

Letter to the editor

What is one?

A letter to a newspaper editor is a short response to an article which has already appeared in the newspaper. In such a letter you can respond to a specific view expressed in an article or the general subject of the article. Nevertheless, the main focus is for you to express a **strong** opinion in your letter.

How to write a letter to the editor

Writing a letter to the editor would seem to be fairly self-explanatory. However, it is actually something of a science. Imagine that you are the letters editor for a major British newspaper and you receive hundreds of letters a day from all round the world. Which ones do you decide to publish? Editors (and examiners) are looking for the ones that are short, focused, punchy, passionate, and within the bounds of good taste.

- If you are referring to a previously published letter, a news story or column, identify it by its headline, writer and/or the date it was published. This enables the editor to quickly check the original item to verify any references you have made to it (i.e. quotes, statistics, etc.):
 - > Re: England fails to qualify for the European Championships, June 16.
- Cut to the chase. You don't need a long, rambling introduction to the subject – this has already been done in the original article. Just focus clearly on one or two key points that you want to make.
- When appropriate, use humour. Be witty, if you can, but without being offensive. Let your sense of humour and irony shine through. You can even be a little cheeky or wicked, as long as you don't cross the line of good taste:
 - > “George Bush says that the US shouldn't be the world's policeman, yet Dick Cheney wants to increase military spending. Why do they want to build an army we're not going to use?”
- Avoid worn-out clichés and weak jokes.
- If you are responding to a columnist's views (or any other opinion piece), don't launch a personal attack on the columnist – attack his or her views, or those referred to in the article, instead.
- Offer a countervailing opinion. Try to advance the debate so that other readers might join in the discussion in subsequent letters.
- If you have read a news story or feature article that relates to something you have experienced, respond by putting your own personal twist on the subject. Identify yourself and why you are qualified to comment.
 - > “I was in Chile when General Pinochet took power...” or “Having been a teacher for 15 years...” are good opening sentences.
- Write short, punchy sentences, grouped in two or three paragraphs. Keep it short. Editors cut from the bottom, so put your main point at the top. Do not assume that because a piece is long, you must respond at the same length. The best advice is that short letters show confidence in your position and long letters do the opposite.