

TAKE ACTION

WRITING A LETTER TO THE EDITOR TIPS FOR ADVOCATES

The letter to the editor is one of the most commanding tools of advocacy, a way to reach thousands of readers with a very few words. The following are tips for getting your letters of advocacy published.

FOLLOW THE RULES

Each publication, whether print or online, has specific guidelines. Always check the rules before starting to write. Guidelines typically are published in the Opinion or Editorial sections or can be found under Contact Us. They most likely will include requirements that you:

- **Provide your real name.**
- **Provide verifiable contact information.**
- **Submit via email** (or postal service) but never in an attachment.

BE NEWS WISE

- **Watch for stories and editorials on which you can comment with passion and authority.** We often find good potential in stories about mental illness; mental health laws, policies, practices and/or budgets; and when preventable tragedies. Address your letter to the aspect of the issue to which eliminating barriers to treatment is most relevant.
- **Be timely.** Submit your letter as soon as possible after publication of the article that has inspired it. Editors aren't interested in letters about last week's news!
- **Speak to the editors.** Write as if you're talking to the editor of the newspaper – not to readers, elected officials or the world at large.
- **Stay on message.** One topic per letter is best. Concentrate on a few powerful points that show the need for reform. Bring in personal experiences only if appropriate and doing so is comfortable.
- **Keep it short.** Word counts vary but generally are in the 200-250 word range. Longer letters are less likely to be published and, if selected, will almost certainly be edited.
- **Use the official submission form,** if provided. That will be the fastest way to reach the editors.
- **Respect limits on how many letters you can submit.** Many publications will not re-publish the same writer within a specified period of time even on a different topic. If the publication has a limit on how often it will publish your letters, do not violate it.
- **Avoid personal attacks.**
- **Always proofread and spell-check.**

IF YOU HAVE TOO MUCH TO SAY for a letter, submit a guest opinion. Though harder to place, these may run up to several hundred words longer than a letter and will be more prominently displayed. The above rules and guidelines generally apply with the exception of the word limit, which will be longer.

REMEMBER THAT LETTERS SERVE MANY PURPOSES. Even in the era of shrunken newspapers and limited news budgets in radio and TV, politicians use the media to track public opinion. A large number of letters on a subject will be noticed by decision makers. At the publication itself, a show of public passion on an issue may influence how much coverage the publication gives to the topic in the future.



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