

## Tool 7: How to Write Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor

Most newspapers accept op-eds, which are opinion pieces written by readers that tie to a breaking or current issue, and letters to the editor (LTE's), which are short pieces written in response to a story the outlet has recently published. For both op-eds and LTE's, it is essential to submit them quickly, as soon as an issue arises. A publication may only run one op-ed on a particular topic, and there may be several people submitting op-eds at the same time—so being first is key. Often, multiple letters to the editor will run in the same issue, especially if there was a strong negative opinion from readers on a particular story.

### How to Write an Op-Ed

#### 1. Identify your reasons for writing an op-ed

Do you need to raise voter support for legislation or favorable policies for safe sidewalks and streets? Are you trying to increase awareness of the benefits of walking? Understanding the reasons for writing the op-ed will help you hone the message and main points you should stress in the text.

#### 2. Target your audience

Knowing your audience (policy makers, parents, youth, etc.) will help you decide which outlet to target.

#### 3. Know the rules

Identify where you plan to submit your op-ed, and the requirements of the outlet. In most cases, the outlet will have a limit on word count—usually between 500 and 800 words. Submissions must also be original and exclusive to that outlet. Time the submission of your op-ed to coordinate with events or dates that stress your message.

#### 4. Consider your “ask”

Now consider the objective of your op-ed. Your piece should provoke discussion, controversy, and response. What do you want your target audience to do?

#### 5. Start backwards

Focus on one issue in your op-ed and one clear action that you will ask for at the end. Support your conclusion with three key points. Devote one paragraph to each supporting point. This paragraph breakdown will help maintain your focus and aid in effective organization of the op-ed as a unified piece.

#### 6. Consider the opposition

Identify and discuss the opposing side to your argument. Counter the opposing arguments with facts, and point out other weaknesses in the opponents' message. Explain why your position is stronger.

#### 7. Create a strong opening

Your opening line should not let your reader turn the page. Importance should be placed on drawing the reader into the article and making the reader review the entire article.

The article should also end with a bang, not a yawn. Drive the point home and sum up the argument.

#### 8. Offer a clear rationale to the media outlet

Submit your op-ed with a letter that provides your contact information and reasons why your article is timely and relevant to readers. Collaborating with a relevant public figure, policy maker, executive director or advocate may maximize its impact on the audience.

#### 9. Keep asking

If you have not heard back from an outlet after three business days, it is safe to assume that they will not run your piece. If you do get your piece published, make sure to thank the outlet. If your piece is not run, do not give up. Try different angles, different outlets, and different time periods to run your op-ed. Keep your information updated with changing events and public perceptions.

### How to Write a Letter to the Editor

Letters to the editor can be written any time you want to shape public opinion, tell others how you feel about people, programs or ideas, or just inform the public on a certain issue. They are a great way to increase awareness of the issues that you or your organization are working on, as well as to advocate for your cause.

Letters to the editor can also be used to start a community conversation about an issue that is important to you. A planned series of letters to the editor can stimulate public interest and media coverage. It's up to you to determine when is the best time to start writing the letters, but be sure to allow time for them to be published.

The larger the newspaper or magazine, the more competition there is for letters-to-the-editor space. This means that your letter will need to stand out in order to get printed. The tips in this section will help you write a letter that will be effective and stand out on the editor's desk.

Generally, shorter letters have a better chance of being published. If you have a lot to say and it can't easily be made short, you may want to check with the editor to see if you could write a longer opinion feature or guest column.

#### *Anatomy of a letter to the editor*

1) Salutation: Don't worry if you don't know the editor's name. A simple "To the Editor of the *Daily Sun*," or just "To the Editor:" is sufficient. If you have the editor's name, however, you should use it to increase the possibility of your letter being read.

2) Write a strong opening: Your opening sentence is very important. It should tell readers what you're writing about, and make them want to read more. Don't make the editor or the reader wait to find out what you want to say. Tell them your key point at the beginning.

3) Explain the issue: Many people may not be familiar with the issue, so include the basics. Explain the issue and its importance simply. Use plain language that most people will understand. Provide supporting points or data to back up your arguments.

4) **Make your “ask”:** In closing, offer suggestions about what could be done to improve the situation. Be sure to be specific—the more good reasons you can give to back up your suggestions, the more likely people are to take your assertions seriously.

