

A GUIDE TO

WRITING A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

2018

Organizing for Action

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WRITING A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

A letter to the editor—or LTE—is a short message to a local news publication that states your opinion on an issue and typically includes a call to action for your elected officials and community members to address that same issue. This guide will discuss LTEs—specifically, their component parts, why they’re an important tool to move your issue forward, the nuts and bolts of writing your letter and, of course, getting your letter published.

Why do we write LTEs?

Writing LTEs is a powerful tactic to advance an issue you care about because they are where members of the community—and elected leaders in particular—find out:

- What local people think or feel about an issue
- How an issue is affecting the local community
- What the major impacts of an action could be from a variety of local perspectives

People do not turn to LTEs to learn in-depth policy details or how policies are impacting the state or nation as a whole. Effective letters are short, personal, and locally-focused, and they share your core values and energize other supporters. In addition, they can also persuade those in your area who are on the fence, or show the numbers and power behind your advocacy efforts.

Now that we know why LTEs are an important tactic in issue advocacy, we’ll explore what you should do before you publish an LTE, the process of publishing an LTE, and what to do after it is published.

Writing your LTE

There’s no one best way to write an LTE. In fact, editors are more likely to publish a variety of types of letters (rather than a set that all appear to be similar). That said, use the guidance and template below for some tips and tricks to writing an LTE that is more likely to get published.

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✓ A good LTE will:

Keep it short. A well written LTE will need to stay within the publication's rules for length, and definitely shouldn't be longer than 250 or 300 words. It should be direct and straight to the point.

Tell your story. Begin the letter with a story, and make it personal. There's a good saying that "people can argue with your positions, but they can't argue with your experience." Describe how this issue has affected you, your family, a coworker, or a friend. Even someone you met or volunteered with at an OFA event, on a long plane or bus ride, or in line at the grocery store can be a great subject for an anecdote (especially if this person is from the local area). Personalize the issue and make it real for the reader.

Be relevant to its audience. What type of publication are you writing for, and who typically reads it? Retired people, young professionals, and immigrant families, for example, may find different types of personal stories compelling. Tell a story that the audience will connect with. Ideally, you should be of the same group or background as the primary readership of the publication, but if not, find something that you have in common and can both relate to.

Avoid confusing readers with wonky policy details. There isn't enough room in 300 words to make a nuanced policy argument. When using facts and numbers, only use one or two of the most powerful figures. A long string of facts and information is not a winning argument.

Use powerful language. Let your feelings show! Use powerful verbs and descriptions. Write short, punchy sentences and vary sentence length. This will help your letter stand out and make it easier for the reader to digest.

Include a call to action. End your letter with a specific action that your elected official or community members can take. Your LTE will only be effective if it gets others to take action and helps them understand the impact doing so will have!

Check for proper grammar and spelling. Trade letters with a friend and ask them to edit carefully. Check for proper grammar and spelling—you want people to take you seriously!

✗ A poorly written LTE will:

Not pay attention to a publication's rules or length. If you push it, the LTE is unlikely to be published at all.

Focus exclusively on policy points, facts, and figures. To be clear, facts are important buttresses to an argument, but they cannot be the main thrust. This will make your LTE less compelling and less likely to be taken seriously by both the publisher and the reader.

Disregard the type of publication and its readers. In other words, don't write your LTE with a preconceived agenda in mind, paying no attention to the motivations of the community it is intended to reach!

Fall into the trap of too many policy details. Let op-eds be the place for policy deep-dives. LTEs that attempt to use a string of facts and figures to convince readers and elected officials end up ignoring the personal impacts that an action will have on you and the community as a whole. People need to see evidence from you about how a policy will affect you!

Embellish. While compelling language and stories of personal experiences can make an issue all the more real, falsifying or overly embellishing your stories will backfire and hurt your efforts more than you'd think they help.

Have no call to action, or a call to action that is unattainable, for the reader to take. Purely informational LTEs are missed opportunities. And asking the reader to take actions that are too overwhelming (such as hosting a house party) will be brushed aside or ignored. Instead, it's good to have a simple ask for the reader, such as calling your elected official.

Submit without checking for grammar and spelling. Do not submit LTEs with errors; they will likely not be published, and even worse, they may be published with the original errors.

LTE template

Now that you know what to do and what to avoid, you're ready to give your thoughts some structure. Here's an example of how to break things down so you can put pen to paper in the most effective way.

Salutation: e.g. "Dear Editor:"

PARAGRAPH 1: Establish why you're writing your LTE.

- If you are responding to or referencing another article, you should reference it in the first sentence. Make sure to specify the title of the article, the name of the publication, and finally the date it was published (e.g., Bowman, Lee. "Reaching the vulnerable." The Badger Herald, 4 October 2016.)
- State clearly why you're writing about this issue.
- Sometimes it's best to include some kind of interesting hook here that explains why you're writing without actually saying "I'm writing because..."

PARAGRAPH 2: Tell your personal story.

- How does the issue you're writing about affect you, your family, or your community?
- Why is this issue important to you?
- Try to tie a key fact or figure around the issue into your personal story to support it—but remember not to make a string of facts!
- Be concise, draw a local connection, and relate to the community you know best by touching on the values you share with them.
- Include contrast—what do opponents and supporters think? This helps legitimize your position by showing you have considered both sides.

PARAGRAPH 3: So, now what?

- What are you asking your readers to do? Are you encouraging them to contact an elected official? Is there another action you want them to take?
- There should be a reason for them to read your letter beyond hearing your opinion—you should not be afraid to briefly spell it out.

PARAGRAPH 4: End on a positive note.

Sincerely,

[YOUR NAME]

[YOUR CITY, STATE, Month, DD, YYYY]

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Publishing your LTE

Well done! You've written your LTE and you're ready to send it to your local newspaper or website to publish. Use the checklist below to give your LTE one last final review.

- ✓ **Make a list of local newspapers and websites you'd like to submit your LTE to.** Remember, don't just look at publications you or your peers read, but also where your LTE will have the biggest impact.
- ✓ **Check for proper grammar and spelling.** Have a friend or family member look over your LTE.
- ✓ **If you're part of a group that's writing LTEs, strategize with the others about when to send your letters.** They won't all get printed at once—it's best to stagger submissions and send 2-3 letters per week.
- ✓ **Check the LTE submission rules.** Publications have different guidelines for LTEs; make sure you've complied with those of the publication to which you're submitting your letter.
- ✓ **Monitor the publication.** After you send your LTE, keep an eye out! Many publications, especially small ones, may not tell you if or when a letter will be published, because you have already given your permission to publish the letter just by sending it in.

After your LTE has been published

If your LTE has been published—congratulations! You've successfully ensured that your message is being heard. That said, the effort doesn't stop there: You still have the ability to amplify your message even further. Share your success with friends, family, and other organizers across the country.

To aid in amplifying your message and success, use the checklist below to make sure you're keeping the momentum up after you've been published.

- ✓ **Share your LTE on Slack.** Sharing your success is a good way to give a boost to a national movement of volunteers and share best practices. Don't forget to share a link so that others can view it too. [Here's what you'll need to know about Slack.](#)
- ✓ **Share the printed LTE on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media outlets.** Link to the page where it's published online. Email and share it with your own networks.
- ✓ **If the publication has an "email" or "share" feature embedded in the article, ask supporters to use it to share directly with their networks.** This will make it rise on the "most emailed" or "most shared" list on the site if it has such a list.

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