

JOINING THE CONVERSATION: LETTERS TO THE EDITOR & OP-EDS

What are Letters to the Editor?

Letters to the Editor (LTEs) offer a quick, brief way to bring the attention of your community to any particular issue, whether it's local, statewide, or even national. LTEs provide a valuable advocacy tool and an opportunity to shape the public discourse. LTEs should not be longer than 300 words; ideally, keep them closer to 200 or 250.

What are Op-eds?

An op-ed, short for "opposite the editorial page" or the "opinions and editorials page," expresses the author's opinion in a longer, more thorough format, up to 800 words. Op-eds are different from both editorials (opinion pieces submitted by the newspaper's editorial board members) and letters to the editor (opinion pieces submitted by readers).

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LTE PRINCIPLES & BEST PRACTICES

Know your paper— Each paper has its own rules regarding length, timeliness and exclusivity. Find out what these are!

Quality and quantity—News outlets want to cover the 'hot' issues that many people are talking about, but they're also selective in what they publish. They're looking for concise, compelling, and timely pieces.

Make it personal—Good LTEs generally have a local angle and/or a personal connection with the story. Your personal story and local perspective make you credible and relatable.

Cast a wide net—There are a lot of news outlets in Vermont. Consider both local and statewide outlets.

Questions to ask yourself

- Do you have personal experience with the effects of severe weather and/or climate change?
- Have you seen the positive impacts of a policy, social movement and/or technology that you feel can and should be brought to more Vermonters?
- Did you have an 'a-ha!' moment that made you care about a specific issue?
- Have you been involved in or witnessed another successful social movement/campaign/issue that others were skeptical of, or thought was impossible?



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TIPS FOR WRITING YOUR LTE

Respond—‘Hook’ your piece to a recent event or article. Newspapers like to see letters that reference or respond to an article that they just ran and/or something that has garnered a lot of media attention (i.e. a recent national event, report, article, etc.) Keep it relevant.

Timely—Letters directly referencing a particular article or story are best submitted as early as possible, within 3-7 days. Letters that are time sensitive—for an upcoming event, vote or notable item—are more likely to be published but have a tighter timeline.

Concise—Outlets have specific length requirements and limited space. Most length requirements fall in the 300 words-or-less range, although some outlets allow for longer commentaries. Consider keeping your letter at 50 or more words below the given limit.

Grammar and tone—Papers will generally not print letters that are too harsh in tone, poorly-written, or in bad taste. Be sure to edit before submission. Adding your own wit and personality is a plus.

Prove it—Adding citations to your piece make you more credible. However, having too many citations can detract from your (more-important) personal angle.

Contact info—Outlets will only publish letters they can verify. Make sure your name, town and phone number are included in your letter.

Follow up—If you haven’t heard from the outlet within a few days, follow up to make sure they received your letter and ask if they will publish it. Be proud and persistent!

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SUBMISSION TIPS & SAMPLE LTES

Follow these steps to submit your LTE:

- Visit the website of your local newspaper/s
- Under "Contact" you'll usually find an email for submitting letters to the editor. Sometimes there will be a form you can fill out.
- Make sure to include your full name and town.



Example 1: *Advocating specific legislation*

Dear Editor: I am writing to thank [INSERT LEGISLATOR HERE] for their vote earlier this year for the Vermont Global Warming Solution Act (GWSA). The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the dangers of ignoring scientists who try to warn us about looming threats to public health and safety. Scientists have been raising the alarm about the dangers of the climate crisis for decades, and we ignore their warnings at our peril. As Vermont recovers from myriad impacts of the pandemic, GWSA offers us a framework to ensure that our economic recovery makes Vermont a more resilient and just state. The bill establishes a diverse Climate Council to recommend climate and resilience solutions that help us rebuild our economy and make our communities healthier and more resilient. As the bill comes up for a final vote in the coming weeks, I urge [INSERT LEGISLATOR HERE] to maintain their stand for the climate and our communities and again vote YES for GWSA. Our health and recovery depend on it more than ever.

Example 2: *Influencing public opinion*

Dear Editor: It's a disgrace that Congress and the Administration are taking us backsliding when it comes to climate change, even going as far as to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Accord. We're running out of time to leave future generations with a livable planet and a strong economy. Vermont has historically been a leader in the green movement, and it is more important now than ever that we live up to that reputation and serve as a model for other states, and this starts with implementing a price on the pollution causing global warming. Pricing carbon pollution is one of the best ways that we can tackle our emissions and boost our economy. The non-partisan climate study released by the highly respected researchers of the Joint Fiscal Office proves exactly that. We have no time to waste, let's get to work and act now!

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OP-ED PRINCIPLES & BEST PRACTICES

Adapted from Duke University's Communicator Toolkit, available at:
<https://commskit.duke.edu/writing-media/writing-effective-op-eds/>

Track the news and jump at opportunities. Timing is essential. Whenever possible, link your issue explicitly to something happening in the news.

Make a single point – well. You cannot solve all of the world's problems in 750–800 words. Be satisfied with making a single point clearly and persuasively. If you cannot explain your message in a sentence or two, you're trying to cover too much.

Put your main point on top. You have no more than 10 seconds to hook a busy reader. Get to the point and convince the reader that it's worth his or her valuable time to continue.

Tell readers why they should care. Put yourself in the place of the busy person looking at your article. At the end of every few paragraphs, ask out loud: "So what? Who cares?" You need to answer these questions.

Offer specific recommendations. How exactly should Vermont protect its environment, or the White House change its policies? Suggest solutions and ways to get there.

Embrace your personal voice. Do you have personal experience with the issue at hand? Personal stories trump jargon. Your local perspective and personal story make you credible and relatable.

Make your ending a winner. You need a strong opening paragraph, or "lede," to hook readers. When writing for the op-ed page, it's also important to summarize your argument in a strong final paragraph. That's because many casual readers scan the headline, skim the opening and then read the final paragraph and byline.

Don't worry about the headline. The newspaper will write its own headline. You can suggest one, but don't spend a lot of time worrying about it.

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SUBMISSION TIPS & SAMPLE OP-EDS

Follow these steps to submit your op-ed:

- Visit the website of your local newspaper/s
- Under "Contact" find the general news line or the news editor's email and email them your piece. Put "Op ed" or "Commentary" and your title in the subject line.
- In *VTDigger*, op-eds are called Commentaries. Submit yours to Tom Kearney by emailing tkearney@vtdigger.org.
- Make sure to include your full name, title/qualifications, and town in your email so the editor knows how to attribute your work



Example op-eds:

- *VTDigger* is a great place to view a variety of commentaries submitted by diverse community members and advocates. Browse the archives at <https://vtdigger.org/category/commentary/>.
- In the *Times-Argus*, op-eds are filed under "Perspectives." Browse them at <https://www.timesargus.com/opinion/perspective/>.
- In the *Bennington Banner*, op-eds are called "Commentaries" and can be found at <https://www.benningtonbanner.com/opinion/>.



Have questions about writing or submitting an LTE or op-ed?
Contact Stephanie Gomory at sgomory@vnrc.org.