? Fine. Do you want to urge them to act? Even better. To get action, however, you should be specific about what you want them to do, and the action should be very simple or a lot of fun, or both. For example, when urging people to write their politician about specific legislation, be sure to give the bill number, its title, and names of other politicians who should be sent copies of the letter.
- Make the first sentence short and, if possible, compelling.
- Make one clear point. Don't try to write about everything you know about an issue. Choose your topic, and narrow it to one clear thesis, one clear point. You should be able to express it in one easy to understand sentence. If you can raise a new perspective or question, your letter is more likely to be published.
- Don't forget your reading audience. Who in the readership do you want to reach?
- Include yourself in the audience. Don't use "I", use "We". Don't say "I don't think..." Instead, note that "we have all been victimized by..." Readers will more closely identify with you if you (implicitly) tell them you are one of them.
- Try to write an interesting letter. To bolster your credibility, use a few facts. A small injection of humour may increase your letter's chance of being printed.
- Convey your outrage and concern, but not through overstatement or exaggeration.
- Your conclusion should restate your one clear point. An analogy is often effective. Let's say you are discussing Canada as a peacemaking country and whether Canada should follow the U.S. down the road to nuclear war, or should stand up for peace. Your conclusion could be: "If you had a friend who was drunk and about to drive, you would probably take away the keys, wouldn't you? And if you were going to be in the same car, wouldn't you feel motivated to make sure your friend didn't drive?"
- Sign your name and give your address. Most papers will not print anonymous letters. If your letter is not published on one issue, don't stop writing, keep trying!