

Writing a Letter to the Editor



The Basics

The “Letters to the Editor” section is one of the most frequently read sections of the newspaper. U.S. Congressional offices know this and they pay particular attention to the Letters section. So, write a letter to the editor today!

Most letters to the editor should not exceed 250 words. A local newspaper may allow a slightly longer letter than national newspapers. You can find most papers’ letter requirements on their websites. It may also be helpful to look at a sampling of the letters that the newspaper has recently published to see if there is a length or style the paper prefers.

Most regional and national newspapers in the U.S. require that letters to the editor be exclusive to them. However, many local papers do not have that requirement. Check your newspaper’s opinions section or website to find out their requirements.

Constructing Your Letter

A good way to think about writing a letter to the editor is that you want to give your letter **REACH**. That is: 1) Make it **R**elevant, 2) **E**ngage your readers, 3) **A**rgue a point, 4) **K**eep it **C**oncise, and 5) **B**ring it **H**ome.

Make it Relevant

Although you believe your issue is relevant, you need to make this relevancy clear to readers and ultimately editors. Letters that respond to a recent article in the paper, a local event, or something timely are much more likely to be published.

Engage your readers

You need to give your readers some context for your issue. If you want to write about a piece of legislation, for instance, you have to give your readers a bit of background about why they should care (e.g. “Some 201 million women in developing countries wish to prevent pregnancy or space births but do not have access to modern contraceptives. The lack of access contributes to the unnecessary deaths of more than half a million women due to pregnancy and childbirth complications. We need to...” Keep your writing active and persuasive so that people will want to keep reading.

Argue a point

Letters to the editor should be biased. Don’t be afraid to state your opinion clearly. Of course, you should always back up what you say with facts to show that your argument is both accurate and compelling, but do not worry about trying to argue “both sides” of the issue.

Keep it Concise

The newspaper will probably have a specific limit on the number of words you can use, but the rule of thumb is to keep your letter short. The shorter your letter, the more likely it is to be published and the more likely it is to be read.

Bring it Home

The most important part of your letter should be a clear articulation of what specific action needs to be taken. Are you asking your representative to co-sponsor a bill? If so, name that representative and call on him or her to sponsor the bill (make sure you name the bill). Are you thanking a representative for his/her leadership and asking for further action? If so, do that and be sure to name that representative. Are you asking people reading the letter to take action? If so, make sure they know what it is they can do and how to do it.

A Letter to the Editor Step-by-Step

1. Read your local and regional newspapers with an eye to articles that have a link to your issue.
2. Write a letter responding to the identified articles.
3. Proofread and shorten the letter.
4. Include your full contact information at the end of the letter: name, mailing address, email, and phone number. The paper won't publish your contact information, but they need to have it to confirm that you wrote the letter and to follow up with you if they have questions.
5. Email or fax the letter to the paper. If you email the letter, most newspapers require that you send it "in-text" instead of as an attachment.
6. Check the newspaper regularly for your letter. If it's published, fax a copy of it along with a letter to your elected official's office, if s/he is the target of your letter.

Below is an example of a letter to the editor by Serra Sippel, executive director of the Center for Health and Gender Equity, published by the *Baltimore Sun*.



Letters to the Editor

March 30, 2008

Ideology distorts AIDS funding bills

Without pitting HIV prevention budgets against research budgets for vaccines and microbicides, it is important to recognize that effective interventions for combating global AIDS exist now ("Enough is enough," Opinion • Commentary, March 25). However, the lack of political will to initiate such interventions could prove fatal to those efforts.

Legislation to reauthorize the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief has been introduced in both the House and Senate. But public response to both bills has largely ignored dangerous, ideologically driven funding restrictions within these bills.



In their current form, both bills include directives that would require organizations receiving U.S. HIV-prevention assistance to give a disproportionate share of money to programs that stress abstinence and fidelity rather than condom use as a way to fight AIDS.

The Senate bill fails to recognize family planning as a key component in the prevention of HIV.

The House bill would limit funding for programs that integrate family planning services with HIV testing, counseling and education to organizations that currently receive U.S. family planning funding.

Those organizations must comply with the "global gag rule" that denies any U.S. assistance to organizations that use their own funds to practice or provide counseling about abortion.

U.S. taxpayer dollars should be used to promote sound, effective, evidence-based strategies for HIV prevention rather than ideological approaches that curry favor with a particular political base.

Our senators and representatives should go back to the drawing board and make urgently needed corrections to the proposed legislation that would save more lives.

Serra Sippel
Executive Director, Center for Health and Gender Equity

