

Write a Letter to the Editor

Letters to the editor are important tools in your advocacy arsenal. They are quick to write, often relatively easy to have published, and are the most widely read section in the paper. In many countries, politicians and government agencies routinely clip and circulate letters to the editor as indicators of what is important to their constituents.

Letters to the editor, while often “reactive” to news already reported, can keep the story alive and the debate raging. Journalism is one of the rare professions in which controversy is good. Reporters get “extra points” when their stories spark debate. A furious war on the letters-to-the-editor page warms the hearts of reporters and delights editors. Among other things, it means people are reading the paper.

If you get a letter published, make sure to send a copy to the office of your elected official. This is a great way to show them that your issue is important to the community they serve.

Ten Tips on Generating a Letter to the Editor

1) Find a "hook." Use current events in the news locally or nationally that can be linked to your issue. Your hook could be a report recently released, a coming summit, an on-going conference, even a controversy that is attracting public attention. Direct some of that attention your way by hooking it to what you want to say. Papers like having readers respond directly to their coverage, so scan the headlines, editorials and the letters sections for opportunities to "hook" your message to the media. Issue-specific hooks are good for broadcasting letters to more than one paper.

2) Be short. Be catchy and snappy. Always ensure you end with a conclusion or demand. If you can't say what you want in three paragraphs or less then you should write an op-ed, which is usually longer and develops in depth on a particular topic. Editors like creative, concise, and insightful commentary. Do you have a perspective that someone hasn't yet thought of? Don't use too many figures! Use only a few to support your arguments.

3) Adopt the proper tone. Be respectful and polite. Don't let anger or slander get in the way of a good opportunity to get your point across.

4) Use the "cut and paste" approach. If you are going to the trouble to write one good letter to the editor, why not publish it ten or twenty times? If you email your letter, make sure you send the letter to each paper individually by cutting and pasting the text into a new message.

5) Display authorship. Papers most times need to confirm authorship of your letter so always include your name, address and a daytime telephone number in the signature block.

6) Pick a dynamite title. Once you have completed your letter, give it a title that will draw attention. Papers keep the right to change your title, and of course often do so, but if the title you are proposing does attract the attention of the editor, your chances of getting your letter published are good.

7) Send it out. Just like the lottery, you have zero chance of getting your letter published if you don't send it out. As mentioned before, sending your letter to more than one paper only increase your chance of being published.

8) Be persistent. After a couple of days if you don't get your letter published, call the letters editor and ask them why not. Find out what it would take to get published next time.

9) Collect your letters. Be vigilant and don't miss your letter if it is published. Get friends and family to watch newspapers for your letters.

10) Use the letters as your calling card. Who needs to see that published letter? Everyone! Distribute copies to people you want to influence. You worked hard to accumulate those letters: let them be your manifesto and your calling card!

Source: [RESULTS Educational Fund's Activist Milestones](#) and [RESULTS Canada](#)