5) **Sign the letter:** Be sure to write your full name (and title, if relevant) and include your address, phone number and e-mail address. Newspapers won't print anonymous letters, though in some cases they may withhold your name on request. They may also call you to confirm that you wrote the letter before they publish it.

### How to Increase the Chances of Your Letter Being Published

How likely your letter is to be published depends to a certain extent on the publication you're sending it to. *The New York Times* probably receives hundreds if not thousands of letters a day, only ten or so of which make it into print. A small-town newspaper, on the other hand, may print every letter it gets, since it may only receive two or three letters a day.

In general, newspapers and magazines will publish letters that are well written and articulate, and that either represent specific points of view on an issue or thoughtfully analyze complex issues and events. Most publications stay away from publishing rants, although they may publish short-and-to-the-point letters that make the same points as a rant might, but in a much calmer and more rational way. Publications also tend to stay away from attacks on particular people (although not necessarily from criticizing the actions of politicians and other public figures), and avoid anything that might possibly be seen as libel. Legally, libel is the publication of a false statement about someone that damages that person's reputation.

### Helpful Tips for Getting Your Letters Accepted by the Editor

- Keep your letter under 300 words. Editors have limited space for printing letters, and some papers have stated policies regarding length (check the editorial page for this).
- Make sure your most important points are stated in the first paragraph. Editors may need to cut parts of your letter and they usually do so from the bottom up.
- Refer to a recent event in your community or to a recent article – make a connection and make it relevant.
- Use local statistics and personal stories to better illustrate your point.
- Make sure you include your title as well as your name – it adds credibility, especially if it's relevant to the topic being discussed. If you are a program director, your title may lend credibility to the letter. Including your title is also important to show that you're not trying to hide your interest in the topic. If you're a program director and you don't mention that in your letter, there may be a letter the next day accusing you of dishonesty for not revealing it.
- Editors may want to contact you, so include your phone number and e-mail address.

- Coordinate with other members of your community and submit multiple letters on the same issue, to demonstrate the breadth and diversity of those in the area who care about the issue.
- If your letter is not accepted the first time around, try again. You might submit a revised version with a different angle on the issue at a later date.

## Sample Letter to the Editor

Salutation: Dear (NAME):

Lead: I am writing in response to your recent story on the growing obesity epidemic in our country. Our organization (NAME) is working directly to help our community and the people who live here become healthier.

Supporting point #1: With more than X percent of people in (LOCATION) being overweight or meeting obesity criteria, we have to take action quickly. When people carry extra weight, their likelihood of getting a variety of illnesses such as diabetes, stroke, heart attack and depression increase, according to the American Heart Association.

Supporting point #2: There is one good solution to the issue, for which the U.S. Surgeon General recently advocated: people walking a little bit every day. The challenge in (LOCATION) is that we do not have enough safe places for people to walk.

Address the opposition: Some people say that creating better places will not encourage people to walk, and our research shows that to be untrue. People are shown to walk when there are trails, sidewalks and scenic routes.

Supporting point #3: With less than X percent of (LOCATION) providing this desired setting, we are calling in local officials to support our plan to create a more walkable (LOCATION). The plan calls for X, Y and Z. We have presented it to (GOVERNING BODY) and eagerly await their approval and funding for capital projects.

The ask: We encourage residents to contact their local representatives to demand better places for walking. In addition to helping keep us healthy, it helps us stay better connected to our families, friends and neighbors. We believe that when we walk more, we connect more.

Signature: Sincerely,  
NAME  
TITLE  
EMAIL and PHONE

## Template

Element	Example	Your letter to the editor
<b>Salutation</b>	Dear (NAME)	
<b>Opening</b>	Make it timely and relevant by tying it to recent coverage	
<b>Supporting point #1</b>	Ideas, facts and data	
<b>Supporting point #2</b>	Ideas, facts and data	
<b>Supporting point #3</b>	Ideas, facts and data	
<b>How to address the opposition</b>	You may address the opposition in the body of your letter, along with any of your supporting points, or even use it as your opening (e.g., Their recent article says that people will not walk even if we create new space in XYZ. National research shows that people will walk if they have scenic routes, trails and safe sidewalks.)	
<b>Make the ask</b>	What specifically do you want readers to do?	
<b>Sign the letter</b>	Name, title and contact information. The letter can have multiple signatures.	