

# How to Write and Format a Letter to the Editor

Letters Are Quick, Persuasive, and Useful



Credit: Getty Images / Thomas Barwick

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The opinion page is one of the most-read pages of any newspaper. The others sections are the sports page, comics, and obituaries. My own theory: after you cry about the White Sox losing again, you'll want to laugh, and then you want to see who you've outlived.

People don't read the opinion pages for the sane and reasonable editorials, which are typically unsigned. They don't read the opinion pages for the Pulitzer-prize winning syndicated columnists.

No, people read their newspaper's opinion pages for three reasons:

- (1) George Will won't be writing about whether the county should allow a new coal plant to get built by old man Miller's farm,
- (2) their friends and neighbors will be writing about local issues -- and people -- that matter to them, and
- (3) there's a good chance that somebody wrote an oped or letter to the editor that is more than a little nuts. And that's always entertaining.

I'm not suggesting you write crazy letters to the editor. Far from it. But if there's ever a time where you can use humor and wit, this is it.

## Writing Letters To The Editor: Length And Format

Different newspapers will have entirely different requirements on length. Some papers will only publish 200 words or less. Others newspapers run 500-word manifestos if they're interesting enough.

But let's keep it simple: stick to 200 words and you'll be safe, no matter which newspaper you're targeting.

Here's the format:

### ***Give your letter a snappy headline***

*Letters are persuasive, not informative, so give your headline a point. Persuasion is about getting people to make decisions. If they read your letter, what do you want them to do? Put that in the headline.*

*A letter to the editor is first-person and all about the message. It's not an essay or a term paper.*

*If you want to see bad examples of writing on the opinion page, hold it out at arms-length and look for pieces littered with quotes, numbers, and acronyms. They're easy to spot. And nobody will read them.*

*Your format is also important. If you write a letter to the editor using the inverted pyramid -- most important thing first, least important last -- it won't be persuasive. It will be boring. Build*

*up to your conclusion. Think of it as the climax of an action movie: the final showdown with the villain doesn't come first. It's the last scene of the movie.*

At the end of your letter, put these things:

Your name

Your town

Daytime phone number

E-mail address

They're not going to publish your phone number or e-mail. These two things are included when you submit a letter so they can verify that you sent it. You're going to send it by e-mail, and it's easy to fake things by e-mail.

Am I saying you can't send a letter to the editor by fax or snail mail? Yes. I'm saying that.

Newspapers still list their fax numbers out of habit, and their snail mail addresses because people send them checks that way, and they sort of like checks.

But no editor wants to spend their days retyping letters and op-eds. Ship your letter to the editor by e-mail, and look on the editorial page for the right e-mail address.

## Why Letters to the Editor Are Wonderful

Letters to the editor are underutilized. Editors and reporters will roll their eyes if you ask them how many press releases they get every day. I know an AP bureau chief who gets 700 to 1,000 press releases every day. Think about having to wade through all of those. Your index finger will develop a callous from hitting the DELETE key.

Letters to the editor and op-eds are the opposite. Most newspapers want more, not less. They're happy to get good pieces written by local public figures.