

Print Media

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Letters to the editor

More people read letters to the editor than almost any other section in the newspaper, especially in smaller communities. So they are a great way to spread the word about important issues. Remember—elected officials and other policy makers typically keep an eye on letters to the editor as a way of gauging public opinion.

Letters to the editor should be short and to the point (usually 250 to 500 words). Make your first sentence catchy and you will hook more readers. Include your telephone number or email address if you want to recruit others to your cause.

When writing your letter to the editor, remember these tips:

- **Be brief.** Newspapers will often specify a maximum length. If not, check out the other letters in your paper to get an idea. If a letter is too long, it will be edited and you could lose some of your most important facts and ideas.
- **Reference your letter to current events.** If possible, refer to a recent news story or an article that has appeared in the newspaper. Tie your subject into what is happening

in your state or community.

- **Skip the form letters.** Mass mailings of form letters are obvious and usually less likely to get published.
- **Include solutions.** For example, connect readers to an innovative new approach to the problem you are addressing. Always stress the possibilities, not just the problems.
- **Give your address and phone number.** Most newspapers will verify your identity before they will print a letter. Most will not publish anonymous letters.

Op-ed articles

Op-ed pieces or guest editorials are printed on the editorial page and represent the views of an individual or organization, usually someone who is considered an “expert” on the topic or issue they are addressing. Typically, guest editorials range from 500 to 800 words. If well thought-out and well-written, they can have a major impact on policy makers, journalists and the general public.

Writing an editorial may be easier than you think. Ask yourself why the public should support your issue. Consider using the information and statistics you have at your disposal, both

Remember:

A letter to the editor is from a personal perspective, representing the opinion of the person who wrote it or the agency they represent. Make sure an organization wants you to represent them in print before you write a letter on their behalf!

locally and from state and national reports. Your goal is to educate and persuade. Be clear, concise and to the point. Avoid overly emotional or sentimental appeals.

Here are some tips for writing your guest editorial:

- Keep your words, sentences and paragraphs short.
- Avoid acronyms, technical phrases and jargon that may confuse the reader. Avoid rhetoric and back up assertions with facts.
- Ask someone who knows nothing about your issue to proof your article before you submit it. If it makes sense to them, it will probably make sense to the average newspaper reader.

Distributing your op-ed article

Most newspapers have an op-ed page editor who decides which editorials get published. You may not get published on your first try. Be persistent. It is also a good idea to send your article to the reporter who covers children's issues as well. It may prompt them to write a related article. If your editorial piece is printed, make copies and distribute them to policy makers. Share your work with colleagues in other areas; it will help encourage them to submit their own guest columns or letters.

Getting supportive editorials

Readers of newspaper editorial pages are often decision-makers and opinion leaders so this is a great way to reach and influence a powerful audience. Most newspapers take editorial positions on important local, state and

national issues, although small newspapers frequently focus on local issues or how larger issues affect the local community. It can be a great boon to your organization or cause to have a positive editorial position taken by your local newspaper. Getting such coverage and endorsements is not as impossible as people think. Here are some helpful suggestions:

Schedule a meeting with the editorial board. Editorial boards typically consist of the publisher, editor-in-chief, managing editor, editorial page editor and editorial writers. Editorial boards provide you the chance to meet the paper's staff and more importantly, to discuss your organization and its key issues.

Be prepared. Editorial board members are busy people so it is important to be organized and to the point in your presentation. Prepare no more than three to five points that outline why the paper should support your issue and provide background information and data, if available. (Newspaper staff love data and statistics.) Prepare a brief handout (one to two pages) that also gives the name and telephone number of your spokesperson for follow-up questions. You will be much more effective if you have read the paper's editorials and are familiar with its previous positions, particularly on children's issues. Refer to those that will help your case.

