

Population Connection Regional Media How-To Guide

Letter-to-the-Editor and Op-Ed

Placing opinion pieces in local newspapers can be an influential way to insert your viewpoint into an ongoing conversation, or one you want to generate in the community. An op-ed is a newspaper article that expresses an opinion about an issue in the news. The name op-ed comes from its usual location in the paper, opposite the editorial page. A letter to the editor (LTE) is just that — a letter written to a newspaper by a reader in order to respond to a previous article or to offer a newsworthy opinion.

How to Write and Submit a Letter to the Editor (LTE):

Step 1: Choose when to submit an LTE. LTEs are most often placed when they are written in response to an article/editorial and either point out an alternate perspective, or highlight/strengthen the piece. In some cases it may make sense to submit an LTE that does not relate back to a particular article, but rather highlights a recent local event (e.g. local rally around the Women’s March or a forum where a candidate mentions women’s health care).

Step 2: Choose what to write in an LTE. LTEs should be able to stand on their own and make sense to readers who may not have read the original article to which it is responding.

Step 3: Write your LTE. LTEs should be focused and direct. Trying to cover several topics and making too many points reduces letters’ impact so try to keep to one subject if possible.

Step 4: Keep it brief. Newspapers and online outlets have different word count requirements for LTEs, but in general it is best to keep them as short and succinct as possible (usually between 150-200 words).

Step 5: List your info. Always include your credentials and contact information, as most publications will require verbal or written verification that you have authored the piece. As with op-eds, timing is everything – news goes stale very fast, so submit LTEs as quickly as possible. Your best shot at consideration is to have something submitted within 48 hours.

Step 6: Submit your LTE. Each outlet has different LTE submission guidelines. Be sure to check the outlet’s website for further guidance. Usually, you will send an email to an address specifically assigned to letters to the editor at the particular publication, or to the letters editor directly.

Step 6: Follow-up after you submit. Most newspapers have areas online where you can post comments to articles. If your LTE does not get placed, consider going online and adding your letter as a comment to a story.

How to Write and Submit an Op-Ed:

Step 1: Choose when to submit an op-ed. Op-eds are most likely to be placed when there is a public debate or coverage of a particular issue occurring in the news. The biggest rule about when to submit is to submit before it’s too late — news goes stale very fast.

Step 2: Choose what to write in an op-ed. Many regional newspapers receive pieces with a national angle from newspaper syndicates, so it's best to emphasize a local/regional angle if possible (e.g., a personal story, local statistic and/or a local event).

Step 3: Write the op-ed. Op-eds should clearly articulate the problem at the beginning of the piece (e.g., Legislators who want to slash funding for family planning programs will cost our state and federal government more money in the long run. Research by the Guttmacher Institute shows that for every \$1 invested in family planning, we save \$7 in public funds. ¹)

Then narrow the arguments down to a very regional point (e.g., Here in California, about 2.6 million women need help gaining access to family planning. In 2014, half of these women received care. ² Worldwide, the unmet need is even larger, with 225 million women who want to avoid pregnancy but who aren't using modern contraception.)

Conclude with a clearly defined call-to-action (e.g., We must urge our members of Congress to continue critical investments in domestic and international family planning programs, which have far reaching health, economic, and environmental benefits).

Need help with sources or citations? We're happy to offer support and to proofread your final draft.

Stay focused on themes such as *voluntary* access to family planning. Do not call for coercive or punitive measures—these viewpoints do not uphold our vision of empowering women and will detract from your point, while hurting our cause.

Step 4: Choose who should 'sign' an op-ed. What is the voice that can have the most strategic impact towards your goals and who you want to influence? Is it a first-person storyteller, academic, or policy maker? Consider regional figureheads who support your issue and determine if it might be more advantageous to ask them to sign, or cosign, the piece once it is written. Remember that the op-ed's byline might not always be the same person that actually wrote the words.

Step 5: Check your word count. Newspapers and online outlets have different word count requirements for op-eds, but in general it is best to keep them between 650 to 700 words. Check the outlets' websites for information about word count requirements, as this information is usually listed in their editorial section.

¹ JENNIFER J. FROST, ADAM SONFIELD, MIA R. ZOLNA, and LAWRENCE B. FINER; "Return on Investment: A Fuller Assessment of the Benefits and Cost Savings of the US Publicly Funded Family Planning Program;" Guttmacher Institute;
https://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/pubs/journals/MQ-Frost_1468-0009.12080.pdf;
accessed 3/1/2017

² "State Facts About Unintended Pregnancy: California;" Guttmacher Institute;
<https://www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/state-facts-about-unintended-pregnancy-california>; accessed 3/1/2017

Step 6: List your info. Always include your credentials and contact information, as most publications will require verbal or written verification that you have authored the piece.

Step 7: Submit to the op-ed editor. Editors usually like to see a finished product first, rather than a pitch of a future op-ed. Expect feedback and edits from the editor. Editors may even ask you to re-write the op-ed to shift focus on the piece entirely.

Step 8: Follow-up after you submit. If you have not heard back from the publication within 24 to 48 hours, it's usually a good idea to follow-up via phone or e-mail. If you receive a "no," then you should consider submitting to another local paper or online outlet. If there are no alternatives, consider posting your piece on a blog.

Social Media

Social media allows you to publicly pressure, persuade and interact with your target.

Step 1: Draft your tweet. When drafting posts, it's always a good idea to balance identifying your key headline/message, while sounding conversational. Put the most interesting part of the post first. Always tag (by using their Twitter handle) the journalist, ally, or partner's twitter handle when mentioning their article, organization, etc. It's important to know the difference between tweeting *at* someone and tweeting *about* them in the third person. If you want to send a message directly to someone and don't mind that the tweet *would not be visible to all followers* you would tweet something like:

- "@SenatorCollins, please cosponsor the #GlobalHERAct to protect women and girls around the world"

However, if you wanted to tweet to your followers and have a message that *is visible to anyone who searches for mentions of the person you're tweeting to/about*, you would need to put at least one character in front of the person's handle. For example:

- "Join me in asking @SenatorCollins to cosponsor the #GlobalHERAct to protect women and girls around the world"

Step 2: Shorten your links. Save valuable characters, tidy up your posts, and track click-throughs with bit.ly or ow.ly. You can also use giphy.com if you want to tag up to 10 additional users in an image or gif.

Step 3: Join the conversation and use hashtags. Get your tweets in front of reporters and advocates who are following this issue by using relevant hashtags (e.g. #FightforHER, #FamilyPlanning, #TrumpGlobalGag, etc).

Thank you and good luck! Email us at engage@popconnect.org if you'd like further tips, help with your op-ed or LTE, or general support. And please let us know if you're successful in being published! We'd like to hear your success stories.