

Tips for writing effective letters to the editor

Letters to the editors of local and statewide newspapers are a good way to express your views on an issue while also providing important information to the public. The “Letters to the Editor” section is one of the most popular sections of most newspapers, assuring letter writers a wide audience.

Legislators, local officials and government workers are among the readers of letters to newspapers, providing a means for letting these officials know how the public feels about an issue. A letter can also render a valuable service to the public by providing information and viewpoints that might not be reported in other sections of the newspaper.

In order to be effective, a letter must be well-written and understandable. The following are some tips on writing effective letters to editors, as well as to legislators and other public officials.

- Think about what you want to say before you begin to write: your ideas should be clear in your mind before you put them on paper.
- Limit each letter to just one main topic or issue — if you bring up too many issues your emphasis will be lost from your main concern.
- Make your letter easy to read; short sentences and paragraphs and simple words are best.
- If you voice criticism on an issue or a legislator’s position or past actions, direct the criticism toward that issue or action and not toward those who may disagree with you. Avoid sarcasm. Be firm and friendly.
- Make constructive suggestions, especially if your letter tends to have an overall negative tone. Let readers know what they can do if they agree with your views, such as write to their representatives. Be hopeful and practical.
- Use facts to support your argument, especially facts that have been omitted from articles or editorials about the issue. If appropriate, cite the source of your information.
- Don’t hesitate to use a relevant personal experience to illustrate a point. If presented well, your story can be persuasive and will help readers understand how the issue affects individuals and communities.
- Make your letter as brief as possible. Look in the newspaper to which you plan to send your letter and see what the average length of a letter is. Try to not exceed this length. It is better that your letter be short with you deciding what to include rather than it being too long with the editors deciding what to leave out.
- Proofread your letter, or ask someone to do this for you. Sign your letter and include your address and telephone number. Some newspapers will contact you to verify that you did send the letter.

- Target your letters. Send them to newspapers whose readership will be concerned or affected by the issue, and to newspapers in districts of important legislators.
- Some television and radio stations have forums for the public to express its views. You may also wish to send a letter to these stations, or ask to be allowed to present your point of view.
- Don’t be discouraged if your letter is not printed right away or at all. Larger newspapers often have

more letters than they can print, or may not print more than one or two letters on a certain topic. Even if only one out of 10 letters is printed, you have reached thousands of readers — enough to make your effort worthwhile.

- If the editorial policy of your newspaper is consistently at odds with your views, remember that it is possible to lobby an editor or editorial board just as you would a legislator. Ask for a meeting, invite others who share your views to go with you and go prepared with facts and specific requests.

Writing to legislators

For the most part, the tips listed above also apply when writing letters to legislators and other public officials. Letters should be brief and to the point, contain relevant facts and personal examples, and be focused on one or two key points. Some additional tips to consider when writing to legislators or public officials are:

- If you are a constituent of the official, identify yourself as such. Legislators pay much more attention to letters and telephone calls from citizens living in the districts they represent than to those from outside their districts.
- Be clear about what you are asking the legislator to do, such as co-sponsoring or voting in favor of certain legislation. State why the legislator’s support for a bill is important to his or her district and constituents.



Letters to legislators often are written while a member is in Frankfort, to reinforce a conversation during a lobbying visit or to leave a note for lawmaker who was not available for a meeting.

- If you are familiar with how the legislator has voted on or spoken about the issue you are concerned about, let this be known. For example: “I know you have voted for groundwater protections in the past, and I encourage you to do so again.” Or: “I saw you comment in the newspaper concerning your opposition to tax breaks for the rich. I encourage you to follow through on this by voting against Senate Bill # #.”

- If you have talked to your family or neighbors about your legislative concerns, or have discussed it in a group you are a member of, let this be known. Legislators consider one letter to represent the views of many others who do not write, so letting them know others beside yourself are concerned reinforces this. You may wish to write something like: “I am anxious to let my Sunday School class know your position on this issue,” — and then do it.