



Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Tips on Writing Letters to the Editor

Writing a letter-to-the-editor is one of the best ways to alert your elected officials about an issue that you care deeply about. In a letter-to-the-editor, you have the opportunity to share your opinion, educate the public about an issue, applaud someone for taking a desired action, or express disappointment when an official fails to act or acts in an undesirable manner. A well written, well timed letter to the editor can shift public opinion and influence policy.

Elected officials and their staff members carefully monitor newspapers to gauge local opinion. **By mentioning your elected officials by name**, and stating the specific action you would like for them to take, you can guarantee that your letter will catch their attention.

In addition to getting the attention of elected officials, letters-to-the-editor are a tremendous advocacy tool because they reach a large audience, can bring up information not addressed in a news article, and can create an impression of widespread support or opposition to an issue.

Some general comments on writing letters-to-the-editor:

- **Keep your letters short.** It is best to limit your letter to 100-200 words or less, but word limits vary by newspaper. Check your local paper for specific policy on length.
- **Focus on a single issue.** Your letter will have more impact if you focus on one issue and state your case well.
- **Focus on the local community.** This varies from issue to issue, but editors are generally more interested in letters that highlight the local impact of a national or foreign policy issue.
- **Respond to a news story.** Editors are often more interested in letters that respond to a specific news story, and some will only print letters that respond to a story. That being said, letters may provide an opportunity to raise points or convey information that is not contained in a news story, though they should clearly have relevance to an issue that is in the news.
- **Respond in a timely manner.** This is related to the previous point. Editors tend to be more interested in letters that respond within a few days of the story or news of an issue that you address, and preferably within a day or two.
- **Demonstrate your reach.** If you know that your opinion also represents that of others, be sure to mention it. For example, if you are member of an organization that officially holds the position you espouse, that is helpful to mention. However, if you want to submit a letter signed from representatives of more than one group, be aware that most newspapers limit signatures to two or three names.
- **Consider your options.** Letters to your local paper have the best chance of being published, though you may certainly submit to national publications as well. Your local paper is most likely to catch the attention of your legislators. Other options include suburban or neighborhood papers, specialized magazines, ethnic press, religious publications, and college alumni magazines.
- **Submit letters by e-mail whenever possible.** The e-mail address for submissions is usually printed in the editorial section of your paper. Generally, editors prefer to have your letter printed within the body of your message, and not as an attachment.

- **Include complete contact information.** You must include your name, street address and phone number. Editors are on guard about fake identities and will often contact you to verify that you wrote your letter. They will not run anonymous letters.

Writing Your Letter

- It helps to begin with determining content:
 - What is your **specific** topic? Why is it important to you?
 - Who are the targeted elected officials?
 - Are you responding to a specific event or article? (Cite name of event or article and date)
 - Is there a local connection? If so, what is it?
 - What is your desired outcome? What do you want to see changed or achieved?
- Outline your letter:
 - State your main point, with appropriate references to an event or article. Some options for your opening statement include taking issue with a comment from someone interviewed for a story, adding to the discussion by pointing out something readers need to know, disagreeing with an editorial position, or pointing out an error or misrepresentation in an article.
 - State why the issue is important to you
 - Impact on local community
 - Personal impact or investment
 - Provide facts, quotes, and/or data (briefly!) to support your position—be careful about accuracy
 - Restate your main point
 - State your recommendation (desired action or outcome).
 - What is it you would most like for your readers to remember? Consider the central point you want people reading the letter to take away.
- Be polite and respectful. Avoid personal attacks
- Be concise
 - Keeping your letter short will increase the likelihood that the editor will have time to read your letter and consider it for publication.
 - Editors will modify your letter for clarity, and could cut parts of it entirely if it is too long. It's best to send a short, well written letter to avoid the chance that you disagree with the changes the editor makes.
- Review your letter carefully. Don't be afraid to ask a friend or colleague to review your letter to be sure your writing is clear and you are getting your point across.

Compiled with help from the following sources:

- Friends Committee on National Legislation
(http://www.fcnl.org/getin/resources/letters_editor.htm)
- American Civil Liberties Union
(http://action.aclu.org/site/PageServer?pagename=AP_writing_letters_to_editor)
- Humane Society of the United States
(http://www.hsus.org/legislation_laws/citizen_lobbyist_center/lobbying_101/tips_on_writing_letters_to_the_editor.html)

Worksheet for Preparing to Write a Letter to the Editor

1) What is your **specific** topic? (preferably one, no more than two) _____

2) Why is it important to you? Does it affect you personally? What is the impact on the community, state, country, world?

3) Who are the targeted elected officials? (local, state, national) _____

4) Are you responding to a specific event or article? (preferred) Yes No

Cite name of event or article and date: _____

5) Is there a local connection? If so, what is it? _____

6) Is there information to support my position? (facts, quotes, data, etc.) _____

7) What is your desired outcome? What do you want to see changed or achieved? _____

8) What do I most want readers to remember about my letter? _____

Writing Your Letter to the Editor

- 1) **Main point:** include appropriate references to event or article. (Some options: Taking issue with a quote in an article, adding something new to the discussion, disagreeing with an editorial position, pointing out an error or misrepresentation.)

- 2) **Why this is important to me:** (remember community connections, etc.) _____

- 3) **This information supports my position:** _____

- 4) **Restate main point:** (not absolutely required, but it helpful if there is room)

- 5) **Desired action or outcome:** (include the actions required by the targeted officials) _____

- 6) **Closing statement:** (what you most want others to remember and/or act upon) _____