Maximize the use of supportive editorials. Frame them and hang them on your wall (if restaurants can do it, so can child advocates.) Make copies and send them to your elected officials. Editorial endorsements of candidates often determine the outcome of an election so elected officials are keenly interested in what their newspaper's

Insider Tip:

To get to know an editor and his views on children's issues, invite him/her to speak at a function. The editor will have to get up to speed on your program and organization in order to address the group. Plus, you can ask about his/her experiences with child care or education. You will learn a lot about his/her opinions.

ACTION AGENDA

Making your editorial board meeting a success

- **Be prepared.** Your ability to clearly state the background and significance of your issue or program is critical. If you don't know the details and background on the issue, bring a staff person who does.
- **Be enthusiastic.** Personal demeanor and non-verbal clues can reveal much about an advocate's commitment and sincerity. If you are excited about a program or passionate about an issue, they should see that in your body language and tone of voice.
- **Be honest.** If you are unsure of the answer to a question, say so, but offer to provide the needed information immediately after the meeting. If there are problems or unresolved issues with a program, admit it. Don't dodge the issue. They will forgive you for almost anything but dishonesty.
- **Focus on your goal.** Editorial writers are paid to be skeptical and to see behind public relations gimmicks. Sometimes they are friendly. Sometimes they are not. Your goal is to get a favorable editorial written about your issue or to diffuse a potentially negative perspective they may have already had. If the meeting becomes a battle of wits and the board seems stacked against your issue, do not get angry or accusatory. Stay focused on your agenda.
- **Stick to the issue.** Don't get sidetracked with unrelated issues. Most editorials deal with one issue. Provide plenty of background but don't get too far off the subject.
- **Ask for their support.** Like any good sales presentation, it's important to close the deal. Summarize what you've told them and ask for their support.
- **Say thanks!** After the meeting, promptly send a thank you note to the board members—even if they never write about your issue. It's simply good public relations.

Insider Tip: Most publications will cover events within a 100-mile radius so you can seek publicity in several publications. Don't forget city/county magazines or small county weekly newspapers.

editorial board thinks. It is also helpful to send copies of editorials to state or national advocacy organizations for use in their efforts. If an editorial board is not interested in taking a position on your issue, thank the group for its time and ask if they will print a guest editorial for you instead.

Other print opportunities

Most newspapers, television and radio stations have numerous opportunities for organizations to post advance notice on events at no charge. Check with each organization for the proper forms and procedures. The forms typically outline submission deadlines and when the information will appear.

Insider Tip: Have general articles on child welfare ready to go for publications that need to ‘fill in the gaps.’ Be familiar with the publication to get a feel for what—and how—they want to present issues to their readers.

Here is a sampling of the types of forums available in many newspapers (*these sections appear specifically in the Tallahassee Democrat, although variations of these appear in papers throughout the country*):

Event Calendars covering recreation and entertainment events, art shows, museum exhibits, organization and government meetings, classes, seminars, self-help and support groups, and professional development opportunities.

Applause or **Good for You** forums announce personal and/or organizational accomplishments and can be accompanied by a photograph. Sometimes appear in the Business section or Local news.

Good Deeds forums recognize local service projects and benevolent gifts. Often accompanied by a photograph.

Caring Connection forum announces fundraising events for charitable causes.

Organizational newsletters and community magazines

Don’t overlook newsletters of organizations and magazines within your community. Many local groups produce regular newsletters—most are monthly or quarterly. Approach organizations with related missions to see if they are interested in an article from you or your organization for their newsletter. As with newspaper submissions, find out the deadlines, appropriate person to submit items to and any length requirements.

Remember, most newsletters and magazines will not publish something that has already appeared in another publication. Vary the article each time and try to target the interest and focus of the newsletter’s organization. For

example, if the organization is a child abuse prevention group and you represent child care, you might explain how these issues are connected.

Although it is good to link your submissions to current events, also consider topics that are not “time sensitive.” Many small publications have limited staff and resources and are eager for material to fill space during slow times. It’s good to have a general piece on child welfare to fill the gaps.