

August 2020

ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

How and why to write a letter to the editor

The decline in newspaper readership and the rise of social media has reshaped media relations for many communications professionals. Messaging in local media was an important part of communications planning. A good plan included strategies and responses to media coverage — whether it was reactive based on current news or proactive messaging through news releases and opinion editorials.

Times are changing for newsrooms. As readership declines, newspapers are folding or significantly reducing staff.

According to the Pew Research Center:

“The estimated total U.S. daily newspaper circulation (print and digital combined) in 2018 was 28.6 million for weekday and 30.8 million for Sunday, down 8% and 9%, respectively, from the previous year. Weekday print circulation decreased 12% and Sunday print circulation decreased 13%.” www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/newspapers

Don't dismiss letters to the editor

People who subscribe to local newspapers generally like to read local news. This may explain why, according to a study commissioned by Legacy.com, the obituary section is one of the most-read parts of the local paper. (<https://legacy.co/38EiVcM>)

Letters to the editor have been popular for the same reason: people like to hear from and about their neighbors. We can find plenty of opinions on social media, but letters to the editor still have merit:

- They are published by a media source that has a set of standards for sharing a balanced range of views.
- They are concise, with a typical word limit of 150 to 250 words.
- They allow readers to see a range of opinions about current issues.
- They are transparent — prior to publishing, the writer's identity is verified.
- The audience reach goes beyond an individual's social media circle and is not part of a paid advertisement.
- They are often posted in print and digital editions and are shareable to readers' individual social media channels.

Planning for letters to the editor

The value of letters to the editor is in the authorship. Reserve opinions from the superintendent and school board chair for opinion editorials — slightly longer format with more stringent guidelines for publication because fewer are published.

For subscription information, contact WSSDA at (800) 562-8927 or (360) 493-9231.

For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

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Letters to the editor can be valuable for non-administrative staff or community members who would like to share their experiences, support or opposition to initiatives. District staff can suggest them or provide tips for sharing views about important issues that affect schools and education.

Letters to the editor may cross into prohibited advocacy issues. Beware of the restrictions on political activity in your state and ensure that the district does not influence the viewpoints expressed in these letters.

Tips for effective letters to the editor

The National Education Association recommends letters to the editor as an effective means of providing information to legislators. “Letters to the editor can provide readers with information and insights on issues with which they may be unfamiliar, and can also inspire readers to take action.” Read tips from NEA about effective letters to the editor: www.nea.org/home/19683.htm

- Keep it brief and discuss only one issue.
- Get to the point and include clear factual points.
- Relate the issue to local interests.
- Personalize the issue by sharing an example of how it impacts your community or someone in your local community.
- End with a call to action, such as reaching out to your legislator.
- Be timely. The issue should have relevance to an initiative or decision currently under consideration.
- Be professional. Submit a legible letter that follows the newspaper’s guidelines and is polite.
- Identify yourself. Provide contact information to help the paper verify the letter’s authenticity.

Sample guidelines for stakeholders and patrons

(Remember to check election laws in your state for restrictions on political activities.)

Your School District Measure xx-xxx: Letters to the Editor Guidelines

The best letters to the editor include a brief statement about the bond measure and a personal point of view. Why are these projects important to you and our community? The letters are brief and should clearly state the author’s support. A sample is below, but writers should personalize their own.

Submission guidelines:

The *Newspaper Times* limits political letters to 200 words.

Submit letters to the online submission form: www.emailmeform.com

Recommendations

Paragraph 1: Introduce the issue and begin to state your case. Add a personal view or details about how the local schools or education in general has impacted you, your family or your community.

This is an uncertain time, but we can do something good for our community that will last long into the future. Your School Measure xx-xxx will be on the May ballot and has needed these

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updates since I was in high school 20 years ago. Our students should not have to walk around buckets in the hallways when it rains because the roof is leaking.

Paragraph 2: In the next section, state one or two key points to support your position. *School District is proposing a bond measure for the May election that will make critical repairs to our schools and improve safety and security for students and staff. Our schools are old—the average age is 55—and they haven't had major repairs or updates since the last bond in 2001. That bond is expiring. Now is the time to replace it and make repairs to protect our school buildings—without raising the tax rate.*

In the conclusion, sum up your argument and ask for support for the measure or provide directions for getting more details about the plan. Please join me in voting yes for our community and our future. Or, Learn more about the proposal at www.sdbond2020.com. With your support, we can fix our schools and protect our investment in these buildings.

Sample Letter

To the Editor,

This is an uncertain time, but we can make a difference. School Measure xx-xxx will be on the May ballot. I am voting yes because schools are essential to a healthy community, and our schools need these critical repairs and safety updates. I went to the high school 20 years ago, and these repairs were needed then!

The School District bond measure will be on the May ballot. It only includes the most essential projects, identified by a community-based facility task force. Our schools are old—the average age is 55—and they haven't had major repairs or updates since the last bond in 2001. Waiting to fix them will cost more later, and these projects will save thousands of dollars in annual costs for operations and maintenance.

The last bond is expiring. Now is the time to replace it and make repairs to protect our school buildings — without raising the tax rate.

*Please join me in voting yes for our community and our future. **Or**, learn more about the proposal at www.sdbond2020.com. Support this plan to fix our schools and protect our investment in these buildings.*

*Sincerely,
Your Name*

Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant