

YOUR ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR WITH DIGNITY

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A letter to the editor (LTE) is a message you write to a newspaper or other publication to share your views on a current issue. You may write in response to another news item, an opinion editorial (op-ed), or a previous, recently published letter to the editor in that paper. People write to submit their perspective on an issue they feel is important in their community, state, or country.

Since the mid-eighteenth century, readers have submitted letters to editors to engage in public discourse, and letters remain a powerful tool in the modern world. Writers frequently comment on the role of government in matters of personal freedom, economic development, or other critical policy concerns. Influential writing sometimes gains national attention.

“Consider letters as a barometer of how well (you are) engaging readers or viewers. The more you receive, the more you’re connecting. The fewer you receive, the stronger the sign you are putting the masses to sleep.”

—Ronald D. Clark
St. Paul Pioneer Press

WHY WRITE?

The better question is “Why not write?” LTEs are a fast, cost-free way to get an important issue in front of a lot of people at one time. After the front page, the editorials are one of the most widely read sections of a newspaper. This is particularly true of small, local publications. People want to know about the opinions of others, and the editorial section will often contain informed opinions about current news. LTEs are closely followed by legislators and other policy makers to keep their finger on the pulse of public sentiment and issues of importance to their constituency. The editors of a newspaper may be more inclined to provide journalistic coverage on a public issue if it seems there is a lot of attention being paid to it.

Resources

[Writing Letters to the Editor](#)

[Tips on Writing a Letter to the Editor](#)

[Writing an Effective Letter to the Editor](#)

[Historical Account of Writing Letters to the Editor](#)



TIPS TO CONSIDER

You are passionate about your issue, otherwise you wouldn't be considering an LTE. Of course, one goal is to send a clear message that will move people to take action. You probably already have specific points you *really* want people to understand.

The underlying (and often not considered) goal is to get your letter published. You can write all day long, but unless the editor of a paper accepts your submission, your message won't go anywhere.

Keep these tips in mind while developing your thoughts as you prepare to draft your letter:

- Be civil and respectful in your message by avoiding finger-pointing, blame, or other condemning language.
- Write in first-person.
- Write about a timely issue (nothing says "old news" like old news).
- Make your letter locally relevant (write about how the issue affects you, your community, or your state).
- If including statistics, cite credible sources.
- Write with a specific target in mind (in the case of death with dignity, it might be the loss of a loved one or your own illness that focuses your writing so it resonates with people who have similar experiences).

- Tailor your letter to the paper. Writing to your local publication may have a different feel than if writing to a major national news source.
- Use an organizational affiliation if you have one, and close with an email address and link to your website for people who want more information.
- Target in-state and local community newspapers. You are more likely to get published in a smaller paper than a larger one.
- Submit your letter to *only one paper at a time*. A paper will want exclusive rights to your submission. It's fine to inquire after a few days to let the editor know you would like to try another paper if they won't be publishing your letter ([check here for publications in your state](#)).
- Follow the paper's directions. Learn about your publication's submission process. You may be emailing or using an online submission form ([see this example for the Daily Astorian, a local Oregon newspaper](#)).
- Keep your letter to somewhere between 200–250 words.

DRAFT YOUR LETTER

Every publication has a preferred word count for letters to the editor. Remaining below the maximum word count increases your chance of publication. As a rule of thumb, plan to keep your entire letter to no more than 250 words, spread out over two or three short paragraphs or key

points. It doesn't sound like much, but you can pack a lot of information and persuasive power into a few sentences. This small example is less than 125 words:

1st paragraph: Clearly state your position on the proposed death with dignity bill. Call on committee members and/or other legislators to agree. Include the bill number and title so people can look it up after reading your letter.

"I strongly support [bill number, bill name] sponsored by [legislator's name]. It's time for our legislature to do the same."

2nd paragraph: Write two or three short sentences about why you've taken your position. Make it personally meaningful and locally relevant.

"As a recent widow, I watched my husband suffer immeasurably during the last two weeks of his life. He begged me to help him. He begged his doctor to help him. The legal risks without a death with dignity law made that impossible. He died in agony while I helplessly watched him take his last painful breath. No one in this [state] should have to go through what we went through."

3rd and final paragraph: State you are glad that [ORGANIZATION] is advocating for death with dignity and encourage readers to visit [ORGANIZATION'S WEBSITE] for more information.

"With the support of [local grassroots organization] and [Death with Dignity] we can get this law passed. Learn more at [website information]."

Your contact information is *not* included in word count. Be sure to provide your full contact information in an email submission. It doesn't hurt to include it at the top of your letter when using an online submission form:

- Full first and last name
- Mailing address
- Phone number with area code
- Email address

Editors will use your information to confirm your submission, particularly if they intend to publish it. They may want to verify you are the one who submitted the letter.

Prior to submitting, take some time to mull over your letter. Practice reading it out loud. This will help you catch any typographical or grammatical errors and reveal areas where editing may make it easier for others to read and understand your intent.

Prior to submitting, have someone else read your letter, too. Make final spelling and grammar checks after the last edit and submit your letter according to publication requirements.

It's best to submit on a business day, rather than a weekend day, and generally not on a Friday.

ORGANIZED ADVOCACY

If you want to boost public advocacy, organize your group for a letter-writing campaign. Well-orchestrated submission of LTEs across your state is a powerful way to raise awareness of an important issue, particularly for bringing attention to a legislative bill.

Letters targeted a few days to a week apart across your state have the potential to dramatically increase momentum for your issue ([check here for publications in your state](#)).

Things to think about:

- Choose publications to target different audiences (e.g., a college paper for younger people, a widely read community paper for a geographic location, etc.).
- Pin locations on a state map for your letter campaign to see what areas may not be getting coverage.
- Target populated areas for maximum reach, but don't neglect rural parts of your state. Sometimes the local, rural paper will get news to a remote area that otherwise doesn't have a reach.
- Help write letters for others to submit with their own contact information. This gives people who don't generally write a chance to submit something that reflects their position well and prevents others in your group from being over-publicized (at which point newspapers may stop accepting their letters).

- If your group intends to recycle letters (use the same basic letter in different publications), revise the drafts to ensure they are not identical and ensure you have several different volunteers willing to submit.
- Integrity and an ethical approach to letter-writing is paramount. Under no circumstance should letters be submitted using alias or pen names.

Additional Resources

[Sample letter to the editor 1](#) (Maine)

[Sample letter to the editor 2](#) (New York)

[Sample letter to the editor 3](#) (Kansas)

[Sample letter to the editor 4](#) (Maine)

[Sample letter to the editor 5](#) (New York)

[Sample letter to the editor 6](#) (USA)

[Sample letter to the editor 7](#) (Delaware)