



## How To Write Effective Letters to the Editor, Op-Eds, Editorials, Blogs, Twitters and Facebook Posts

By Moira Bulloch, CHEJ

### Letters to the Editor

- Letters to the editor are the most widely read section of the newspaper, and can be a very effective way of getting your message out there. Politicians scan the letters to the editor section on a regular basis, so it's a great way of getting your campaign targets to pay attention to you.
- Letters to the Editor are usually 150 words or less, so you must be succinct.
- Newspapers will typically only run letters that are written in response to an article within the past week. Try to get letters to the editor in within 48 hours.
- Reference the article in your letter. You can do this as a title (*Re: "Green Your Spring Cleaning", Lifestyles, April 2<sup>nd</sup>*) or directly in the first sentence of the letter.
- Be witty. Consider whether you can relate the issue to a popular issue or anniversary or holiday, or use an analogy if it is complicated to simply the problem for people.
- Have your supporters write letters as well. Editors look for letters that are representative of the readership. If the editor receives a lot of letters, he or she is more likely to print one or two of them.
- Always proofread your letter to correct any grammatical or spelling errors.
- Include your contact information and day and evening telephone numbers. Newspapers will often verify your identity before printing a letter, and will usually not print your letter if they can't get in touch with you.

### Op-Ed Columns and Editorials

- Op-ed columns appear in daily newspapers, especially on Sunday, and are often popular and widely read. Op-Ed columns are usually limited to 650 words.
- **Call the Op-Ed editor to see if you can submit an op-ed.** Sell your story and your credentials and find out if the editor is interested in printing your piece and what the deadline would be.
- **Call the Editorial Board editor** if you are interested in having them do an editorial on your issue. See if you can set up a meeting with the editorial board to present your views. Let them know if community leaders or expert speakers will be coming. Explain why it is an important and timely issue worthy of an editorial. If you have a meeting, make sure to bring succinct written materials that describe your issue, including fact sheets, past articles, reports, etc.
- **Try your local paper.** Smaller papers, such as your daily newspaper, are more likely to print your op-ed than the New York Times.

- **Make it timely.** Track what's going on in the news and jump at opportunities. Look for ways to tie your work into the current news. For instance, if a major chemical spill happens in your state, you could do an op-ed on how your local chemical plant has a series of violations, is at risk for a chemical spill, and needs to take precautionary measures to prevent one.
- **Make a single point.** There isn't space in 650 words to tell the full history of your fight. Choose a message that can be summed up in one or two sentences, and put it at the top.
- **Tell the reader why they should care.** You may be very passionate, but a casual reader isn't invested in your fight. Tell them why your issue matters to them. Will it help them protect their children's health? Improve the local economy?
- **Use short sentences and paragraphs.** If an article looks too daunting and long, the reader will tend to skip over it.
- **Avoid rebuttals.** Don't waste space repeating your opponent's arguments and refuting them point-by-point. Build your own case.

## Blogs:

- More and more, people are turning to the internet and blogs for breaking news and ideas. Blogs can be small, personal websites by a mother sharing her child's first words and pictures with family, or large, professional sites like [www.huffingtonpost.com](http://www.huffingtonpost.com) which function like an on-line magazine. Other blogs are very specific to certain issues and provide expert opinion and insider information; mainstream television stations and newspapers monitor these blogs for story leads.
- **Blog posts are usually 250-650 words.** Keep in mind, the headline and first few sentences are key to grabbing people's attention as the average reader won't spend more than 90 seconds reading your post.
- **Write an attention-getting headline.** This is what attracts readers. Make it startling, with keywords to help it pop up on the Google, internet search engine.
- **Use links.** Include links to websites or reports to back up your points, especially to other blogs who will then more likely "link back" to you.
- **Make it personable.** Connect with your audience and don't be afraid to write in the first person.
- **Engage in discussion.** Ask your readers to interact or perhaps share their own stories in the comment section.
- **Reach out to other blogs** and see if you can write a guest post on their blog. If you write a blog, invite other bloggers to guest post on yours.
- **If you maintain your own blog, try to** update it on a daily basis.



## Twitter Posts

- **Twitter** is a new form of social media that is gaining in popularity, especially with people in the media industry. It is ‘micro-blogging’, meaning that you can only post a couple sentences at a time.
- **Twitter is quick and immediate** and has become very popular for breaking news. Journalists monitor Twitter when a new story breaks because eyewitnesses will often post information to Twitter even before the media or law-enforcement knows about it.
- **Twitter is also used to organize** for conferences or events. Attendees can suggest meeting up for a discussion during lunch via Twitter or share information with people who could not come.
- **Activists can share information** and new studies and industry watches Twitter to see what people are saying about their products. If you can get a lot of people to start talking about PVC packaging at Wal-Mart over Twitter, you can bet that someone in Wal-Mart’s Marketing office is taking note. This makes Twitter important in publicizing a boycott, or critique of a company.
- **Twitter only lets you write up to 140 characters**, so keep it very short. You will only be able to write one sentence, and maybe include a link to your website, or a related article.
- **Include links** to other websites or reports to make a bigger point. Use services like <http://tinyurl.com> to shorten hyperlinks to other articles or websites so that you don’t take up all your 140 characters. [www.chej.org](http://www.chej.org) isn’t very long, but posting <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/30/AR2009053002121.html> leaves you with no space left for a comment. Using websites like <http://tinyurl.com> will shorten those long hyperlinks to a more twitter-appropriate length.
- **Ask** a pointed question about an article to get people thinking.
- **Use humor.**
- **Repost or “retweet”** (RT) posts from other people. The more you retweet posts from others, the more likely they’ll return the favor. It’s a great way to build your list.
- **Use hashtags** (ex: #environment so that others can search your tweets by topic. These tags turn your tweet into part of a conversation by making it easy for others to follow the whole conversation just by searching for the hashtag. They can also provide context. For example, maybe you are organizing around a superfund site: “Community action kept developers from building a school next door to the Wingate site! #superfund”. The #superfund hashtag connects you to Superfund activists across the country and provides the context that Wingate is a Superfund site.
- **Update** it on a daily basis, but be sure not to update it too much (i.e. every minute).



## Facebook Posts

- **Facebook** is a networking site with over 200 million users, of all ages. You can share links to websites or articles directly from your personal Facebook account. Links to news-stories or videos are most useful.
- **You can also create Facebook 'pages' or 'groups'** to connect with others. Use a group if you are trying to organize others around your issue. Only use a page if you have an established organization that you are promoting.
- **Quizzes & Applications.** If you have some tech-savvy people in your organization, you can create quizzes or other Facebook applications to make your group or cause more interactive.
- **Post Pictures.** Post an album of photos from your most recent event, and share them with your friends and supporters of Facebook. You can use <http://twitpic.com/> to share single photos over Twitter.
- **Post links to your Twitter and Facebook accounts** on the front of your website, in your e-mail and print newsletters, etc. Send out e-mail blasts inviting your supporters to follow you or become your friend.

