

GUIDELINES ON HOW TO WRITE EFFECTIVE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Courtesy of Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME)

Letters to the editor, sometimes known as LTEs, are an effective tool in advocacy and public awareness efforts. They are relatively easy to get published and many people read them. They keep the media on their toes and allow readers to exchange opinions. Not only do journalists enjoy receiving feedback on their articles, but it is also very common for government officials and other public figures and their offices to clip and circulate LTEs. It helps them determine the sentiment among their constituents and communities.[1]

SUGGESTED STRUCTURE FOR A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Here are the guidelines that CJPME suggests for individuals involved in the Media Centre:

- The subject line in your email should read “Responding to: [title of article, date published]”;
- Write short letters: 100-200 words is ideal. 300 is the usual outer limit;
- Include the following information at the bottom of your letter: Your full name, your address, a daytime phone number and an email address you can be reached at. Some outlets call to verify that there is a real person behind the letter, and will not print a letter unless they are able to confirm so. There is no reason to be concerned about sharing your personal information, as professional outlets will be very careful to protect your privacy.
- Mention your credentials if you have some especially pertinent ones: If you have a relevant job title, unique experience or expertise, include this information;
- Proofread! Ensure there are no spelling or grammatical mistakes and double-check your citations.

Aim for 3-4 short sections as follows:

1. The first sentence or two should cite the story or a letter published by another reader: e.g. “It’s a shame that Mr. Oakland (‘Israel Has a Right to All Settlements’, Nov. 12) does not realize that [...]”;
2. The next few sentences should serve as an introduction to your argument: e.g. “As a naturalized Canadian citizen myself, I know only too well how [...]”;
3. The next few sentences should include the facts to back up your argument, followed by a call to action: e.g. “It was in fact the Israelis that first broke the ceasefire in November 2008 by firing [...] according to [...] and I believe that it is in your best interest not only to correct this misrepresentation, but also to apologize to your loyal readers who rely on this publication for thorough fact-checking.”;
4. The last part of your letter can act as your ‘kicker,’ if you choose to include one. This can be the punch line to hammer home your message: e.g. “Despite having fled the war-torn conditions for this great country, Mr. Abdallah now lives as a prisoner in his own home. What justice is this?”;

A letter of praise is not much different in terms of structure – simply begin by 1) expressing your gratitude then 2) transition into the facts or experiences that define your letter, and 3) end by emphasizing notions such as objectivity and trust in order to reassure the editor that the article was of solid reporting;

CHECKLIST OF CONSIDERATIONS FOR YOUR LTE

Keep these core guidelines in mind as you develop your LTE:

- React QUICKLY: it is best to respond to an article the morning it is published, or within the first 24 hours. The earlier, the better.
- Keep the letter focused – don't make too many points at once;
- Always double check your spelling, and grammar and make sure your arguments are clear;
- If you are responding to an article, make sure your letter can stand on its own. The reader should not necessarily have to go back and read the original piece;
- Share a personal experience and send an original letter – your submission is more likely to get published if it is one of a kind;
- Connect a local news item to its international context: for example, if your city has a water problem, use that as a platform for discussing health and sanitation in the developing world;
- Don't forget that letters of encouragement are just as important as letters of protest. Remember that whenever an article is honest in how it reports the facts; it will likely draw letters of protest from the other side. These letters of protest must be countered with letters of commendation from us.

OTHER ELEMENTS TO CONSIDER FOR YOUR LTE

Other elements which can make a letter more attractive for publishing are the following:

- Introduce new information. Introduce relevant information not included in the article you are responding to, and give it a new spin;
- Respond to other LTEs. Keep a debate alive and on the radar: respond to other LTEs and emphasize well-checked facts;
- Personalize the issue in some way. Write on a topic you feel strongly about. Don't be afraid to shed light on an issue that affects you, but may not necessarily have made the news – it's likely other readers may feel the same way;
- Ask for additional coverage. Make a request to have something specific covered by the paper or magazine in question – this is crucial to editors as they continue to understand who their readers are and what they care about;

DON'T:

- Don't submit your letter to more than one paper in your city (feel free to send it to other papers across the country);
- Don't include an attachment in your email – staff don't have time, nor do they wish to go over extra documents;
- Don't send mass emails or chain mail – these are frequently labeled as spam and deleted promptly. They will also never be published!;
- Don't attack aggressively or be insulting – your letter will not likely make it to the page and your credibility will be damaged. Instead, present your argument in a clear and concise manner to insist that the reporter or reader is very much mistaken;

[1] This document is partially drawn from the Web site of *Engineers Without Borders – Canada*.