Write a Letter to the Editor—With Examples

The voice of the people

Because many people read letters-to-the-editor (LTEs), they are a quick, effective and continuing means of communicating on issues to many readers. They can be used to correct and clarify facts in a news story, editorial or op-ed piece, oppose or support actions of an official agency, direct attention to a problem, spur news editors to cover an issue that is being overlooked, and urge readers to support your cause.

Respond to Current News — Newspapers rarely publish letters about topics that are not being covered in the news. Referring to a previously published article or column will increase your letter’s chances of being published.

Research the Guidelines — Most papers’ length limit on LTEs is around 250 words. Stick to this so that an editor does not cut out the important points of your letter. Some papers ask you to submit your letter through an online submission form or to submit by e-mailing your letter. Always include your name, address and phone number so they can verify that the letter is from you. You can usually find a paper’s guidelines on the letters page in the opinion section. If not, call the paper directly to ask!

Make it Personal — Readers are more interested in an issue when they see how it affects their lives and communities. Find a way to show how budget cuts or environmental policies will affect this particular readership. Ask yourself “why this issue or action is important to you and your family?” and “how will the issue positively or negatively impact your life or community?” Facts and figure can certainly add to the probability of getting a letter published, however, making your letter personal is equally as important.

Assume Nothing — Do not assume that your readers are informed on your topic. Give a concise but informative background before plunging into the main issue. Refer to any newspaper article or editorial by date and title. Also include any relevant credentials that prove you are informed about your topic. And, always briefly explain difficult topics to be easily understood and spell out acronyms.

Stay Focused and to the Point — State your position as clearly as possible without eliminating necessary detail. Keep your paragraphs short. Long rambling sentences and digressions will cause people to lose interest quickly. Stick to one subject.

Maintain Composure — It is okay to express outrage, but it should be kept under control. Avoid personal attacks and focus instead on criticizing specific policies or ideas.

Have Your Facts Straight — Be sure your letter has its facts straight. Letters by that has its facts wrong or in conflict with our allies does not reflect well on the cause. Ask for additional facts and information or you can do your own research form credible sources. We have many informational resources for Sierra Club volunteers and activists!
Global warming

I have lived in the Columbus area for 34 years. Throughout my life I have seen and experienced many things, but I’m just starting to understand how they connect to climate change as well as the health and wellbeing of my community. Now that I know, I want policymakers to take aggressive action in reversing climate change by drastically cutting greenhouse gas emissions—particularly carbon pollution from coal fired power plants—for the sake of my family and the global family.

After twenty years of delay, the Environmental Protection Agency has finally proposed Carbon Pollution Standards for power plants. They could not have come sooner because passing and enforcing those carbon pollution standards will help in two ways: 1) Improving air quality and health; and 2) stopping climate change. Although air pollution is a big issue for the general population, it is especially critical to African-Americans because it affects us disproportionately.

The EPA Green Book showed, for example, that 71% of African-Americans live in counties in violation of air pollution standards, compared to 58% of Whites. The Ohio Department of Health found that “Black residents of Ohio have a higher mortality rate from asthma than white residents. While 12 percent of the Ohio population is black, they represent 27 percent of asthma deaths.”

Climate change is affecting our everyday life and as the temperature increases we all could see more extreme summers and winters, natural disasters, and debilitating health, social and economic problems. The
change in the climate brings hurricanes and other natural disasters that will disproportionately weigh on African-Americans in Ohio and across the country. The study, Coal Blooded, pointed out that the median wealth of African-American households is one-tenth of that of the white households, which leaves African-Americans with fewer resources to fall back on when disaster hits.

In the recent report NAACP Coal Blooded—which evaluates 378 coal-fired power plants on how they affect low-income communities and communities of color — our state of Ohio has ten plants marked as “failing”. These plants emit levels of chemicals and heavy metals that no one in Ohio should be exposed to.

We must move away from dirty industries that are polluting my community and others around the nation and around the planet. Corporations aren’t going to do it on their own, so we need policies to enforce major reductions in pollution. We have to do this now for the sake of present and future generations.

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**Below is an easy process which can help give your letter a personal angle**

1) Find a topic you want to write about
2) Choose a category that fits you
3) Ask yourself questions to make it personal.
4) Answer the question to decide how the angle fits into you and your life
   - Think of ways that _blank_ affects you, your family, your community, the environment, the world, etc.
   - Think of how _blank_ affects ethnic groups, public health, the environment, personal income, etc.
5) Write the letter — use Sierra Club talking points to add in supporting details and facts
6) Submit your letter to the newspaper
7) Call the newspaper and ask for the opinion editor – confirm that they received your letter!

Example:
Topic (what you fill the blank with): Recently upheld Mercury Standards
Personal Trait (choose form the categories): Expecting Mother
Angle (choose a bullet point and decide how it fits your views): How Mercury Standards affect me & my unborn child—the upheld mercury standards affect me and my unborn child positively because…etc...
Final: I could write a story about how the recently upheld Mercury Standards will positively affect my health and the health of my unborn child. I can use Sierra Club talking points to support my stance and give facts…etc...

The above letter would be set-up as follows:
Topic: EPA’s proposed Carbon Standards
Personal Trait: African American
Angle: How carbon pollution affects African Americans disproportionately

Categories (add more categories & bullet points if you can!!):

Parents:
- How does _blank_ affect your child’s health?
- How will _blank_ affect your child’s future?

Elderly:
- How does _blank_ affect your health?

Geographical Location:
- How does _blank_ affect the area you live in? (air quality, water quality, etc.)
- How does _blank_ affect your health?
- How does _blank_ jeopardize a good quality of life?
- How does your politician handle _blank_?

Mothers:
- How does _blank_ affect you and your child?

Personal Health:
-Do you have a health problem(s) that was triggered by _blank_?
-Does _blank_ make your health problem(s) worse?