

Writing an Effective Letter to the Editor

Democracy depends citizen participation. There are many ways to participate in elections that matter to you beyond casting a vote. Writing a letter-to-the-editor (LTE) to your local or regional newspaper is a very effective (and easy!) means to reach a large audience with your message.

Elected officials want to be informed and responsive to their constituent's needs and keep a close eye on media coverage, including LTEs, in their local papers. This is also true for people campaigning for an elected office. Media monitoring helps representatives keep a 'pulse' on issues of importance to their constituents. LTEs are printed on the editorial page, which is one of the most read pages in the paper. So having a strong LTE published is a 'twofer'—you reach both a wide public and the candidates for elected office 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. It clearly expresses the issue's importance to the community.

Tips:

1. **Respond to an article in the paper.** Many papers require that LTEs reference an article that ran in the paper. Some papers do occasionally print LTEs noting a lack of coverage. However, it is best that your letter be in response to an article in the paper.
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 or on the newspaper's website. This often includes guidelines on what the paper looks for in LTEs. Follow these guidelines to increase the likelihood that your letter will be printed. 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 in two or three days.
4. **Keep it local.** Candidates want to know what issues their potential constituents care about most. Be specific! If you can, highlight the local impacts that a current or proposed policy would have on your community. Refer to the election race as specifically as possible. If the letter includes a candidate's name, in almost all cases staff will give him or her the letter to read personally.
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. Include your word count at the top of your letter.

6. **Write the letter in your own words.** Editors want letters in their papers to be original and from a reader. Be sure that you take the time to write the letter in your own words.
7. **Include your information.** Be sure to include your name, address, and daytime phone number; the paper will contact you before printing your letter.

For more information on crafting a successful letter to the editor, [see these UCS tips and tricks](#).

Election LTE Tips:

1. **Be nonpartisan.** Your LTE can help educate candidates and fellow constituents on nonpartisan, science-based policy solutions. It is best to avoid calling out candidates by party association. Remember, all candidates can and do learn from this public education!
2. **Ask questions.** It is important to get a candidate on the record about her or his policy stances. Asking questions of candidates participating in an election race can encourage clearer policies.
3. **Fact check candidate statements.** Science-based issues, like climate change, can be a hot-button topic during elections. Are there any local or captivating factoids you can use to educate the public? If there is an issue important to your community but not adequately addressed by candidates, consider bringing it up in the LTE.
4. **Call to action.** Outline the actions you want the candidates to take.
5. **Amplify your LTE.** If your LTE gets published, you can amplify the impact by tweeting the LTE at your policy maker or candidate.

Helpful Resources & Talking Points:

Below are talking points you can include to call on all candidates in an election race to take action.

Curious about candidate questions? [See here for some crucial science-based topics and questions to consider for midterm elections](#).

Sample Template Letter to the Editor:

To the editor:

I read the story, (insert title), with great interest. I was (pleased/disappointed) to (see/not see) ample discussion and coverage of (insert issue area) by the candidates in (insert election race).

It is important for all candidates in (race) to speak up about (issue). This is an issue that elected officials must be ready to address, as it impacts (insert location) by (insert reason), and (insert reason).

As an engaged voter, I look forward to hearing more about what the candidates have to say on (issue) as we approach Election Day.

Yours sincerely,

Name

Hometown or zip code, Professional title (if OK with your employer's policy)

Word count: #

Sample Letter to the Editor:

Dear editor,

Yesterday's story on the city council candidate debate showed that none of the candidates made any mention of climate change. However, as residents of Sunnyville know, our town's persistent flooding, ever-growing tides and coastal erosion are among the clearest signs we have that our planet is changing due to global warming. The most expensive thing we can do in the face of climate change is nothing. Elected representatives of Sunnyville must to be ready to address climate change and should be poised to take the swift and strong action we so urgently need to avoid the worst impacts of a change climate.

I hope to see all of the candidates in the local city council race speak up on climate change in the next debate. As an engaged voter, it is crucial to see what science-based solutions our potential leaders, no matter the party, have to tackle this issue on behalf of the Sunnyville community.

Sincerely,

Jonny B. Goode

Sunnyville, USA

Word count: approx. 155

