Deciding to Write a Letter to the Editor

There are many reasons to write a letter to the editor of a newspaper. Motivations for writing include:

- Expressing your opinion on a current issue
- Influencing the public, business, or government
- Pointing out an error or inconsistency in an article
- Making a humorous comment about an item
- Wanting to see your name in the paper

Whatever your motivation, this article helps you to write a letter that gets published. It addresses the following elements to writing an effective letter:

- Choosing a topic
- Managing length
- Setting the tone
- Submitting to the paper

In addition, the article presents possible consequences of writing a letter to the editor and how to deal with them.

Choosing a Topic

You probably already have a topic in mind when you decide to write a letter to the editor. Nevertheless, you should consider the following aspects of your topic that can influence whether your letter is published:
Timeliness

The most important element to consider when deciding what to write about is timeliness. You want to write about an issue that is currently of interest to the public. The easiest way to pick a timely topic is to respond to a recently published article. If you wait too long to respond, the paper and its readers will have moved on to other topics and your letter will not be of interest. If possible, write your letter the same day as the article appeared.

A letter to the editor doesn’t have to be in response to a single article as long as it is about a current issue. For instance, if there’s a debate going on about a tax issue in your community, you could pick that as a topic without referencing any particular article.

Suitability to the Publication

Different newspapers have different target audiences. Consider that newspapers can be categorized like this:

- National dailies — USA Today, NY Times, Wall Street Journal
- Regional dailies — Raleigh News and Observer, Charlotte Observer
- Local weeklies or biweeklies — Cary News, Chapel Hill News
- Niche papers — Sporting News, North Carolina Catholic, The Independent

You must consider who reads the paper to which you are submitting your letter. For instance, the big national dailies cover topics primarily of national concern. They aren’t interested in a letter about an issue that is local to your town. However, your regional daily or a town biweekly paper probably would consider your letter.

Niche newspapers are narrowly focused in the news they cover. There are papers that cover sports, religion, or arts and entertainment. If you are writing about an issue that is of interest to a narrow audience, consider sending it to a publication that focuses on that audience.

Widespread Interest

If you decide to write to your regional or national paper, pick a topic of widespread interest. To be sure your topic is of widespread interest consider responding to one of the following:

- An article on the front page
- An item on the front page of a subsection
- A piece by a popular columnist

Many readers often look only at articles on the front page or front page of subsections. So responding to an issue addressed there assures that your letter is of interest to many readers. If you want to comment on an article buried in the middle of the paper, be aware that fewer readers have seen the article and your letter could be less interesting.
Most newspapers have columnists who are widely read. Referring to a piece by a columnist is another good way to be sure your topic appeals to many readers.

**Managing Letter Length**

You may have heard of the KISS principle, **Keep It Simple, Silly.** When you are writing a letter to the editor, it also means **Keep It Short, Seriously.**

Newspapers have a limited amount of space on their editorial page, so a short letter is more likely to be published than a lengthy one. Often the layout of the page leaves only a inch or two of space. A letter as short as two or three sentences is perfect to fill that space. Figure 1 — How a Short Letter Fits shows how a brief letter can fit into limited available space.

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**Your short letter**

Figure 1 — How a Short Letter Fits

Most papers have a length limit on letters. See Table 1 — Length Restrictions and Other Requirements for examples. Newspapers typically print their requirements on the editorial page. Check there if you are concerned that your letter may be too long. Newspapers sometimes waive the letter length limit if you are an expert on an issue. However, for the best chance at being published, keep your letter as short as possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Length Limit (# of words)</th>
<th>Requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA Today</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>Name, address, daytime phone, evening phone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wall Street Journal</td>
<td>None specified</td>
<td>None specified</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Consider the following ways to keep your letter as short as possible:

- Use simple language.
- Use active voice.
- Avoid repetition.

**Simple Language**

One way to reduce the length of your letter is to use simple language. Keep your sentences short and to the point. Avoid unnecessary adjectives and adverbs. Eliminate modifying clauses when possible.

**Active Voice**

Use active voice in your letter. Active voice almost always requires fewer words than passive voice. For instance, compare “John hit the ball.” to “The ball was hit by John.” Active voice also makes the tone of your letter more decisive. You want your letter to have punch and active voice helps you achieve it.

**Avoid Repetition**

When you write your letter, take extra care not to repeat ideas. You might be tempted to rephrase your thoughts in different ways to be more persuasive. However, for the sake of brevity, pick just one way to express your idea.

**Setting the Tone**

Another important aspect of writing a letter to the editor is setting the tone. The tone of your letter affects how your letter will influence those who read it. Do you want them to be angry, or do you want them to smile? Do you want the reader to take some action, or do you just want to express your opinion?

Some possible tones for a letter to the editor are:

- Outrage
- Concern
- Agreement
- Humor

**Outrage**
This one is easy. Newspapers frequently report on people doing egregious actions, such as:

- Politicians accepting bribes
- CEOs getting million dollar bonuses while laying off thousands
- Celebrities making racist comments

If an issue affects you personally, like taxes or school reassignments, it’s easy to express outrage. However, if you can empathize with others, you can be outraged even at actions that don’t impact you directly.

