

Letter-to-the-editor

Writing a letter-to-the-editor (LTE) to your local or regional newspaper is a very effective (and easy!) means to reach a large and influential audience with your message. LTEs are printed on the editorial page, which is one of the most read pages in the paper. Members of Congress and their staff often keep a close eye on media coverage, including LTEs, in local papers. This media monitoring helps members of Congress keep a 'pulse' on issues of importance to their constituents. So having a strong LTE published is a 'twofer'—you reach both a wide public and also your elected officials with the same effort.

Even if your letter is not published, it is important for educating and persuading editors. The more letters they receive on a given topic, the more likely they are to dedicate more time in their newspaper to that issue—both on the editorial page and in news articles. Your letter helps demonstrate the issue's importance to the community.

Tips:

1. **Respond to an article in the paper.** Many papers require that LTEs reference an article or editorial that ran in the paper. While some papers do occasionally print unrelated LTEs, noting a lack of coverage, your letter is most likely to be published if it relates to previous coverage.
2. **Follow the paper's directions.** Information on how and to whom to submit a LTE is usually found right on the letters page in your paper. This often includes guidelines on length and other factors the paper looks for in LTEs. If you can't find the information you need, simply call the paper and ask how to go about submitting a letter in response to a recently published article.
3. **Be timely.** Respond to an article as soon as possible, no more than two or three days later.
4. **Refer to the legislator you are trying to influence by name.** If the letter includes a legislator's name, it is more likely that staff will bring it to his or her attention.
5. **Keep your letter short, focused, and interesting.** In general, letters should be under 200 words; stay focused on one (or, at the most, two) main point(s); and get to the main point in the first two sentences. If possible include interesting facts, relevant personal experience, and any local connections to the issue. If your letter is longer than 200 words, it will likely be edited or not printed.
6. **Write the letter in your own words.** Editors want letters in their papers to be original. Be sure that you take the time to write the letter in your own words and refrain from cutting and pasting talking points.
7. **Include your contact information.** Be sure to include your name, address, and daytime phone number; the paper will likely contact you to confirm you wrote it before printing your letter.
8. **Clip out your printed letter and send it to your legislator with a brief cover note.** This way you can be certain that he or she sees it.

As an example, read Union of Concerned Scientists Analyst Lael Goodman's letter to the editor published in the New York Times on May 24, 2014, [Saving tropical peat soils](#). The LTE is short and to the point, citing an important point about peat soils that was not mentioned in an editorial published earlier in the month. It concisely describes the impacts of peat soils, why they are relevant to our interest in this issue, and how they impact public health and the environment. The LTE stays focused on the one main point—that protecting peat soils should be part of our work on the issue of palm oil production.

Re “Palm oil’s deceptive lure” (May 5): Your editorial rightly describes deforestation as a problematic byproduct of palm oil production, but it neglects palm oil’s growing impact on tropical peat soils. These carbon-rich soils form when vegetation does not fully decompose due to waterlogged conditions.

Peat soils are often poorly understood but are as problematic as deforestation. These soils must be drained for use, which releases stored carbon into the atmosphere. Furthermore, when peat soils are drained they become extremely flammable, a dangerous problem given the frequent use of fire to clear land. In particularly dry years, these fires have caused some of the largest and longest-burning fires ever — creating public health crises from smoke and haze.

Southeast Asia contains some three-quarters of the world’s peat-soil carbon — an amount comparable to that stored in the Amazon’s aboveground vegetation. If the draining of peat soils continues, the global warming consequences would be catastrophic. Protecting tropical peat soils must be part of the solution to combat global warming.

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