



# WRITING A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

MEDIA ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

A letter to the editor (LTE) is a quick, simple, and effective way to get your message to the public. The "letters" section in newspapers, as well as radio and television stations that have a listener/viewer feedback system, exist to provide a forum for public comment and debate. They are excellent opportunities to get "free" coverage and to keep your issues alive. LTEs work well to help you correct or clarify misinformation or misperceptions, provide additional information, express an opinion or point of view on an issue in the news, and introduce or reinforce a specific message.

Whether you are writing a letter to respond to "bad press" or to reinforce "good press," there are a number of important points to keep in mind.

## IMPROVE YOUR CHANCES OF GETTING PUBLISHED

- If you are responding to a specific report or issue in the news, quickly send your letter while the topic is still current. Deliver, fax, or e-mail your communication within 1 to 3 days. The LTE e-mail address and fax number are provided in the publication. Make sure you send it to the "Letters to the Editor" department. Most newspapers with Web sites have a direct e-mail link for submitting letters to the editor.
- Shorter letters have a better chance of being published. Always check first to see if the newspaper has a word limit. If a letter is too long, it may be edited down or, worse, it may be ignored for not complying with the word limit.
- Keep the tone objective and professional. Don't be offensive or make personal attacks. Focus on the information, not the person who wrote it. Letters containing derogatory or hypercritical statements may be edited or rejected entirely.
- When providing factual information or corrections, include the reference or source (for example, "According to the last census, the number of Americans over the age of 65 was...").
- Avoid acronyms or industry jargon that your audience will not understand.
- Check for spelling, grammar, and clarity. Have someone edit or at least read your letter before you submit it.
- Always include your name, address, and phone number so you can be contacted easily to confirm that you are the author. Newspapers will often call and check to make sure the letter was not submitted under someone else's name.

## REMEMBER!

- Newspapers want to hear from their readers—as long you respond quickly and follow the writing guidelines, you stand a good chance of being published.
- Whenever you see an article, editorial, or column about issues that are relevant to older Americans and their families, consider it an opportunity to write an LTE.
- News programs on radio and TV often air listener comments at the end of programming. This is another opportunity for you to get your information out through the media.

All of this adds up to "earned" media for your organization and your issues—media that provide coverage of your issues without you having to pay for it! Reading your area newspapers and keeping track of area news and public affairs broadcasts will help you identify earned media opportunities. (See "Identifying Media Opportunities.")