



EARTHJUSTICE

BECAUSE THE EARTH NEEDS A GOOD LAWYER

HOW TO WRITE A COMPELLING LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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WHY LETTERS TO THE EDITOR MATTER

In an era of digital media and rapid online sharing, letters to the editor remain one of the most powerful tools for shaping public discourse at both the local and national levels, especially on pressing environmental issues.

Letters to the editor are a simple but effective way for concerned community members to make their voices heard, to highlight how big-picture policies connect to life on the ground, and to influence decision-makers who monitor local sentiment. Elected officials, newspaper editors, and community leaders regularly review these sections to gauge public opinion, making it an ideal platform for spotlighting environmental harms and championing solutions.

At their core, letters to the editor can create meaningful change by raising awareness, amplifying underrepresented voices, and inspiring others to engage in advocacy. When written from a place of authenticity and grounded in solid facts, these letters are catalysts for dialogue, urging readers to consider both the immediate and long-term consequences of environmental challenges. By connecting national policies to local realities, each letter can spark conversations that ripple beyond the pages of a newspaper, prompting neighbors, policymakers, and potential allies to take action for our shared benefit.

Highlighting Local Impact while Linking National Policy

Letters to the editor reach a broad and engaged audience, including influential decision-makers, in ways that connect national environmental policies to the specific needs of local communities. They also:

- **Elevate Voices:** Local residents and neighbors are powerful messengers.
- **Influence Change:** Elected officials pay attention to local publications, using them to gauge constituents' concerns.
- **Strengthen Community:** Show that people in the region care about an issue and are paying attention.

Core Value(s) in Action: *Justice* demands that we highlight how national environmental policies intersect with real communities, particularly those already burdened by environmental harm.

Inclusion of community voices and viewpoints ensures that the public are not just hearing from corporate CEO's or elected officials about an issue but the people on the ground will be impacted by their decisions.

Recent Examples of Success

1. Pittsburgh and the Clairton Coke Works (Late 2010s)

Residents near the Clairton Coke Works in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania wrote letters to local newspapers such as the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and the *Tribune-Review* describing air quality problems and health concerns (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 2019). These firsthand accounts spurred additional investigative coverage by local reporters (Tribune-Review, 2019) and public health advocates.

Impact

- **Heightened Scrutiny:** Media outlets expanded their investigation, revealing evidence of harmful emissions and community health challenges (Allegheny County Health Department, 2020).
- **Regulatory Action:** In response to public outcry, the Allegheny County Health Department strengthened enforcement measures against the plant (Allegheny County Health Department, 2020).
- **Political Attention:** Elected officials cited letters and local news stories as a catalyst for public hearings (Pennsylvania State Senate Hearing, 2020).

2. Hawaii's Red Hill Fuel Leak (Early 2020s)

When fuel leaks at the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility threatened Oahu's drinking water, concerned residents submitted letters to newspapers including the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser* (Honolulu Star-Advertiser, 2021) to share personal accounts of tainted water supplies and related health issues.

Impact

- **Amplified Coverage:** Local journalists delved deeper into the situation, connecting community stories to official Navy documents (Civil Beat, 2021).
- **Policy Response:** State leaders and the Hawaii Department of Health took stronger measures to pressure the U.S. Navy into addressing the leaks (Hawaii Department of Health, 2022).

- **Community Mobilization:** By sharing links to these published letters on social media, residents galvanized widespread support, which put further pressure on decision-makers to act (Community Coalition Report, 2022).

3. *Local Wind and Solar Projects*

In many rural communities across the Midwest and other regions, everyday residents with no formal public profile wrote letters supporting or opposing new wind turbines and solar farms in outlets like *The Des Moines Register* and regional papers (Des Moines Register, 2021). These letters provided insight into both the benefits and challenges of transitioning to renewable energy at the local level.

Impact

- **Increased Dialogue:** Readers engaged in debates through follow-up letters, sharing perspectives on jobs, property values, and environmental stewardship (Kansas Reflector, 2021).
- **Public Hearings:** After noticing strong community interest, local officials organized town halls and listening sessions to address citizen concerns (Iowa County Records, 2021).
- **Influence on Decision-Making:** County boards and commissioners cited letters to the editor as evidence of community sentiment, sometimes resulting in policy revisions or implementation of stricter regulations (Midwest Regional Planning Commission Report, 2022).

