

## What are letters to the editor?

*Readership polls consistently show that letters to the editor are one of the better-read features of a newspaper. The purpose of printing letters is generally misunderstood and readers often assume a newspaper shares the same opinion as letters they print.*

*Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, letters to the editor are printed in order to allow readers an opportunity to express views differing from those of the newspaper or ones expressed by individuals in articles or other letters.*

*Offering an editorial page is one way a newspaper helps to preserve the right of people in a free society to discuss, question and challenge actions and utterances of our government and public institutions. Journalists uphold the right to speak unpopular opinions and the privilege to either agree or disagree with the majority.*



*Most newspapers get too many letters to print so they only print ones that meet the newspaper's letter criteria. This brochure outlines some of the basic criteria that most newspapers use. Submitting a letter that meets those criteria improves your chances of seeing the letter in print.*

## A word from an editor ...

“The best letters to the editor are direct and to the point. Writers should not try to be chatty. Make every word count and don't repeat yourself. Pretend you are paying for the letter by the word, and get rid of every word that does not increase the information in the letter. Never call anyone names and don't accuse people of committing crimes. Libelous accusations cannot be published. Being witty and/or funny may make the letter go down more easily and thus be remembered.

**Murray Bishoff**

**Managing Editor, The Monett Times**

*If it's worth saying or putting in writing, it's worth signing. Otherwise, it's worth nothing.*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David L. Burton".

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*Being an active  
citizen by writing . . .*

# Letters to the editor



**Tips for submitting  
and getting your  
letter published**

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# Tips and Suggestions on How to Get a “Letter to the Editor” Published

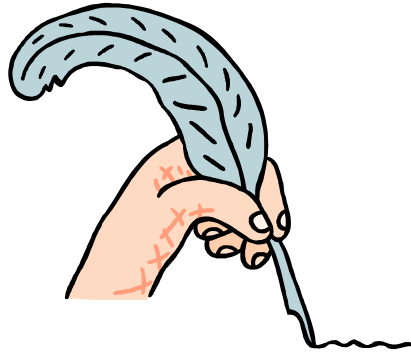
Every newspaper has criteria for “letters to the editor” that help determine what they will publish. Submitting a letter that meets those criteria improves your ability to get a letter published. The following are common criteria for letters followed by an explanation or recommendation:

**Make your point quickly.** Just 200 words is considered a long letter. Take the time to edit a well-written letter that exceeds that length — or a letter that raises a compelling point that exceeds that length — to the newspaper’s length limit. *Newspapers value concise writing.*

**Include your name, address and daytime telephone number on the letter.** Letters to the editor must be signed. Nearly all newspapers throw away anonymous letters because letters must be *verified prior to publication.*

**All letters are subject to editing for clarity, libel and taste.** No vulgarity, racial slurs or mean-spiritedly insulting terms. Most newspapers will not print accusations of criminal behavior, even on the part of elected officials. Use common sense on what you write, and who you write about. *Most letters are also edited for newspaper style and length.*

**Most newspapers prefer to have letters typed or electronically transmitted.** However, newspapers will accept handwritten letters, providing the handwriting is legible. *Submitting your letter by e-mail increases the odds of getting it published and getting it in print sooner.*



**Letters picked for publication are normally acknowledged** quickly in order to be sure that published letters are timely.

**Newspapers cannot publish every letter they receive**, even if they are written clearly and concisely. The editor has to make a choice based on the timely nature of the letter and whether or not there has been a balance of letters from both sides of an issue. Many newspapers define “balance” as printing one letter from both sides of an issue, not a publication rate representative of the ratio of letters received. *If your opinion differs from the opinions of those letters being printed, your chances for publication increase.*

**Letters criticizing the newspaper are okay, as long as the criticism is not mean-spirited.** Most newspapers will publish letters that challenge a reporter’s take on a story, but stay away from letters that personally attack staffers, call them liars or question their ethics. *Letters that disagree with editorial stances are as valuable for publication, if not more, than letters that agree with them.*

**Most newspapers will not publish letters that are part of an organized attempt** to flood them with mail on a given topic. They also don’t publish “form” letters. Additionally, most newspapers also set a submission limit for letter writers, like no more than one letter published per month.

**Remember that newspapers print letters as space permits.** Electronic mediums sell time, a newspaper sells space, and advertisements keep a publication’s doors open.

## Tips From An Expert

Walter Seifert, professor emeritus of journalism at Ohio State University, holds the world record for having the most published “letters to the editor.” Here are Walt Seifert’s rules for writing an effective letter to the editor.

- 1. Be legible.** Type your letter, double-spaced, check your spelling, and use proper grammar.
- 2. Be timely.** React at once. If you wait a week or so, the issue that upset you might be past.
- 3. Be brief.** If you can’t sell ’em in three paragraphs, you won’t in 20. Identify your complaint in the first sentence so the editor knows why you are writing. Then expand on your theme, using a factual source to make your case.
- 4. Be simple.** Most readers don’t like long sentences or fancy words. Keep paragraphs short. Use punchy words.
- 5. Be constructive.** If you condemn, suggest a better way (and think about using humor).
- 6. Give complete information.** Most papers require verification that you actually wrote the letter so give your address and both work and home phone numbers.
- 7. Ask for a response.** A polite request for a reply shows that you are serious about your complaint, and that you want it answered.
- 8. Send a copy of your letter to the reporter or writer about whom you are complaining.** This is common courtesy.
- 9. Keep copies of all letters you write.** If you can document that your letters are consistently being “spiked” you will have direct information to use with the editor.

