

# Writing a Letter to the Editor

Letters to the editor (LTEs) of your local or regional newspapers are an effective and easy way to get your message in front of a large audience. The editorial page is one of the most-read pages in any newspaper, and members of Congress keep a close eye on local media coverage, including LTEs, in order to “take the pulse” of issues important to their constituents.

Even if your letter is not published, it will help educate and persuade editors. The more letters they receive on a given topic, the clearer its importance to the community will become, resulting in more space dedicated to that issue—both on the paper’s editorial page and in news articles.

Here are the seven elements of writing an effective LTE:

1. **Respond to an article in the paper.** Your letter will have a greater chance of being printed if it is in response to an editorial, op-ed, or front-page story. Many papers even require you to reference a specific article, so begin your letter by citing the original story’s title, date, and author. Some papers do occasionally print LTEs that call attention to a lack of coverage on a specific issue; if this is the case with your topic, begin by stating your concern that the paper hasn’t adequately addressed this important issue.
2. **Follow the paper’s directions.** Information on how and where to submit an LTE is usually found right on the editorial page, often including guidelines on what the paper looks for in LTEs. If you can’t find the information, simply call the paper and ask how to submit a letter in response to a recently published article.
3. **Share your expertise.** If you have relevant qualifications on the topic you’re addressing (e.g., you are a Prius owner writing about hybrid cars), be sure to include that in your letter.
4. **Refer to the legislator, policymaker, or corporation you are trying to influence by name.** If your letter includes a legislator’s name, in almost all cases they will be given the letter to read personally. Government agencies and corporations also monitor the media, especially in areas

where they have offices or facilities. Be sure to use each legislator’s, policymaker’s, or corporation’s full name.

5. **Write the letter in your own words.** Editors, like all journalists, value authenticity and originality.
6. **Refute, advocate, and make a call to action.** Most LTEs follow a standard format. Open your letter by refuting the claim made in the original story, then use the next few sentences to back up your claims and advocate for your position. Try to focus on the positive, using data whenever possible. For example: “According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, investments in renewable energy would bring more than \$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—your call to action.
7. **Include your contact information.** The paper will let you know if it is going to publish your letter, so be sure to include your name, address, and daytime phone number.

## Additional Tips and Resources

- Keep your letter short (150 words or fewer is best); letters longer than 200 words will likely be edited or not printed. Focus on one or two main point(s) at the most, and get to the point in the first two sentences. If possible, include interesting facts, relevant personal experience, and any local connections to the issue.
- Be timely. Respond to an article within two or three days of its publication.
- If your letter is published, and targets a specific legislator, policymaker, or corporation, clip out the printed letter and send it to the target with a brief cover note. This way you can be certain that the appropriate decisionmaker sees it.

If you have any questions as you draft your letter to the editor, or to learn more about the Union of Concerned Scientists Science Network, email [ScienceNetwork@ucsusa.org](mailto:ScienceNetwork@ucsusa.org).

FIND THIS DOCUMENT ONLINE: [www.ucsusa.org/scientisttoolkit](http://www.ucsusa.org/scientisttoolkit)