



# Partners In Health

ENGAGE

## Letters to the Editor Toolkit



## Writing Letters to the Editor

### What is a Letter to the Editor?

A Letter to the Editor (LTE) is a brief statement expressing your opinion, generally in response to current events or a recently published article. While news reporting is supposed to be objective, LTEs are a chance to talk about an issue that's important to you and what can or should be done about it. You can use LTEs to target specific politicians or ask your audience to take a particular action.

### Why Letters to the Editor?

Letters to the editor are quick to write, relatively easy to have published, and appear in the most widely read section of the paper: the editorial page. Politicians and government agencies routinely clip and circulate letters to the editor as an indicator of what is important to their constituents. Voicing your opinions through LTEs help your elected officials understand the importance and urgency of issues that may not typically be front of mind for their offices.

It's *always* a good time to write and submit a LTE, but whenever possible, link your submission with the goals of our current PIH Engage advocacy campaigns. Webinars, supplemental toolkits, and updated information for your team's coach will help you think about what issue to highlight, who to target, and how to frame the solution. You also enhance your chance of getting a letter published if your thoughts and ideas add some new angle or element to the public debate on a story or issue.

### Writing Your Letter to the Editor

Frame your letter in the **EPIC** Format:

**E**ngage audience (Startling statistics, quick story, photos)

- Try to respond to a recent news article, relate the issues to your local community, or personalize it with your own experience. The goal is to catch your audience's attention and get them to keep reading.

**P**roblem statement (approx. 2 sentences)

- Present your issue of concern – what is the problem, and what are its causes? (Hint: the cause should be something that can be addressed by your elected officials!)

**I**nform on solution

- Make it clear that the problem you presented is solvable! Present a solution and explain why you know it will work (or how it has worked in the past). Here, you can bring in research on the topic or personal experience.

**C**all to action

- The idea here is to make your call to action for your elected official public. This will show lawmakers that their constituents are interested, and put pressure on them to take action. You can also frame this as a yes or no question to your readers: "will you call Representative X and ask them to vote for Y?"

## Tips on Generating a Letter to the Editor – Remember Your C’s

### 1. **Be Current**

Responding to a recent article in the newspaper or a recent event is a great way to increase your odds of being published. Have someone in your group skim the newspaper each day to identify "hooks" upon which you can hang your response. Do a search on the newspaper's website for recent articles, using search terms like "global AIDS" "HIV" "global health," etc. When submitting your letter, refer specifically to the article you are referencing by using the name of the article and date (i.e., "In response to your recent article on child care...")

### 2. **Constructing Your Letter**

Create your letter using the EPIC format (**E**ngage the listener, state the **P**roblem, **I**nform about a solution, give a **C**all to action). Make sure you check your papers' guidelines for LTE submissions and that you follow word limits and other directions.

When you've got your final draft, check the Letter to the Editor page of your newspaper or its website for the guidelines and logistics for submitting a letter. Most times you can create a draft on your computer then copy and paste it into an online web form. Once you're ready to send your letter, make it obvious in the subject line that your letter is in reaction to a story or piece printed in the newspaper. Reference the article, date of publication and page number in the newspaper (i.e. RE: "Senate Weighs Health Reform Bill" article, October 21, 2009, p. A5).

### 3. **Be Clear and Concise**

Most papers will not print letters that are more than 200-250 words. Some papers limit them to 150 words. The shorter the letter, the more likely it will be published. Stick to one subject and check your grammar. After you have written your letter, read it aloud (this really works). Ask yourself: Is my point clear? Is my letter compelling? Can I shorten it and still get my point across? Better yet, ask a teammate to read it and help you answer those questions!

### 4. **Connect the Dots**

Connect the dots between your community and our national and international poverty issues. For example, use local stories on schools to talk about global education, mention the local food bank to talk about the need for nutrition assistance programs, or link local economic stimulus stories to microcredit or individual development accounts. Be creative.

### 5. **Be Challenging**

Feel free to question what others have said or done, and even start your letter off with a feisty first sentence. However, be sure to avoid personal attacks. An argument based on merit rather than emotional attacks is respectful and more persuasive.

If appropriate, mention members of Congress by name - If you are thanking a member of Congress for something or respectfully challenging their position in your letter, mention them

by name. Many congressional offices do Internet searches by name each morning. This increases the chance your member of Congress will see your letter.

#### **6. Call to Action**

Remember to end your letter by asking for action from your members of Congress or from your readers. Articulate your passion for the issue; ask them to make a difference.

Include your name, address, e-mail, and a daytime and evening phone number with your submission to the paper. They won't print this information, but may use it to confirm that you wrote the letter.

#### **7. Be Contagious**

Maximize your efforts by sending your letter to newspapers all over the country if you are writing on an issue that is being covered widely. (Note: When submitting letters to the Washington Post or the New York Times, do not send it to other papers until you are sure they will not print it.)

#### **8. Coordinate Your Efforts**

Have as many people in your group send in letters to the editor at the same time to maximize your odds of getting published and to emphasize the importance of the issue. Whether they print your letters or not, you are letting the paper know what issues the community cares about.

#### **9. If Your Letter is Published, Send a Copy to Your Congressional Offices and to PIH Engage**

Remember, follow-up is critical to maximizing the political impact of your published letter! Send a copy to your representative or senator and to their aides, and bring a copy next time you visit their office.

Be sure to check the online version of your local paper for your letter. Sometimes letters will be printed in the online version even if they are not included in the print edition.

And of course, let the PIH Engage network know you're published! Send your team's coach the URL or print copy of your letter to the editor so we can track our media impact and help amplify your message. Also post it with to PIH Engage Facebook group, and share it on your own social media platforms with the hashtag #RightToHealth.

## **Write On!**

Much of the material in this toolkit was adapted from the [RESULTS Activist Toolkit](#).