

# Writing an Effective Letter to the Editor

Writing a letter-to-the-editor (LTE) of your local or regional newspaper is an effective and easy way to reach a large audience with your message. LTEs are printed on the editorial page, which is one of the most read pages in the paper. Congressional staffers also tell us that members of congress keep a close eye on media coverage, including LTEs, in their local papers so they can keep a 'pulse' on issues of importance to their constituents. Having a strong letter published helps you reach both a wide public audience and your elected officials with the same effort! Even if your letter is not published, it is important for educating and persuading editors. The more letters they receive on a given topic, the more likely they are to dedicate more time in their newspaper to that issue—both on the editorial page and in news articles. It clearly expresses the issue's importance to the community. **Here are some tips to help you write an effective letter and help get it placed:**

1. **Respond to an article in the paper.** The best letters are those that are in response to an article that ran in the paper and many papers require that you reference the specific article. Your letter will have a greater chance of being printed if it is in response to an editorial, op-ed, or front page story. Begin your letter by citing the original story by name, date, and author. Some papers do occasionally print LTEs noting a lack of coverage on a specific issue. If this is the topic you are writing about, begin by stating your concern that the paper hasn't focused on this important issue.
2. **Follow the paper's directions.** Information on how and to whom to submit a letter-to-the-editor is usually found right on the letters page in your paper. This often includes guidelines on what the paper looks for in LTEs. Follow these guidelines to increase the likelihood that your letter will be printed. If you can't find the information you need, simply call the paper and ask how to go about submitting a letter in response to a recently published article.
3. **Be timely.** Respond to an article within two or three days of its publication.
4. **Share your expertise.** If you have relevant qualifications to the topic you're addressing be sure to include that in your letter. If you are a doctor writing about a health issue, a Prius owner writing about hybrid cars, or you are writing about energy issues and you have solar panels on your roof—share that information up front.
5. **Refer to the legislator or corporation you are trying to influence by name.** If your letter includes a legislator's name, in almost all cases staff will give him or her the letter to read personally. Corporations also monitor the media, especially in areas where they have offices or plants. Be sure if you are trying to influence a legislator or corporation that you include the full name in your letter.

6. **Keep your letter short, focused, and interesting.** In general, letters should be under 200 words, 150 or less is best; stay focused on one (or, at the most, two) main point(s); and get to the main point in the first two sentences. If possible include interesting facts, relevant personal experience, and any local connections to the issue. If your letter is longer than 200 words, it will likely be edited or not printed.
7. **Write the letter in your own words.** Editors want letters in their papers to be original and from a reader. Be sure that you take the time to write the letter in your own words.
8. **Refute, advocate, and make a call to action.** Most letters to the editor follow a standard format. Open your letter by refuting the claim made in the original story the paper ran. Then use the next few sentences to back up your claims and advocate for your position. Try to focus on the positive. For example: *According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, investments in renewable energy would bring over \$200 million to our state and create 36,000 jobs by 2020.* Then wrap your letter up by explaining what you think needs to happen now, make your call to action.
9. **Include your contact information.** Be sure to include your name, address, and daytime phone number; the paper will contact you before printing your letter.
10. **Follow-up with your legislator or corporation.** If your letter is printed, and targeted a specific decision maker or corporation, clip out your printed letter and send it to the target with a brief cover note. This way you can be certain that the appropriate decision maker sees it.

## **Tell Congress We Don't Need More Dirty Coal**

Please urge Congress to oppose the construction of new coal-fired power plants unless they feature carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology and to limit testing of CCS to five to 10 demonstration plants until the technology is proven.