

Definition of genre

Letters to the editor are written by readers of a newspaper, magazine, or other source, on topics relevant to the publication's audience. They address diverse topics, from commentary on local, state, national, and international current events, to responses to opinions and stories previously put forth in the publication. Sometimes they rant; sometimes they rave. Sometimes they read like mini-[op-eds](#).

Because editors have limited space to print letters, and because they often try to publish a variety of viewpoints on a range of topics, letters typically must be brief (e.g. 100-200 words). Thus, writing a letter to the editor becomes a useful exercise in creating a succinct but persuasive argument.

Questions to ask

- Why is your issue important?
- Consider your audience: Who are they? Are they readers of a small-town newspaper, a technical journal, a national newspaper, or an independent activist press, etc.? What do they already know about the issue, and what do you need to tell them?
- Pick up a copy of the publication to which you will address your letter. What do the letters published on the editorial pages look like? Which ones are you drawn to first (e.g. long ones or short ones)? Which ones do you find most persuasive, and why? Which do you dismiss as ineffective, and why?

Actions to take

- Stay within the word limits requested by your publication. (Publications occasionally waive normal word limits for writers who are authorities on their topics.)
- Have an opinion: take a stance!
- Consider what kind of persona you want to present, and the advantages and disadvantages of that persona. For example, while it may feel therapeutic to rant about a local politician, if you vitriolically complain about or make fun of someone you disagree with, readers will likely sigh and ignore you. Instead of "preaching to the choir," think about what it would take to change the views of those espousing different opinions.
- Again, pick up an actual newspaper and use successful (i.e. published) letters as models for your own. Durham's *Herald Sun* and *The New York Times* are available to students for free in the lobby of the Marketplace on East Campus.

Helpful links

<http://www.nytimes.com/ref/membercenter/help/lettertoeditor.html>

The *New York Times* writer's guidelines for letters to the editor.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/opinion/23READ.html?ex=1141189200&en=1fd8b7f8078f4183&ei=5070>

New York Times letters editor Thomas Feyer provides detailed answers to questions about what kinds of letters get published. (NB: You may need to set up a user name and password to access the *New York Times* archives.)