

# HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

## A LETTER TO THE EDITOR IS A SIMPLE, QUICK AND EFFECTIVE WAY TO REACH THE PUBLIC

A letter to the editor can be an effective way for individuals and/or organizations to deliver important information to the public. The "letters" section in newspapers, and radio and television stations that have a listener/viewer feedback system, exist to provide a forum for public comment or debate. The "letters" section is widely read. Whether you are writing a letter to respond to "bad press" or to reinforce "good press", there are a number of important points to keep in mind. This factsheet has been developed to help in writing effective letters to the editor.

### Things to Consider Before Putting Pen to Paper:

#### The Purpose of a Letter to the Editor

- To correct or clarify information or perceptions.
- To provide additional information.
- To express an opinion or point of view.
- To introduce or reinforce a message.

### Should You Write a Letter?

A letter to the editor is generally written in response to a specific news story, editorial or letter. Publications also allow for general letters that comment on timely issues or events not reported by the publication. It is always appropriate to compliment the media when they provide balanced and accurate coverage of an issue. A letter to the editor is one of several ways to respond to or address media reports and issues we know and care about. Other options include contacting the journalist directly, submitting a professionally written opinion piece/editorial, or, in the case of an ongoing concern, requesting a meeting with the editor or editorial board.



- If you read, see or hear something that is inaccurate or misleading, do not overreact. Try to be as objective as possible.
- If an error or omission is not significant, let it go. Do not be a nit-picker. There will always be another opportunity.
- Sometimes what seems negative or unbalanced to those close to a subject, is not seen that way by others. Get a second opinion. Ask someone who is not directly involved to comment. If the report seriously misinforms them or leaves false impressions, then you have grounds to respond.
- If it's a case of you not liking the story, but it's factually based and includes various points of view, it usually is best to leave it alone.
- If the story has an unfair, derisive, negative tone, write a letter to the editor that lays out your response.
- If the story is not likely to be noticed (i.e. small and/or buried in the back pages) it may not be worth drawing attention to. If on the other hand, it is prominently placed or likely to be noticed it may be worth responding to.
- Consider whether a letter to the editor will be counterproductive. Will your letter add fuel to the fire (by drawing additional media attention to an issue that is likely to die on its own) or will it serve to put the matter to rest?
- Are there others who can respond? If there is someone better qualified to respond? Can you encourage others to also write letters, especially credible third parties?
- Look at the long term. What is the publication's track record on the issue? Do they consistently take one side in their news coverage and editorials or do they (over time) run stories that provide differing points of view? If the reporting has been consistently poor or biased, a letter to the ombudsman (editor in chief, producer, etc.) may be in order. Industry representatives can ask for a meeting with the editor or editorial board.
- Can the errors or omissions be corrected in a letter to the editor? If there are many errors and the allegations are very serious.
- Can the errors or omissions be corrected in a letter to the editor? If there are many errors and the allegations are very serious, you may consider submitting an opinion piece for publication or asking a third party knowledgeable on the subject to do so.
- In the event of factual errors consider calling the journalist directly and politely point out the error. If an error is significant you can ask for an immediate correction. Usually the reporter will make a note for the next time he/she writes on the subject. If appropriate, suggest reading materials and send copies if possible. If you still don't get satisfaction, consider calling the editor and follow up with a personal letter and/or write a letter for publication.



- Don't just write critical letters. Letters should also be used to reinforce positive and accurate stories. Journalists, like anyone else, appreciate receiving credit when they've done a good job. A supportive letter can help balance any criticisms they may receive.
- Letters should also be used to reinforce or clarify a particular message or point of view.
- A news story or editorial can be used as the opportunity to provide additional information and to get another message across. Don't overlook reports or editorials that are not specifically related but that in some way can be used to deliver a point or message.

Don't underestimate the effect of this type of feed-back. Not only are letters to the editor widely read, but they can have an effect on the editorial stance a publication or program adopts (after all, readers/audiences are their customers).

## How to Begin

Become familiar with various publications, since each one will differ in their policies on letters. Spend a few days carefully reading the "letters" section in your newspaper(s). What sorts of letters get printed? Do they have to be very short? Should the tone be "conservative", or does the editor prefer a "bite". Does the publication prefer to run letters from local individuals or organizations? Does the publication reserve the right to edit letters? Most publications outline their specific policies in the letters section or on their mastheads.

Begin by collecting your thoughts on paper. What are the main points you want to make? Keep them to three or less. List them by priority and use this as an "outline". Remember you do not have to answer every error in the story or letter, only the most significant ones. Often it is better to use one or two errors or perceptions as examples to make your point.

Decide on the "approach" of your letter. What is the best way to make your point? Should it be forceful or gentle? Can criticisms be delivered in a helpful way? Can you raise questions or options for the reader to consider? Should it be serious or could you use a catchy phrase or thoughtful wit? Would relaying personal experience or expertise strengthen your message?

Always approach your subject with an intelligent argument. Do not just voice your sentiments. Avoid whining or complaining.



Address the message or perception not the details. Avoid setting yourself up for rebuttal letters by making absolute statement, or by using facts and figures that can be disputed.

Your letter should stand on its own. Your readers may not have seen the original report.

Once the letter is written, read it over. Are your ideas clear? Is there repetition? Can the letter be simplified? (Even professional writers revise their work several times). Get a second opinion from someone you trust, preferably who didn't see the original item you are writing about.

## How to Improve Your Chances of Getting Published

Don't expect a letter to the editor will always be published. Most media are swamped with correspondence and must be selective. They are under no obligation to run a letter. Don't expect a letter to be published immediately. A letter to a large city daily, for example, could take two or more weeks to be published after it is received.

- If you are responding to a specific report or issue, send your letter quickly while the topic is still current. Deliver, fax or email immediately (within one to three days). The address and fax number are provided in the publication. Ensure you send it to the "Letters to the Editor" department.
- Keep it short (less than 150 words) if possible. Shorter letters have a better chance of being published. If a letter is too long, it may be edited down by someone who probably doesn't understand the issue.
- Use logical or chronological order.
- Keep the tone objective and professional. Don't be offensive or make personal attacks. Focus on the information not the person. Letters containing derogatory or libelous statements will be edited or rejected entirely.
- Keep your sentences short (less than 21 words). Shorter sentences have more impact and are more "readable" than long rambling sentences.
- When providing factual information/corrections, include the references or source (i.e. "According to the last census, the number of family owned farms in Canada...")
- Don't use acronyms or industry jargon.
- Check for spelling, grammar and clarity.



## Format

Submit type-written letters.

Address the letter to the publication to the attention of the Editor.

Refer to the item you are responding to: title and date, in the opening sentence if possible.

State your position clearly and concisely in the first or second sentence.

The letter must include the author's name and signature, address and telephone number. Most newspapers are required to verify letters they are considering publishing with the author. Reputable publications will not publish anonymous letters.

Whether it is to express an opinion, to set the record straight, or to reinforce accurate information, writing a letter to the editor is one simple, direct and effective way to communicate with the public.

*If you would like more information on writing letters to the editor, please contact us.*

