



FOR BETTER OR VERSE

Writing powerful letters to editors and elected officials.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the editor are one of the most widely read sections of the newspaper and reach a large audience. They allow community members to comment on the way issues are being addressed in the media and to influence what topics the local paper covers. Elected officials often monitor this section of the newspaper and take notice of constituents' opinions.

Due to strict space limitations in newspapers, not all letters will be published, but the more letters the newspaper receives on a certain topic, the more likely they are to run at least one letter on the topic. Check the letter guidelines in your local paper and use these tips to write an effective letter to the editor:

- Keep it short and focused. Many newspapers have strict length limits and edit letters for space. A concise, single-issue letter has a better chance of retaining its salient points and keeping the reader's interest.
- Make specific references. While some newspapers will print general commentary letters, most prefer letters that respond to a specific article. For example: "I was impressed by the comprehensive solution outlined in the May 5th article, 'Manpower Shortages Plague the Nation,'" or "I strongly disagree with Senator John Doe's position for a windfall-profits tax ('A Real Windfall' June 22)."
- Be factual and highlight aspects of the issue that haven't been previously addressed.
- Include your contact information. Many newspapers will only publish a letter to the editor after verifying the author's contact information. When printed, the letter will usually only include your name and city.
- Type your letter and sign it.
- Send letters to smaller newspapers. Small newspapers are more likely to print your letter and the letter can then spark local community action.

WRITING TO ELECTED OFFICIALS

It is absolutely vital to tell elected officials where we stand on issues. Our input shapes the way our representatives create and implement environmental and social policy. Emails, postcards and phone calls are good communication tools, but letters and faxes are the most effective and persuasive way of communicating our views to elected officials. These tips will help you write a persuasive letter:

- Keep it short. Limit your letter to one page and one issue.
- Identify yourself and the issue. In the first paragraph of your letter state who you are and what issue you are writing about. If you are referring to a specific bill, identify it by number (e.g. H.R. 2372 or S. 1287).
- Focus on your main points. Choose the three strongest points to support your argument and develop them clearly. Too much information can distract from your position.
- Make it personal. Tell your legislator why the issue matters to you and how it affects you, your family and your community. Make a connection to the legislator. Did you vote for him? Did you contribute to the campaign?
- Ask for a reply. Include your name and address on both your letter and envelope.
- Follow up with a telephone call. This will show the official that you are passionate about the issue.
- Trust your voice. Be polite and take a firm position in your letter. Be confident in your understanding of the issue and remember that the legislator may know less than you. Thank elected officials when they vote the way you want.