CHOOSING THE RIGHT PUBLICATION

Go Local, Go National, or Both

- **Local Newspapers:** Small community papers are often more willing to publish letters from residents. They focus on localized angles like air quality, drinking water safety, or the impact of economic or national fossil fuel policies in the local community.
- **Regional & Statewide Outlets:** Medium-sized publications reach a broader audience but still welcome community voices.

- **National Outlets:** Well-known newspapers, magazines, and online platforms accept letters, though competition is stiffer. They often look for commentary tying personal stories to hot national topics.

Match Your Message to the Outlet

- **Research Editorial Guidelines:** Each publication has its own rules for word count, submission methods, and tone.
- **Read Existing LTEs:** Notice what kind of language and topics resonate with that publication's audience.

Quick Tip: Shorter letters (150–200 words) often have higher odds of being published.

STRUCTURING YOUR LETTER

While letters to the editor can vary, a clear, succinct structure increases the chance of publication. Aim for one to three short paragraphs:

1. **Hook:** Start with a powerful statement, timely reference, or local anecdote.
2. **Key Point:** Tie the local situation to broader environmental issues or policies, emphasizing Earthjustice's commitment to justice, excellence, partnership, and inclusion.
3. **Call to Action:** Encourage readers, local leaders, or policymakers to take specific steps; e.g., support a piece of legislation, attend a hearing, or donate to local environmental efforts.

Quick Tip: Present yourself as a champion of the community, helping to protect health and the environment. Show determination and commitment to positive change.

WRITING WITH PURPOSE AND PASSION

Incorporate Earthjustice's Values & Archetypes

- **Justice:** Speak boldly about the environmental harms affecting your community.
- **Excellence:** Provide credible facts and thoughtful arguments, avoiding exaggerations.

- **Partnership & Inclusion:** Demonstrate that solutions come from community collaboration, uplifting diverse voices.

Use a Clear, Energetic Tone

- **Bold But Not Hyperbolic:** Write assertively without resorting to insults or alarmism.
- **Forward-Thinking:** Address how local or national changes can lead to positive outcomes for the future.
- **Respectful & Inclusive:** Acknowledge partnerships with local and national organizations, including Earthjustice.

Mind the Word Limit

- **Check the Publication's Limit:** Some cap at 150 words; others allow up to 250.
- **Focus on One Key Issue:** Don't try to cover everything. A single, clear point is most effective.

SUBMISSION AND FOLLOW-UP

- **Follow Submission Guidelines**
 - Some outlets require an online form. Others accept email submissions. Include your full name, address, and phone number (they often need this for verification but won't necessarily publish it).
- **Craft a Concise Subject Line (If Emailing)**
 - Example: "Letter to the Editor on Local Air Quality Concerns"
- **Double-Check Everything**
 - Proofread thoroughly. Editors are more likely to publish polished letters.
- **Follow Up Politely**
 - If you haven't heard back within a week or so, a courteous email or call can help. But avoid spamming.

Quick Tip: Keep a record of each submission, noting the outlet and date. This helps you track where your letters have run or remain pending.

WHAT TO DO AFTER PUBLICATION

- **Share on Social Media**
 - Post your published letter on your personal accounts and tag Earthjustice.
 - Encourage friends and community members to like, comment, and share.
 - Explain why this issue matters locally, linking to any relevant Earthjustice pages or donation pages.
- **Send It to Earthjustice**
 - Forward your published link (or a scan if it's print-only) to jlevin@earthjustice.org. This helps Earthjustice track community engagement and amplify it on our channels, when possible.
- **Thank the Publication**
 - Building positive relationships with editors can increase chances of future placements.
- **Engage the Community**
 - If your letter prompts discussion or local action, consider organizing or attending events, town halls, and listening sessions.

ADDITIONAL TIPS AND RESOURCES

- **Resource Links** (*Placeholders*):
 - [Earthjustice Landing Page on National Policy Issues]
 - [List of Local Environmental Action Groups]
 - [Sample Letters to the Editor Archive]

Excellence in Action: Keep learning and refining your approach. Over time, you'll see what resonates with editors and readers alike.

CONCLUSION

Writing a compelling letter to the editor allows you to merge local voices with the pressing national environmental issues that shape our everyday lives. By leveraging Earthjustice's

values of justice, excellence, partnership, and inclusion, you can create an authentic, powerful statement that resonates with readers and decision-makers alike.

Thank you for taking the time to lift up our collective efforts and protect the planet we share. Your voice matters because the earth needs a good advocate in every community.