



Preventing Chronic Diseases: An Investment in New York State

Writing a Letter to the Editor

Why should I write a letter to the editor?

The editorial (opinion and letters to the editor) section is one of the most widely read segments of both print and online newspapers. A letter to the editor (LTE) provides a free and rapid way to respond to news stories. LTEs can be a powerful tool for commentary or for adding additional information or insight to a health-related topic. LTEs also offer opportunities to share what organizations are doing about an issue and to create calls to action for readers.

How do I get started?

Before you write an LTE, do your homework:

- Read through other LTEs to get an idea of what types of LTEs are published in your target newspaper.
- Review LTE requirements such as formatting, length, and contact information.
- Some papers require that LTE submissions be exclusive to them, so be wary of submitting your letter to multiple papers.
- Be aware of your response time (e.g., *The New York Times* requires LTEs to refer to articles that have appeared within the last seven days).

How do I increase my chances of having an LTE published?

- **Have a clear purpose:** Know what you are trying to achieve in your LTE. Are you refuting an issue? Are you clarifying an issue so readers will be more informed or know how to take action? Are you providing facts to correct misinformation? Are you praising an article?
- **Be concise:** Explain the purpose of your letter early in the text and have a clear main point.
- **Support your main point:**
 - ✓ Back up praise or criticism with facts or evidence (e.g., *In the past year, 390 miles of bicycle and walking paths have been built throughout the city, providing an important access point for city residents to exercise.*)
 - ✓ Use personal stories (e.g., *Prior to last year, I had never biked in the city. With the addition of hundreds of miles of bicycle trails, I now commute to work on my bike almost every day.*)
 - ✓ Use current events (e.g., *The mayor is a strong advocate for healthy communities, as evidenced by her recent signing of a law to restrict tobacco use on all village property.*)
- **Provide a call to action:** State what should be done to address the issue, and point readers to actions, websites, or other resources.
- **Know your audience:** Write to appeal to your audience; emphasize local activities and interests.

- **Make sure your LTE is relevant:** For example, promote breast cancer screening programs during Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October, or provide data about a successful local anti-tobacco policy when a new policy is being considered or reviewed in the local media.
- **Be aware of these common errors:**
 - ✓ Making grammatical and spelling errors: Give your draft letter to a colleague, friend, or family member to proofread.
 - ✓ Being wordy: Follow the paper's guidelines; most LTEs are 150-300 words in length (e.g., *The New York Times* prefers LTEs of 150-175 words).
 - ✓ Addressing more than one issue: Having multiple issues into one letter can confuse the point you are trying to make.
 - ✓ Being rude or sarcastic: It is okay to disagree with an issue, but be respectful not accusatory. Support your position with facts, not opinions.
 - ✓ Being overly casual: Keep the letter professional and avoid slang or informal phrasing.
 - ✓ Repeating what others have said: Make your voice original; offer a new perspective on an issue.

What are the core elements of a successful LTE?

- **Agency letterhead:** if applicable
- **Date of letter**
- **Inside address:** Name and address of newspaper (include e-mail/fax)
- **Reference line (Re):** headline/author of story you are responding to
- **Salutation:** "Dear Editor" (insert editor's name, if known)
- **Body of letter**
 - ✓ **First paragraph:** Explain the purpose of your letter. Reference the original newspaper article and clearly state your point of view. If applicable, cite new data. (e.g., *As a public health professional, I applaud your article, Why Our Communities Are Killing Us.*)
 - ✓ **Second paragraph:** Support your argument by sharing statistics or results of studies. Provide background and contextual materials. Convey what your program is doing to address the issue. (e.g., *While the article states that our community is unhealthy and contributing to the poor health of city residents, the article failed to acknowledge recent advances that support healthy choices.*)
 - ✓ **Third paragraph:** Summarize what you want readers to know about the issue. Re-emphasize the main point of your letter and direct readers on what steps you want them to take to address the issue.
- **Simple closing:** "Sincerely," with your name, title, organization (include a one sentence description of your program and contact information)

What do I do if my letter is published?

- Be happy! Most LTEs are not published.
- Be aware that your LTE may be edited and shortened for space.
- Share it on Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms, and ask others to share it. Generate as much earned media as possible.