



Tips on Writing a Letter to the Editor

By Patrick Lohier, CESO Public Engagement Officer

Letters to the editor are the most effective method you can use to share your views on topics with your community. They are popular with newspaper readers and can be an effective way to let others know about pressing issues. As a CESO volunteer, you may have firsthand knowledge of, and personal experience with, international development issues. Share your experience with others. Remember, you have a better chance of getting a letter to the editor published than of placing an op-ed piece or having a reporter write a story about you.

Content Tips

- Letters that are an immediate reaction to a story previously published in the paper have the best chance of getting published. Refer to the title and date of publication of the article you are responding to (e.g., "Ms. Chesel ("Why Pursue the MDGs?", August 8) does not take the full issue into account . . ."). You need to respond quickly to the article you are referring to, though--two to three days maximum.
- You will learn the most effective letter-writing style if you read the letters to the editor page regularly. Also, you'll avoid redundancy and wasted effort if someone has already written on an issue.
- Make your letter to the editor both personal and informative. Touch on your firsthand experience in a specific region, and back up your opinion with well-researched facts. For example, use data from the UN Millennium Development Report or other reputable sources to support your opinion. Cite your sources.
- Read the newspaper's guidelines regarding the publication's preferred length for letters to the editor. Some newspapers prefer letters of 150-200 words. Some others (e.g., the Globe and Mail) publish letters of upwards of 1,000 words in length. If the newspaper does not post their guidelines, contact the paper and inquire.
- Be concise. Lead the piece with your opinion stated clearly and succinctly.
- Keep your paragraphs short and punchy.
- Avoid personal attacks of any kind. Construct a clear argument, using examples, to convey your opinion.
- Edit and spellcheck your letter. Nothing turns an editor off more than a piece filled with misspellings or bad grammar. Have a friend read and proofread your letter with an eye

on (1) the effectiveness of your argument, and (2) spelling mistakes and errors in grammar.

Etiquette Tips

- As with the word length, follow the publication's posted guidelines for submitting your letter. Note the contact name, postal or email address to send your letter to. Also, follow any formatting guidelines (e.g., font size, restrictions on attachments to emails, etc.) preferred by the publication, and follow those guidelines carefully.
- You can submit the same content for a letter to the editor to more than one newspaper, but be sure to state this in your email or letter (e.g., "This is a simultaneous submission", or "I am also submitting this letter to other publications"). If you do make simultaneous submissions, avoid submitting to more than one paper per city. Note that some publications do not appreciate simultaneous submissions. If you want your letter published in a particular newspaper, then submit only to that publication.
- Include your name, address, phone number and email address with your submission. The editors may need to get in touch with you.

Follow up to see if the letter was received. But only call once!

For more resources, tools and tips on Public Engagement in support of Canada's role in international development, please visit <http://www.ceso-saco.com/>.