



TIPS FOR WRITING EFFECTIVE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The letters sections of newspapers and magazines are prime forums for getting your message to a wide audience. Letters to the editor in local and regional papers are read by local activists, government officials, legislators and many community members.

Your letter can support and expand on something already in the news, make a point that was omitted, or disagree with/correct misinformation from a news story, editorial or another letter.

TO MAXIMIZE YOUR CHANCES OF GETTING PUBLISHED, DO:

- Respond directly either to breaking news or an article or commentary published in the previous two days (for dailies) or the previous issue of a weekly paper/ magazine. Follow the format used in the target publication. The typical format is: Re “Talking With the Taxman,” (national news, Jan. 13). Your report neglected one key fact...
- Focus on one important point (don’t try to address separate issues in one letter). Be sure to follow the guidelines and word count limit of the target publication (up to 250 words is typical for local and regional papers, but many larger newspapers are limited to 150 or so and some magazines limit letters to less than 100 words).
- Maximize your chance of being published by removing every non-essential word. For example, don’t say, “I think...” It’s obvious. This also minimizes the chance of editors changing the letter.
- Use verified facts. Take the time to check original sources rather than repeating “facts” cited in another media outlet.
- Draw from your own experience. Don’t pen a letter that relies on quotes from outside authorities to make its point. We want to hear what you think, not what you read elsewhere.
- Create immediacy by indicating how readers will be affected by the issue you address when possible; try to balance criticism with a positive — ask readers for action when practical. This includes your elected representatives — by including their names in the letter and asking for action, you can get their attention.
- Point people to a source for more information or to engage in action whenever practical.
- When writing to your local newspaper (not recommended for larger city or national publications), follow up with a polite phone inquiry about its status if it doesn’t appear within 4-5 days to ensure it was received and considered.



- E-mail your letter in the body of the email (never send unsolicited attachments) and put “Letter re: your topic or article name” in the subject line. If you wish to copy others or submit to more than one publication, do so in a separate email. Include your name, address and daytime phone number for verification.
- If the publication publishes an online version, hyperlink the relevant websites or emails.
- Pay attention to letters and comments by others. Note effective and ineffective approaches (especially letters that effectively argue a position you oppose), style, length, etc. This will help you improve rapidly.
- Speak in the language and to the literacy level of that publication’s readers.
- Though urls may not be included in print, if your target publication includes links in letters published online, be sure to include the most relevant link(s) in yours.

THINGS TO AVOID:

- Don’t overstate/exaggerate your points. One overstatement makes every following point suspect.
- Don’t insult your opponents.
- Avoid jargon or acronyms (spell out any name the first time you use it, followed by the acronym in parentheses).
- Never use all capital letters or bold text to emphasize a word. It will rarely be printed that way and may prevent your from being considered. You may italicize one or two words, but most papers will print it in plain text regardless — the words must speak for themselves. Use quotation marks to indicate the title of a book, article, etc.

Don’t consider your effort a failure if your letter isn’t used in larger publications (where even the best letters face long odds). Each letter is read and plays some role in molding the thinking and content selection of the editors.

AND “DO” SEND US A COPY OF YOUR LETTER (INFO@FIRSTCALLBC.ORG)!

These letter writing tips were compiled from ReclaimDemocracy.org and The National Post

