

**LETTER TO THE
EDITOR
HANDOUTS**

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

A **letter to the editor** is the simplest way to communicate an opinion to the general public. The chances of having the letter printed greatly increases at smaller or less prominent newspapers or magazines. On average, many local papers publish up to 80 percent of the letters they receive. Of course, if you hope to have the letter published in *The New York Times*, then it will compete against hundreds or thousands of other letters.

The most important caveat is to write a letter no longer than what the target newspaper tends to publish. A much longer letter is more likely to be disregarded, and if it is not disregarded, it is the editor who will decide what information to cut out in order to fit the length requirements. Short, pithy pieces are best.

Before you begin writing your letter, look at the editorial pages of different newspapers. Often, specifications on writing letters to the editor will be on this page. If not, follow these general tips.

- **Respond quickly.** If you see something in the paper that you want to respond to, try to send your letter by the next day, at the latest.
- **Mention your reason for writing, preferably in the first sentence.** If you are responding directly to an article you read in the publication, state the article's headline and publication date. If you are commenting on a local or current event, be specific about the issue or event.
- **Be brief and concise.** Limit the content to one or two key points. A letter to the editor offers the chance for a concise statement on a subject, not an in-depth analysis. Focus on the one message you want readers to get from your letter. Limit yourself to 250 words or less.
- **Refer to other stories.** If possible, refer to other articles, editorials or letters the newspaper has recently published. This should be done as soon as possible after the article was published. This will increase its chances of being printed.
- **Take a strong position.** Letters Section editors look for fresh facts, honest statements of opinion and creative slants on the news. If you can, include a compelling fact that shows the urgency or importance of your issue. Include a call to action.
- **Include contact information.** Include your name, address, and phone number so the paper can contact you with any questions. Also, include any titles or degrees that are relevant to help the media know you have expertise. And make sure to refer to your organization in your letter.

TRY IT OUT: LETTER TO THE EDITOR WORKSHEET

Using the newspaper on your table, look for an article that relates to an issue you are advocating for and write a letter to the editor relating back to that article. Here is a sample letter to the editor format that may help you organize your ideas. You can use some or all of these sentence ideas in your letter, but try to use your own language as much as possible.

Letter to the Editor

[Newspaper name]

[Newspaper address, fax, or email]

[Date]

Dear Editor:

Yesterday, you reported that _____.

This is [timely/interesting/ironic] because _____.

As a [parent/teacher/physician/community member/voter], my perspective is _____.

What people don't realize is _____.

One thing that could really make a difference is _____.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

[Your Name, address, and phone number]

**MEDIA INTERVIEW
AND SOUNDBITE
HANDOUTS**

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A MEDIA INTERVIEW

- **What is your goal with this interview?**
 - Know the one, two, or three (max) key points you want to make and have simple facts and figures ready to support those points. Don't worry about repetition. Use every opportunity to try and restate your three main points.
- **Who is your audience?**
 - Knowing your audience is important because it will affect what you say and how you say it. Ex. You would speak differently to a group of kids that you would to a group of adults Or if you are a cancer control person used to speaking with medical professionals and you were asked to do a morning radio show interview, you would want to use different language--non-clinical, more everyday.
 - Along those lines, stay away from jargon and abbreviations.
- **Who is your interviewer? What is the format?**
 - Take time to learn a little bit about the person doing the interviewing – Is the person a seasoned health/political reporter or a rookie?
 - Don't assume that the reporter knows a lot about the topic. Some general assignment reporters cover multiple beats.
 - Don't assume that the reporter read the materials that you gave them as background.
 - Remember that ultimately, you are talking to your audience, not the reporter.
 - Discuss the format of the interview—live, taped, other guests, etc.
- **Learn to Bridge – takes practice.**
 - You will often be asked questions that don't get to the points you want to make or that you don't wish to answer or know how to answer. You can use "bridging" to turn the questions to your points. Listen for a larger issue behind the question and an opportunity to make your point. Bridging phrases include: "Your question brings up another interesting point..." and "however, it's also important to note that..." and also "I'd like to add that..." or "What the public really needs to know about this issue is..."
- **Know that you are always on the record.**
 - Anything you might say could end up in a story. A reporter may try and use "off the record" to get you to say something you don't want to say.
- **Anticipate Questions.**
 - Try and determine what questions might be asked at the interview and practice your answers.

