



Writing for the Media: How to get Published and Influence People

Practical advice on how to write letters to the editor that get published

Think of the newspaper's editorial pages as sort of a town hall meeting that covers a wide range of topics. In essence, those editorial pages are a public conversation between the newspaper and its readers.

The newspaper facilitates that discussion by choosing the topics brought up in the form of news stories, editorials or columns. Your job as a letter-writer is to be a brilliant conversationalist who stays on topic.

Staying on topic means that you must respond to something that has been in the newspaper, either as an editorial or front page story (best), column (good), op-ed (okay) or news story (also okay).

Letters that do not reference an article in the paper stand little chance of being published. With a big news story – such as climate change legislation being introduced in the Senate- you might not need to cite the specific article, but you will need to reference the news.

Once you have something to respond to that relates to your issue (an LTE opportunity), your next job as a brilliant conversationalist is to move the conversation along by adding something to it.

This can take many forms -- disagreeing with a view that was brought up, providing important information missing from the original article, presenting a solution to a problem that was raised in the article.

The point of your letter is to get your message published. This in turn:

- 1) Educates the public about your issue.
- 2) And gets your message in front of decision-makers who then take your views into consideration.

You can ensure that No. 2 happens by mailing your letter to your Congressperson with a little note from you, and also by mentioning your members of Congress by name in your letter. Their staff will then see the letter as part of their regular tracking of the media for that office.

Putting your letter together: the structure

Letters to the editor typically are 150-200 words, meaning you are limited to 3 or 4 short paragraphs. They are the haiku of advocacy -- short and sweet.

Start the writing process by asking yourself the question:

"What is my message and how does that relate to the article that was in the paper?"

Opening:

In your very first sentence, cite the article that you are responding to.

For example, "Your editorial Saturday questioning the existence of climate change left me quite puzzled, given that the world's glaciers are receding at record rates."

(Note: It's okay to challenge a view, but never be disrespectful or snide)

Transition to message:

You don't have much space, so transition quickly to your message.

Start by stating the problem.

"If we ignore what scientists are telling us, global temperatures will rise throughout the century with significant consequences -- coastal flooding, droughts, famine, and extinction of species."

Propose a solution: This is the meat of your message.

"We must reduce the level of carbon-dioxide -- the primary greenhouse gas -- to a level that will avert these disastrous effects. Scientists tell us that level is 350 parts per million in the atmosphere. The most efficient and effective means to do this is to place a fee on carbon and return the revenue equally to all residents."

Closing the letter:

Finish up strong either by referring back to the beginning of the letter (closing the circle) or with something clever.

"Policy-makers can argue all they want, but Mother Nature doesn't argue -- and she doesn't negotiate."

Don't try to say everything in one letter. There's no room for it and it muddies the message.

In addition to your name, the newspaper will want your address and phone number (not for publication) to verify your letter.