

Tips for writing letters to the editor

- ◆ Letters to the editor are one of the most effective and least expensive ways of getting publicity. Readership surveys show the letters pages to be among the best-read sections.
- ◆ Large dailies receive so much correspondence that the competition for space on the letters page is stiff. Community papers, though, depend upon letter-writers to fill their editorial pages, so your chances of being published there are much better.
- ◆ Respond ASAP: The same day as an offending story is best for a daily paper, within a day or two for a weekly. Many papers prefer to receive letters via e-mail.
- ◆ Keep it *brief*. Most published letters are fewer than 200 words. If you can have your say in 100 words, so much the better. If they are too long, the editor will cut them—and they may cut the best parts.
- ◆ Make your argument clearly, dealing with only one or two main points, and avoid BCTF jargon. Check your facts and spelling for accuracy.
- ◆ Maintain a polite, professional tone. Use strong, but never offensive, language to attack the argument, not the writer.
- ◆ Feel free to use humour and satire in your letters.
- ◆ Letters to the editor are most often written in response to inaccurate news or biased editorials/columns, but they also can (and should) be used to praise good reporting and to advance the public debate from teachers' point of view. You can start off a letter by praising something the reporter covered—and then add your point.
- ◆ Never attack a reporter by name—newspapers rarely print such letters because the reporter can't respond. You can, however, name a columnist, as they write opinions.
- ◆ Editors are looking for clever, compelling writing. Work on having your first sentence as creative as possible—funny, ironic, forceful, using a metaphor or comparison to some other event or issue which strengthens your message.
- ◆ Read the letters that your local paper publishes and see if there are any common elements to them and then try to include those elements in your letter. Editors have their own styles and preferences—if you ignore these you may hurt your chances.
- ◆ Try and get other teachers in your local involved. If you write a letter and the minister responds, the editor probably will not give you another rebuttal, but someone else can keep the debate going.

A basic outline for letters to the editor

Feel free to adapt this outline to suit your local purposes and your personal writing style. Let your distinctive voice be heard loud and clear.

Editor
The Daily News
1234 Main Street
Our Town, B.C.

Dear Mr. or Ms. So-and-So:

I am writing in response to “Title of the contentious article,” (date of publication).

Why are you responding? Make the connection between the story and your issue or point of view. Establish your credibility to comment on the issue.

As a teacher/union leader/parent/concerned member of this community, I am delighted by your coverage/concerned about this issue/outraged by your story, etc., because ...

Offer facts or background to support your point. Use the writer’s words against her or him. Turn their quotes upside down to make your point.

Your story reports XYZ. On the contrary, studies show that ABC is actually true.

Conclude with a call to action or a rhetorical question to further the public debate from your perspective.

Sincerely,

Your name in full
President (if you are one... or just teacher and district)
Our Local Teachers’ Association/Union

Don’t forget to include your e-mail address at the end. Most papers may want to check to see you are a real person, not some made-up political staffer.