

Helpful tips for an effective Letter to the Editor (LTE)¹

Word counts: Fewer is Better

While editors may offer some degree of flexibility on the maximum number of words allowed, it's always better to error on the side of fewer words. You can use this as a rule of thumb:

- **Letters to the editor generally run just 200 to 250 words (or edited, even shorter). Some outlets allow 300 words; some allow 100-150 words.**

LTEs are welcome to come from pretty much anyone. Depending on the news outlet, such as national outlets, sometimes those with credentials often stand a better chance of getting published. But for most Michigan's statewide news outlets, letter writers enjoy a true democracy.

Like opinion pieces (essays, op-eds), most publications want letters that play off the news of the last few days, or the week. So, if there IS something in the news, even if you think its minor or it's not "breaking" news (e.g., April is Autism Awareness Month) you should act fast and get your LTE submitted.

On the other hand: don't let any lack of "newsworthiness" discourage you. There is a world of conversations that can be held on the topic of autism. **ASD is an evergreen issue.** So, submit your LTE idea to your local outlet no matter what is, or is not, in the news.

Another important reason to submit personally written LTE or opinion pieces to your local news outlet is simply public education: no matter what your official credentials in life, you are the expert on the autism topic you are writing about, be it your personal experiences, the experiences of your child, your medical practice, your business, etc.

What makes a good letter to the editor?

The same things that make a good op-ed/essay make a good LTE --- except in a nutshell.

As with the essay, your LTE is not just your opinion. It begins with facts, and makes an argument based on facts and informed by logic—not emotion or ideology. You can educate without preaching. It should not just be a complaint; you must almost always offer next steps or possible solutions for the matter at hand.

Editors want pieces that don't just wow you with expertise; they want pieces that are colorful, fast-moving and provocative – hallmarks of any good writing. A good LTE is concise. It hits hard. It marshals vivid images, analogies and, when appropriate, anecdotes. Editors see the Letters page as a place for advocacy, denunciations, controversy and astonishment. They want to stimulate community discussion and drive public debate. They want people to say, "Wow! Did you see that letter to the editor today?"

LTEs easily lend themselves to strong, stark statements. Just make your case and make it fast.

Don't forget to include a catchy headline that conveys your message. This will help the editor grasp the idea quickly and help sell your contribution. (However, expect the publication to write its own headline; that's just how it works.)

Do I need an editor or sign-off?

¹ Much credit to: Kevin Krajick, News from the Columbia Climate School, State of the Planet, [Writing and Submitting an Opinion Piece](#), May 4, 2020

You do not need “sign-off” but all writers need editors. You might show your piece to a family member or colleague to see if they can poke holes in it. Editing almost always helps. You should also feel free to contact Maureen Saxton (maureen@vandykehorn.com) at Van Dyke Horn, the public relations firm working with Autism Alliance of Michigan (AAoM); or Kathleen Larson at AAoM: kathleen.larson@aaomi.org.

After you submit your LTE to your local news outlet, please let Maureen and/or Kathleen know that it has been submitted and please send them a copy.

Where can I find more guidance?

Below are some good resources. Good luck!

Writing Letters to the Editor Community Toolbox

Seven Tips for Crafting a Compelling Letter to the Editor Advocacy & Communications Solutions, LLC

Writing – Letter to the Editor Leverage Edu