



Writing Letters to the Editor

What is a “Letter to the Editor” (LTE)?

A letter to the editor is a short letter to a local newspaper, news site or publication that gives your opinion on an issue and can call on others in your community to take action.

Why Write an LTE?

The letter to the editor section is one of the most widely read parts of most newspapers and news sites. These letters can:

- Raise awareness. An LTE is a great way to raise the profile of an issue in your local community and educate the public.
- Respond rapidly to new developments. Many publications print LTEs within a day or two of receiving them, making them one of the most effective actions when trying to respond quickly to new developments or announcements.
- Energize supporters and leaders. Published letters energize local supporters on important issues.
- Be persuasive. Persuading others is a way to involve them in the civic life of their community. It’s a chance to explain how and why it’s important to have a stake in what happens in a community.

People Read LTEs to Find Out:

- How certain issues are affecting their community.
- What are the major impacts of those issues?

However, people do not read LTEs for:

- In-depth policy descriptions. **Keep it short.** LTEs should be short and demonstrate your personal connection to an issue and the views of local community members. You don’t have to be an expert on an issue to share your personal story. Most papers and news sites will not print or select letters that are too long or try to outline an entire policy issue.



Planning Your LTE Campaign

- **Research publication type.** Which publications are commonly read in your community? Most local newspapers and related news sites have well-read letters to the editor sections, but they can be found in unlikely places. Don't forget online spaces like Patch.com, alternative papers or lifestyle magazines that younger people may read, and community specific media, including media in languages other than English. Don't discount a publication just because you don't often read it — it may be very popular with other parts of your community. Investigate what's out there by asking friends what they read and listen to. Make a list of the publications to target with your campaign.
- **Consider radio and TV media outlets.** In some communities, local radio stations and public-access TV shows carry a lot of weight. Look into submitting LTEs to such programs if they have a segment where letters are read aloud on air.
- **Know the rules for LTE submission.** Publications usually have tight rules for publishing, including length of the LTE and listing your own contact information in a very specific manner, and they will reject letters if they break the rules. Know the rules for submission and make sure your letters conform to them. Know the publication's schedule and submission deadlines.
- **Consider your messenger.** If you are working with a group of volunteers on an LTE to a publication widely read by a specific community, it's usually ideal to make sure the name attached to that LTE is that of someone who identifies within that community.

Write Your LTE

***Note - Most publications and news sites have an electronic submittal tool for LTEs.**

- **Keep it short.** Stay within the publication's rules — likely no longer than 250 or 300 words. This may seem very short, but shorter letters are the most effective. Get to the point.
- **Tell your story.** Begin the letter with a brief story about you or someone you know. People can argue with your positions, but they can't argue with your experience. Describe how an issue has affected you, your family, a coworker or a friend. Make it personal. It makes your story human.
- **Know your audience.** What type of publication are you writing for, and who is reading it? Different people and demographic groups may find different types of personal stories compelling. Use a story the audience will connect with. Ideally, have your letter writer be of the same group or background as the primary readership of the publication.



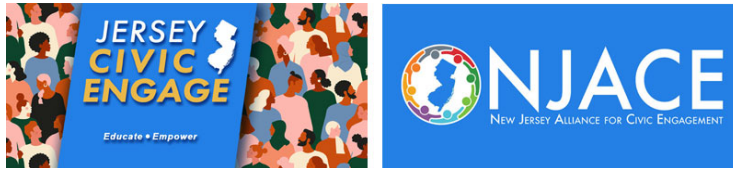
- **Don't delve into policy.** There is not enough room in 300 words to make a nuanced policy argument. When using facts and numbers, use only one or two, and choose the most powerful. A long string of facts and information is not an argument.
- **Use powerful language.** Let your feelings show! Use powerful verbs and descriptive nouns. Write short, punchy sentences. Vary sentence length. This will help your letter stand out and make it more likely to be published.
- **Check for proper grammar and spelling.** If you're working with a group, trade letters with each other and edit them carefully. If you're writing a letter by yourself, ask a friend to take a look at it before you submit it. Don't submit LTEs with errors — they will likely not be published, and even worse, they may be published with the original errors.
- **Make a call to action.** End your letter with a specific call to action (e.g. – **Register to vote; Make a commitment to vote**), to other community members. Your LTE will only be effective if it gets others to take action!

Getting Published

- Monitor the publication. After you send your LTE, keep an eye out! Many publications, especially small ones, may not tell you if you will be published because you have already given your permission to publish the letter by sending it.
- If you are published: Success! Congratulations! Your message is being heard.

Make sure to:

1. Re-share the printed LTE on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media outlets. Link to the page where it is published online. E-mail it to yourself from the site if possible.
2. If the publication has an "e-mail" or "share" feature, ask local supporters to use the web site itself to send the piece to family and friends. This will make it rise on the "most e-mailed" or "most shared" list on the site if it has one.
3. If your letter is printed in an actual paper, clip the letter and make a scan of it. If it's broadcast on TV or radio, try to record it.



Sample Template

Below is a sample template to help you structure your letter.

Dear Editor:

[If you are responding to or referencing another article, you should reference it by writing the first sentence, then the title of the article, the name of the publication & finally the date it was published. If not, you can start here with the reason why you're writing, but it's not always necessary. Sometimes it's best to include some kind of interesting hook here that also explains why you're writing without saying "I'm writing because..."]

[Tell your personal story in this second section. How has the issue impacted you, your family, or someone you know? Or why is this issue important to you? What are the impacts of the issue on people in your community? Remember to be concise, draw a local connection, and relate to the community you know best by touching on the values you share with them. If you include contrast —what others think — be respectful.]

[So now what? Are you encouraging readers to contact an elected official? Are you asking them to take some other action? Don't be afraid to make a specific ask of the people reading your letter.]

[End on a positive note. You have gone to all this trouble to entice your Readers. You don't want to turn them off to your opinions before you've sealed the deal.]

Sincerely,
[YOUR NAME]
[YOUR CITY, ST, Month DD, YYYY]

If you need additional help or guidance around writing an LTE please contact us at NJDOS@sos.nj.gov