

## Composing Letters to the Editor

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Letters to the editor are great advocacy tools. They reach a large audience. They are often monitored by elected officials. They can bring up information not addressed in a news article. And they can create an impression of widespread opposition or support to an issue or candidate.

Over the years, I have written many letters to the editor, about four-fifths of which (around about 125 to date) have been published. I am often asked for tips on how to write a good letter to the editor (LTE).

The first thing I tell people is to remember that, depending on the newspaper, between only ten and twenty-five percent of letters get printed. Therefore, it is important for writers not to give up if your first attempt does not get printed.

Newspaper editors tend to publish letters that:

1. Are the best single expression of what many people wrote in to say
2. Make some point exceedingly well
3. Bring a unique perspective to an issue
4. Are responding to agree, or to respectfully disagree, to a published LTE, or Opinion-Editorial (OpEd)
5. Are signed by some prominent person
6. Are concise and to the point, without rambling or meandering
7. Are without swearing or other vitriolic language

Every day the news offers us many topics on which to comment. When deciding to write a LTE in order to comment on a current event, timeliness is crucial. Try to submit your letter within two days of the event to have the best chance of your letter being published.

The same holds true for responses to published LTEs or OpEds. Waiting a month to write and submit your letter responding to another author's opinion makes it very unlikely your letter will be published.

Timeliness is less crucial when writing a LTE in support of a candidate or issue. Nevertheless, waiting until ten days before an election to write your LTE in support of a particular candidate or issue makes it more likely your letter will get lost in the crowd. Be one of the first, and you are much more likely to be published.

Some stylistic tips which are useful to remember:

1. Start your letter with "Dear Letters To The Editor"
2. Clearly address the topic on which you are writing within the first sentence or two. Most readers (nor editors) lack the patience to wade through a bunch of extraneous words to reach your point.
3. If you are responding to a previously published LTE or OpEd, clearly refer to it in the first one or two sentences. ("In response to John Smith's editorial published January 1st, ...")

4. If you are writing to disagree with a previously published piece, briefly state the argument you're rebutting in the first one or two sentences. A lengthy rehash only leaves you with fewer words to make your case, and may cause the reader to remember instead the opinion you're rebutting.
5. Make one concise, easy to follow argument. Attempting to make too many points weakens all of them.
6. If you are responding as a "person of authority" (such as a teacher responding to an article about education reform), mention your profession very early in your letter.
7. Don't be afraid to let some passion, and some poetry, show through.
8. Don't be shrill, or abusive. No personal attacks. Stifle the urge to use juvenile name-calling. Such techniques just about guarantee your efforts at getting published will have been wasted.
9. Use facts, figures, and expert testimony whenever possible.
10. Close your letter with a short restatement of your position, a "take home message" for the reader. Try to end memorably, tying your concerns to the concerns of other readers when possible.
11. Proofread your letter carefully for errors in punctuation, spelling, and grammar. Editors will usually edit to correct such mistakes, but your work is more likely to be published if already "clean".
12. Read your letter to a friend or spouse, for objective input.
13. Read your letter from the reader's perspective. Will the arguments make sense to someone without a special background on this issue? Did you use technical terms unfamiliar to the average reader?
14. Put the letter aside overnight. Rereading your letter in the fresh light of a new day often helps you to spot stilted language and errors in reasoning, and allows for the possibility of new and better phrasing.

And, finally, a few tips on etiquette:

1. Do not exceed the newspaper's stated word-limit.
2. Always include your name, address, and day-time phone number at the end of the piece. The newspapers will not publish this information. Editors are on guard about fake identities, and sometimes will wish to contact writers personally to confirm authorship before publishing.
3. When emailing your letter in to the newspaper, put "LTE" or "Letter To The Editor" in the subject line.
4. Patience is a virtue. The typical turnaround time for a submitted letter to be published is 3 to 10 days. If your letter has not appeared within 2 weeks, it is unlikely to have been chosen. Do not attempt to call or repetitively email the editors to "check on" your letter; this will only decrease your letter's chance of being published.

Happy writing!

Submission Addresses:

- Eugene Register-Guard: [rgletters@registerguard.com](mailto:rgletters@registerguard.com) (250 word limit)
- Eugene Weekly: [editor@eugeneweekly.com](mailto:editor@eugeneweekly.com) (200 word limit)
- Oregonian: [letters@oregonian.com](mailto:letters@oregonian.com) (150 word limit)