



TASB Advocacy Tool Kit: Communicating with Print Media

On occasion, it is necessary to communicate your ideas with or provide clarification to newspaper editors or staff writers. Two common ways that people correspond with newspaper staff are letters to the editor and opinion editorials (op-eds).

Letters to the Editor

When commenting on an article or editorial that has been printed in a newspaper, it is best to submit a letter to the editor. Such letters appear in the editorial section of a newspaper and run between 100 and 250 words. Anyone may submit a letter to the editor to any paper, whether or not the writer lives in the publication's circulation area.

When writing a letter to the editor, be sure to keep in mind one or two points that you wish to make and focus exclusively on them. There is usually not enough space in a letter to tackle three or more issues.

It is also advisable to read letters that have already appeared in the newspaper to which you are writing to get a better idea of what kind of letters the editors are printing. Think of new ways to discuss the topic and present unique solutions to the problem. Write clearly and concisely following the limitations usually given on the editorial page or letters-to-the-editor page.

In the first paragraph, reference the article or editorial about which you are writing. Include the article title, author, and date of publication: ["Texas schools shine," Smith, John, Jan. 1].

Address your major points early in your letter. It is not necessary to restate or summarize your points at the end of a letter. If editors decide to shorten a letter, it is usually the end that they cut. If you are including facts or statistics, be sure you are able to back up the data if contacted by editors. Also, do not go overboard when expressing dissatisfaction or outrage. Maintain comprehensibility and a balanced tone in your letter.

Include your name, city/state, e-mail address, and phone number in your letter. Editors often contact authors of letters to verify their identity.

Once you have finished writing your letter, proofread, proofread, and proofread it. Submitting a concise, well-written letter with few errors increases a letter's chances of publication.

The best way to submit a letter to the editor is via e-mail. Some newspapers have letter submission pages on their Web sites. Others provide an e-mail address for letter submissions.

Do not be discouraged if your letter is not printed. Newspapers receive several letter submissions daily. Keep submitting letters on different topics as they arise for the best results.

Opinion Editorials

When you need to communicate a message that does not conform to the space limitations of a letter to the editor or a perspective on an issue that has not been addressed previously, an opinion editorial (op-ed) may be the best way to deliver your message.

An op-ed is an editorial column submitted by someone other than the editorial staff and is usually printed opposite of the editorial page in a newspaper – which is why it is sometimes referred to as “opposite editorial.”

Because newspapers receive several submissions daily, it is important to carefully plan any op-ed submission.

First, identify your reasons for writing an op-ed. Is the purpose of the op-ed to raise voter support for legislation or to increase awareness of an issue? Understanding the reasons for writing an op-ed will help you hone the message and main points you should stress in the text.

Next, consider where you plan to submit your op-ed and the requirements of the outlet. In most cases the outlet will have a limit on word count, usually between 500 and 800 words. Try to time the submission of your op-ed to coordinate with events or dates that stress your message.

Determine what background information is essential for readers to follow your argument. Develop a brief paragraph or two which explains this necessary background and puts your op-ed in context.

Focus on one issue in your op-ed and one clear action. Support your conclusion with three key points. Devote one paragraph to each supporting point. This paragraph breakdown will help maintain your focus and aid in effective organization.

Sometimes, it is necessary to briefly identify and discuss counter arguments to your position. Counter the opposing arguments with facts and point out other weaknesses in the opposing message. Explain why your position is stronger.

Remember that your submission should provoke discussion and response. State your position, support your stance, and sum up your argument.

Submit your piece to the editorial page or guest column/op-ed editor at the newspaper of your choice, but keep in mind that most media outlets require exclusive rights to a submission under consideration. You may send your op-ed via e-mail, fax, or mail. You may find relevant contact information in the editorial section of a newspaper or on an outlet’s Web site.

Thank the outlet if your piece is printed. If your piece is not published, do not give up. Try different angles, different outlets, and different time periods. If you keep your op-ed fresh and thought-provoking, chances are it will be printed eventually.

If you experience problems writing or submitting a letter or op-ed, please contact Dax Gonzalez, communications manager at TASB Governmental Relations, for assistance.