Writing a Letter to the Editor

Writing a letter to the editor – especially of your local news outlet – is one of the most effective ways to draw the attention of your elected leaders. Congressional staff monitor media “hits” for their offices daily. Every time a member of Congress is mentioned in the news, voters’ perceptions are influenced.

It’s true that the larger the news outlet, the more the exposure to your opinion. However, smaller is often better: members of the U.S. House of Representatives care most about views expressed in their own congressional districts. Small-circulation newspapers print most of the letters they receive. It’s more challenging to get a letter printed in major metropolitan newspapers or online news sites with large readerships.

Keep in mind that every letter to the editor makes an impact, even if it’s not published. The more feedback a news outlet receives on libraries, the clearer they understand that libraries are relevant and newsworthy to their readers.

Tips for getting your letter published
Before you start a letter, whether it’s to an online or print news outlet, be sure to consult their guidelines. Most outlets will post guidelines on their websites on the same page as the “opinion” or “contact us” section.

- **Keep it short.**
  Letters should be substantive and concise, typically 150 to 200 words. Each news outlet is different. Often, the smaller the news outlet, the larger the word count accepted.

- **Make it timely.**
  Respond to a recent article or tie your letter to a current event. When you connect your opinion to a timely topic, you show that you are not only passionate about libraries – you are an active part of an ongoing conversation in your local media about concerns relevant to your community.

- **Be original.**
  Don’t simply copy from an ALA alert. Speak from your own experience and insight. That’s most compelling to editors, who can easily detect duplicate or “canned” messages. Also, don’t send the same letter to different news outlets. Each letter you submit should be unique.

- **Watch your language.**
  As leaders in their communities, librarians can speak with authority and with confidence. Express your opinion with conviction, using strong but never strident language that reflects your reputation in the community.
Use names.
Name your representative and/or senators so that your letter, if published, reaches your members of Congress quickly. If your member of Congress is on a key committee related to the issue (for example, appropriations), be sure to include that detail in your letter. If one of your elected leaders has demonstrated support for libraries, thank them. There is nothing like a sincere, public thank-you to reinforce an elected leader’s support.

Consider your target audience.
Many people will see your opinion if it gets published, but when it comes to advocacy, decision-makers are usually your target audience. When appropriate, try to use language and examples that will especially appeal to your target audience. For example, if your member of Congress is on the House Veterans Affairs Committee, highlight the ways your library meets the needs of vets in your area. If your senator is known for a strong stance on the federal budget, focus on ways that libraries are a good return on investment through services that support, for example, job-seekers and entrepreneurs. A topic of nearly universal appeal to elected leaders of all political persuasions is science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education.

Pay attention to email details.
Do not send attachments by email – only send text. Also, do not cc: your letter to ALA or any other organization or individual. If you want someone else to see your letter, email them separately. Always include your telephone number and address in case an editor can verify you as the author.

Enlist other advocates.
Consider asking a library trustee, friend or supporter in good standing in your community to submit a letter to the editor.

Template for a Letter to the Editor
With a little practice, writing good letters to the editor is neither time-consuming nor difficult. Below is a general structure you can use to help you craft a letter to the editor. Be sure to consult the unique guidelines of your news outlet before writing a letter.

1. Introduce the issue and why you are writing the letter. If you are responding to what someone else has written, directly address that article or letter.
   Example: Jane Smith rightly notes that lack of a national curriculum mandate is one reason why students aren’t prepared for careers in computer science (“The real reason why students lag behind in computer science,” October 22). However, her assessment leaves out one answer to the problems she identified: libraries.

2. State the facts using statistics, preferably local. If you do not have statistics, cite a local story. If you do use statistics, use them sparingly. Metrics are important, but a list of numbers is unoriginal.
   Example: Fewer than half of K-12 schools in our country offer any kind of CS education, and Everytown Middle School was one of them. Through a new partnership with Everycounty Library System, middle school students get hands-on STEM opportunities with coding classes, laptops and expertise our public libraries offer. Collaborations like ours make coding more accessible to women, African Americans, Hispanics and other groups under-represented in the tech sector.

3. Close with a call to action or offer a solution to the problem.
   Example: While libraries are well-positioned to help teens succeed in school and prepare for today’s careers, the president wants to eliminate nearly all federal funding for libraries. Senators Brown and Jones as well as Representative Green can protect that funding by signing letters of support for the Library Services and Technology Act and Innovative Approaches to Literacy program. Representative Green, who serves on the House Appropriations Committee, is especially well-positioned to lift up Everytown’s successful STEM programs as a model for leveraging libraries to fill the national need for CS education.

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Amplify the message when your letter gets published.

- Spread the news as broadly as possible! You can multiply the impact of your letter by sharing it on social media. Be sure to use the tag #FundLibraries and ask as many of your friends as possible to react to your letter. Tweet it directly at your representative and senators, thanking them or urging them to support federal library funding. Social media addresses for your decision-makers are on ALA’s website: ala.org/fundlibraries

- Ask your friends and library supporters to respond to the letter by commenting online. If you want to see more coverage of libraries and the services they provide to your community, show the news outlet that their readers care about their library. The more news content elicits a response from readers, the higher priority the issue takes for news editors, who decide what news to cover.

- If you don’t use social media, email or fax your letter directly to your congressional office(s) along with a note that reinforces your message, encouraging your leaders’ continued support for libraries or urging them to make libraries a priority in federal spending decisions.