

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Writing a Letter to the Editor is an easy way to share your thoughts about an issue. If you feel strongly about why an issue is important to the health of Arkansans, a Letter to the Editor is an easy way to share your thoughts. Letter should be short and to the point in order to ensure the message is heard

OPEN THE LETTER WITH A SIMPLE SALUTATION

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

GRAB THE READER'S ATTENTION

Your opening sentence is very important. It should tell readers what you're writing about, and make them want to read more. A straightforward title tells the reader what you are writing about.

EXPLAIN WHAT THE LETTER IS ABOUT AT THE START

Throughout your letter, remember the rules:

- Be quick,
- Be concise, and then
- Be quiet.

Don't make the editor or the general public wait to find out what you want to say. Tell them your key point at the beginning.

EXPLAIN WHY THE ISSUE IS IMPORTANT

If you are motivated enough to write a letter to a newspaper or magazine, the importance of your topic may seem clear to you. Remember, though, that the general public probably doesn't share your background or the interest. Explain the issue and its importance simply. Use plain language that most people will understand.

GIVE EVIDENCE FOR ANY PRAISE OR CRITICISM

If you are writing a letter discussing a past or pending action, be clear in showing why this will have good or bad results. For example, tell the reader why it's important that Arkansas water stay fluoridated for the health of all Arkansans.

STATE YOUR OPINION ABOUT WHAT SHOULD BE DONE

You can write a letter just to "vent," or to support or criticize a certain action or policy, but you may also have suggestions about what could be done to improve the situation. If so, be sure to add these as well. Be specific. And the more good reasons you can give to back up your suggestions, the better.

KEEP IT BRIEF

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

SIGN THE LETTER

Be sure to write your full name (and title, if relevant) and to 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.

CHECK YOUR LETTER TO MAKE SURE IT'S CLEAR AND CONCISE

A newspaper may not print every letter it receives, but clear, well-written letters are likely to be given more serious consideration.

HOW DO YOU GET YOUR LETTERS ACCEPTED?

How likely your letter is to be published depends to a certain extent on the publication you're sending it to and how many letters they receive a day. In general, newspapers and magazines will publish letters that are well-written and that either represent specific points of view on an issue, or that thoughtfully analyze complex issues and events. Most publications stay away from publishing rants, and prefer to publish short-and-to-the-point letters that make the same points in a calmer and more rational way. Publications also tend to stay away from attacks on particular people (although not from criticism of the actions of politicians and other public figures), and 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. Thus to falsely accuse someone of a crime would be libel; to inaccurately print that someone had won an award would not be.

Here are a few helpful tips for getting your letters accepted by the editor:

- Keep your letter to absolutely no more than 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.
- Editors may want to contact you, so include your phone number and e-mail address.
- 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.

You do not have to be the only one to write the letter: letters are often published with multiple signers. You also don't have to be the only one to write *a* letter. Several people may write letters on the same topic, and submit them a few days apart, so that the issue stays on the Letters page for a period of time.

Material adapted from the KU Work Group for Community Health and Development. (2015). Chapter 3, Section 10: Conducting Concerns Surveys. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas. Retrieved September 7, 2015, from the Community Tool Box:

<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/advocacy/direct-action/letters-to-editor/main>