

Tips on Writing Effective Letters to the Editor and Congress

(Many thanks to Citizens Climate Lobby)

Letters to the Editor Guidelines

Every paper has specific guidelines for letters to the editor—most importantly, the length of the letter that will be accepted. Be sure to check this information FIRST.

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.

Structuring Your Letter: The Formula

Letters to the editor are typically short & sweet. Start the writing process by asking: What is my message and how does that relate to the article that was in the paper? (Speak to the concerns and values of your audience)

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 dire consequences—coastal flooding, droughts, famine, 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. Use a proof read buddy, be respectful in tone, bipartisan, and avoid wordiness.

*** Name names in your letter. Legislature and Corporations have google alerts and media flags to keep informed of what is being said about them in the media.

Read your newspaper opinion section daily. Look for opportunities for LTE and Op Ed's.

Letters to Congress

Concise, well thought out personal letters are one of the most effective ways Americans have of influencing lawmakers. But, members of Congress get hundreds of letters and emails every day. Congressional staff will often select a sampling of letters by topic with a variety of viewpoints and present those in meetings with the senator or representative. It's usually best to send letters to the representative from your local Congressional District or the senators from your state.

Keep it Simple

Typed, one-page letters are best.

1. Say why you are writing and who you are. List your "credentials." (If you want a response, you must include your name and address, even when using email.)
2. Provide more detail. Be factual not emotional. Provide specific rather than general information about how the topic affects you and others. If a certain bill is involved, [cite the correct title or number](#) whenever possible.
3. Close by requesting the action you want taken: a vote for or against a bill, or change in general policy.

The best letters are courteous, to the point, and include specific supporting examples.

Structuring Your Letter: The Formula

1. Introduce yourself and acknowledge the senator/representative for something they've done. If you have professional credentials or experience that is relevant to the topic, say so.

2. State your purpose.

Be specific. Keep your letter focused by addressing only one issue or topic, and state your main purpose in the opening paragraph of your letter. **Example:** My name is Mary Jones, and I am writing this letter to ask that you vote in favor of SB 2222.

3. Make your letter personal.

Keep your letter unique; don't just copy a form letter and send it. **Example:** Because of the circumstances surrounding the tragic death of our neighbor, Bob Smith, I know first-hand that this bill, if implemented, could save lives.

4. Support your stance.

Be informed when you write your letter, and as you write, be honest and accurate in the information you present. Use specific statistics, numbers, or examples. Saying generally that you don't like a certain law or regulation won't get you very far. Instead, mention how the problem or issue you are addressing directly affects you or those of your community. However, though it is important to write with passion, it is generally best to keep your letter factual, rather than emotional.

Example: According to the Associated Press, in addition to the death of our neighbor Mary, last year in this country more than one hundred other people were killed in similar circumstances. That is more than 100 families whose lives will never be the same.

5. Make your request.

Indicate the specific action that you would like the representative to take, and by when (if applicable). For example, indicate whether you are writing in favor of or against a new bill or particular policy, and state what you hope that the representative will do. Be sure to identify the bill or other policy correctly. You can request, but do not demand, a response to your letter.

Example: I urge you to join with thousands of other concerned individuals who support SB 2222. Please vote “Yes” on February 13.

6. Remain professional and courteous.

No matter how upset you might feel, be courteous and professional. Again, it is perfectly acceptable (even preferable) to show your passion for the topic in your writing, but that does not mean you should resort to mud slinging, name-calling, swearing, or similar tactics.

7. Keep your letter clear and concise.

As you write, don’t resort to using a flowery style or being long-winded. Your representatives are busy; make their lives easier by stating clearly and concisely **what you want, why, and by when**. Generally, you should keep your letter to one page.

8. Close your letter.

Close your letter by restating your purpose for writing the representative and repeating your request for action. Then thank the person for taking the time to read your letter.

Avoid snail mailing letters, especially if time sensitive. They must all go thru a screening process that may take up to a month to complete. Fax if necessary.

Other Helpful Advocacy Outreach Efforts:

1. Routinely write thank you notes to publications that write about issues you care about.
2. Share your published Letter To the Editor or your Letter to Congress on social media. Organize letter writing events at presentations and tabling opportunities.
3. Subscribe to your representative’s newsletters
4. Subscribe to a daily newspaper
5. Encourage friends and family to write and give them tips.
6. Let us know if you get published or write congress (grassroots@greatoldbroads.org)
7. Create relationship with your newspaper editorial board.
8. Use google alerts or media flags for topics of interest (public lands, climate change)