When writing to express outrage, use short sentences. Write with passion. You might even deploy the occasional exclamation point! A letter of outrage isn’t necessarily intended to persuade readers as much as to express your opinion.

Concern

Concern is a bit more subtle than outrage. An issue may be worrying you, but not to the point of anger. For instance, a lost opportunity to purchase land for conservation could bother you, but you aren’t to the point of outrage.

A letter of concern is more intended to influence people. Try to suggest steps that your audience could take to improve a situation. You need a more thoughtful tone when expressing concern.

Agreement

Often you read something in the paper, and you think, “Right on! I’m totally in agreement.” This is particularly true in responding to columnists. If you can express your agreement in a way that expands on what the columnist wrote, this is a good tone for a letter to the editor.

When writing a letter of agreement, use words of praise. Describe how the issue impacts you personally in your explanation of why you agree.

Humor

With so much bad news in the paper, readers appreciate a chance to chuckle or smile, even in someplace unexpected, like the editorial page. If you have a funny idea while reading the paper, consider putting it in a letter. Humor can be controversial, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. Controversy sells papers.

The following are examples of humorous letters that have been published:

- A letter praising rescue dogs that also implies cats are indifferent
- A letter suggesting elected officials travel inconspicuously, rather than cause traffic jams with security shutdowns

Submitting for Publication

Once you have written your letter, it is time to submit it to the newspaper.
Methods for Submitting
There are several methods for submitting a letter to a newspaper. They include:

- E-mail
- Postal mail
- Fax
- Hand delivery

A newspaper prints its address, e-mail address, fax number, and any requirements for publication on the editorial page.

Final Checks Before Submitting
E-mail is the easiest way to submit a letter these days, but before you hit the send key, check the following:

- Did you spell check your letter?
- Did you edit your letter to remove wordiness?
- Did you include your name, and any other information the paper requires?

See Table 1 — Length Restrictions and Other Requirements.

Direct Contact with Reporters or Columnists
Newspapers frequently print the e-mail addresses of columnists or reporters beneath their articles. A backdoor way of being published is to send an e-mail directly to columnists or reporters. If they like what you have to say, they might ask if you would like your letter forwarded to the editor.

Deadlines and Frequency Limitations
If you are submitting to a weekly publication, you may want to find out if it has a submission deadline. For example, a paper that publishes on Wednesday could have a deadline of Monday for letter submissions. Some papers have a limit on how often they will publish a letter from the same person. You should space out your submissions to adhere to their policy.

Letter Archival
Keep a copy of your letter on file. If it is published, you should compare what you wrote to the edited version that appeared in the paper. This can give you clues to improving future letters. If the letter isn’t published, you can refer back to your failed submission as an example of what didn’t work.

Dealing with Consequences of Your Letter
Some possible consequences to having a letter published in the newspaper include:

- Negative consequences
- Comments by friends and family
- Letters in the paper in response to your letter
Negatives Consequences

In the United States and most other Western countries, we have a great deal of freedom of speech. However, a letter to the editor isn’t completely without consequences. Writing something that affects your employer or customers could be ill-advised. For instance, if you are a musician played on country radio, think twice about criticizing a Republican president. If you plan to run for public office, take special care with what you write, as an opponent could try to use your letter against you.

Reactions by Friends and Family

Your friends and family may tell you they saw your letter in the paper. If they agree with you, they may be impressed that you wrote. If they disagree, you now have an opportunity for a lively discussion. Suggest that they submit a letter of their own. Papers often seek to publish a variety of opinions.

Letters in the Newspaper in Response to Your Letter

If you have written a letter that really affects some readers, they may write back to counter your letter. Consider this a good thing. It indicates that your letter mattered enough that they took the time to respond. Don’t respond to their letters. Newspapers aren’t interested in feuds. Move on to another topic.

Contact by Reporter

A reporter may contact you about your letter. If you wish to be interviewed, go ahead and talk to the reporter. Be aware that the reporter is also interviewing people who think differently than you about the issue. You could be quoted and contradicted in the same article.

Request to Join an Organization

After having a letter published, you could be contacted by an organization of people who hold similar opinions. You might be surprised to discover that such an organization exists. Joining an organization can be a good way to become more involved in your community and further the ideas you first wrote about. Consider the time and money involved before committing, even though you are flattered to be asked to join.

Keeping a Record of Your Writing

You could find out that writing letters to the editor is habit forming. Keep copies of any letters that you get published. Also keep copies of any responses to your letters. Re-read them occasionally. You’ll
find yourself asking yourself questions:

- Why did I write this letter?
- How has my opinion changed since I wrote this letter?
- Did any predictions I made in my letter come true?
- Is my funny comment still funny, or is it dated?

Good luck. Go write a letter!

References

_Shut Up and Sing_, Cabin Creek Films, 2006. Documents the consequences for The Dixie Chicks when their lead singer made a remark critical of President Bush.

_Science_ (March 2007). Documents the consequences for The Dixie Chicks when their lead singer made a remark critical of President Bush.

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_The original document is available at http://newsletter.stc-carolina.org/Writing+an+Effective+Letter+to+the+Editor_