

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editor are great public policy advocacy tools. They help to shape public opinion, and they inform legislators about constituent concerns. Letters to the editor are more than just the statement of one individual. For every letter that is printed, there are many other, similar letters that didn't get printed, and many other individuals who share your feelings but didn't submit a letter.

One of the most important aspects of letters to the editor is their tangibility—elected officials and others can collect them over time to track opinions and issues of importance. You should hope and assume that people you don't know will clip your letter and use it as part of a body of evidence, so it's worth making sure you say exactly what you mean. It's also worth using tried and true strategies to increase your chances of publication.

Tips for Getting Your Letter Printed

1. Respond to something that was in a newspaper, even if you have to stretch to make the connection. Make reference to the printed sources in your letter, even though the paper will probably take out the reference when they print your letter.
2. Keep your letter to no more than 150 words, not including your name and contact information and the reference to the source.
3. Use standard three-section format shown on page 3 of this handout.
4. Submit your letter by email (preferred) or fax. Since 9-11, media organizations have had to take time-consuming precautions opening mail, and your letter might not get opened for several days after you send it.
5. Don't forget to include your FULL contact information. The paper uses that information to verify that you actually submitted the letter and that you aren't a front for someone else.
6. If you have a digital "headshot" of yourself, attach it as a graphic file to your letter and the paper might print it.
7. Remember: the sooner you get your letter in after you read the original story, the better chance that it will be printed, even if it isn't printed until several days after the story appeared.

Getting the Most Mileage Out of Your Letter

Getting your letter printed is great, but there are a few simple things you can do that will increase its impact.

1. If you submit a letter to the editor, let Texas Impact know so that we can "scan" for it.
2. If your letter gets printed, let Texas Impact and others know. If your letter is available online on the newspaper's website, simply email the link to Impact, as well as your denominational newspaper, and the newsletters of other groups you belong to.
3. If your letter gets printed, clip the letter and the header of the page it's printed on—including at least the name of the newspaper and the date, photocopy the letter and header together on one page, and fax them to your elected officials. If you like, include a personal note, or at least hand write a short memo indicating that you are a constituent.
4. If your letter was printed in a statewide paper, email it to your local paper and suggest they reprint it. If it was printed in your local paper, email it to the nearest statewide paper and ask them to run it.
5. Post a copy of your letter on your church bulletin board if you have a space for such items.

Statewide vs. Local Papers

There are several newspapers in Texas that are considered to be "statewide." They are read by elected officials and other policy professionals on a regular basis and frequently articles from them are reprinted nationally.

Other newspapers aren't as big, but are important because they are the biggest regional

print media available. Legislators and others pay the most attention to letters in these papers when they are authoritative—the writer has some special credential, or the issue originates in the local area but has statewide import.

There are also larger local dailies that don't get much attention outside their immediate catchment area. It's easier to get letters printed in these papers, and they sometimes allow more words in a letter, some as many as 300 words.

Statewide Papers

- Dallas Morning News
- Ft. Worth Star-Telegram
- Houston Chronicle
- Austin American-Statesman
- San Antonio Express-News

Examples of Regional Papers

- Lubbock Avalanche-Journal
- El Paso Times
- McAllen Monitor
- Victoria Advocate
- Corpus Christi Caller-Times

Examples of Local Papers

- Beaumont Enterprise
- Big Spring Herald
- Round Rock Leader
- Mount Pleasant Daily Tribune

Emailing Your Letter

Your letter needs to be a "clean copy," that is, it shouldn't include any messages you've exchanged with anyone else about it. Paste just your letter and contact information into a new email and send it to the address for letter submissions. Don't "cc" anyone on the submission itself; send a separate email if you want to copy the letter to another individual or organization.

If you aren't comfortable using email, you can have someone else submit your letter for you. They need to state up front that they are submitting the letter for you, but that your contact information is the information to be used with the letter. They could also say why they are submitting it (for instance, "I am submitting this for my friend who doesn't have email.")

Texas Impact can...

- ...find out the email address for you to submit your letter
- ...read over your letter and make suggestions
- ...identify news articles you'd like to respond to
- ...provide "boilerplate" letter language for you to personalize
- ...submit your letter for you if you don't have email



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Ideal Format for Policy Communication (Commonly known as a “point paper”)

REMEMBER: If you can’t get the gist of your letter just by reading the first sentence of each paragraph, redo those sentences. Highlighting the first sentence of each paragraph makes it much easier on the reader, and it forces you to order your thoughts clearly.

My name is Jane Doe, and I live in Rep. Smith’s district. I am the president of the PTA at my child’s school and I’m an active member of First United Methodist Church. I am impressed with how responsive you always seem to be to constituent concerns. *(Optional: Example of something good the representative did.)*

I am very concerned about the new state policy that says elementary school children have to have 120 minutes of guided physical education a week. This policy has caused our school to change the daily schedule so that the kids only get a real recess on days when they have an actual phys ed. period in school. On other days, they have to run laps or do push-ups during their recess time.

Failing to have unstructured recess time is not healthy for children. If the kids don’t have real recess, my son
—doesn’t have the opportunity to make friends with other kids in a relaxed setting, so he’s uncomfortable participating in group activities in class
—doesn’t get a chance to “blow off steam” by being silly and loud outdoors, so he is more likely to disrupt class
—doesn’t have any period available to finish work he needs extra time on

I hope you will sponsor a bill that requires schools to leave some unstructured recess time in the school day. I would be happy to work with you on a specific proposal, and I know other members of my PTA would, too.

Please let me know if you plan to sponsor such a bill, or if you plan to support any such bills that are already in the works. You can contact me at the address and phone number below.

Thanks for all you do for your constituents!

Sincerely,

NAME

Contact info