TALKING TO A REPORTER: GROUND RULES FOR TRAINERS

On the Record: Everything you say can be attributed to you, either with direct quotes or paraphrased. Unless you say otherwise at the start of your interview or at the beginning of a particular question, everything will be on the record.

On Background: You can be quoted directly, although your name can not be used; your status may be used (i.e., “a high official,” “a company officer,” etc.)

On Deep Background: Same as background, but no direct quotes can be used.

Off the Record: There can be no direct or indirect quote of the information provided, nor can any of the information provided be attributed in any way to you, either by the use of your name or indirectly. But the information may be sought or confirmed.

Not for Attribution: Technically, not for attribution suggests that the material can be used but without naming the speaker. Thus a source becomes an "Exxon-Mobil spokesman" or "a Microsoft executive who preferred not to be named." The organization's name suggests the authenticity of the quote and can always be tracked back to the source.

TALKING TO A REPORTER

Choose Your Words Carefully

- Never assume anything is “OFF THE RECORD.”
There is no such thing as an “off the record” comment.
- If you don’t want to see it in print, don’t say it.
- Don’t say more than you know to be true.

Set Ground Rules

- Ask questions about why they are doing the story.
- Find out if they have an angle.
- Establish the reporter’s deadline and respect it.

Be Helpful

- Offer facts and keep an open dialogue.
- Establish yourself as a trusted, credible resource.
- Give them as much information as they need.
- If you don’t know the answer, say so. Then find someone who does.
ASAP. (“Tis better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt.” -- Abraham Lincoln)

Tell the Truth

- Honesty *is* the best policy.
- Credibility is the key to building relationships with reporters.
- The truth is easier to remember.

Get Your Message Out

- A news story is a public forum.
- View each reporter’s call as an opportunity to tell your story.
- You can use the press to speak to various audiences.

STICKY SITUATIONS

What do you do when questions come up that you either cannot or do not wish to answer?

Honesty is the Best Policy

- Explain why you can't talk about it, e.g. litigation.
- Credibility is the key to building relationships with reporters.
- Being up-front builds trust. Evasiveness erodes it. Outright lying destroys it.

Try to Help

- If possible, give them something they can use in the interview.
- Offer facts and keep an open dialogue.

Never say: "NO COMMENT."

- In the public's mind, it's a confirmation of guilt.

"ATM"

- Answer the way you want to
- Acknowledge it - Tame it – Transition back to the Message
- **Transition statements**
 - "I don't spend a lot of energy..."
 - "I don't get confused..."
 - "I think what's really important to remember is..."
 - "It just goes with the territory here in Washington/in the government..."

WORKING WITH A REPORTER: FATAL FLAWS

- **Being defensive**
Make the reporter catch up to you. Don't let them put you on the ropes.
- **Using your own jargon**
Stay away from complexity. By giving too much information, you will lose your message. Even if the reporter asks you a question using jargon, don't answer them back in jargon.
- **Following the reporter**
It's your interview, not the reporter's. You can't control what the reporter will ask you, but you can control what you will say. You must protect your own interests and do not repeat the negative.
- **Off the cuff comments can kill you**
- **If you know there is quicksand, don't get in**
- **No show is a no go**
Make sure you use the opportunity to state your view and get it out there.
- **Silver bullet**
One size fits all answers do not work. When a reporter is wanting and expecting more, not getting it really makes them mad.

WORKING WITH A REPORTER: WHAT WORKS

- **Good media is good manners**
- **Reach your viewers where they are, not where you think they should be**
- **Every Interview is an Opportunity**

The only reason to talk to a reporter is to talk through them. You are not having a conversation with them, you are talking to your audience; the reporter is just the medium.
- **Don't be evasive, be protective**
- **Land the first punch**
- **There are no throw away questions**
- **On Tough Questions, "ATM"**
 - Answer the way you want to
 - Acknowledge it - Tame it – Transition back to the Message
- **Transition statements**
 - "I don't spend a lot of energy..."
 - "I don't get confused..."
 - "I think what's really important to remember is..."
 - "It just goes with the territory here in Washington/in the government..."