

Writing an effective letter to the editor

CLS workshop
March 7, 2014
5:00 – 6:00 p.m.
The Green Room

Why write a letter to the editor?

Letters to the editor are among the most read features of a newspaper.

With a letter to the editor, you can:

- Suggest an idea, or educate others
- Influence public opinion & the public dialogue
- Influence decision-makers
- Call for action, or suggest a solution
- Raise awareness of your group

It can be part of your group's strategy to:

- Change the culture – shift public attitudes
- Raise awareness of your group, and help like minded people find you
- Influence the civic dialogue – what stories get written, and the media's and government's assessment of public opinion
- Influence decision makers

When to write a letter to the editor

Timeliness is important. You might write a letter in response to a specific issue, event, decision or news item. Or you might write it to promote an upcoming event, or an issue that is seasonally timely.

If you are responding to an article or event, you want to get your letter in quickly – ideally within a few days.

If you are letting people know about an important decision and asking them to take action, give about 7-10 days for the letter to get in, and factor in how much time you want readers to have to react.

Making it count

You can write a letter to the editor individually, or as part of a planned series of letters to stimulate public interest and media coverage, or influence the public and decision makers on an important issue. E.g. Submit letters a few days apart over time, so the issue stays in the news. Editors keep track of the number of letters received on an issue, so even if they don't publish them all, it makes it more likely they'll follow up with a story on the issue.

If you represent a group and write a well articulated analysis or opinion column, they may publish it as a guest column, and you can get away with a bit more length – up to ~ 400 words. This can have a more professional tone, and you could try sending a photo along with it if you like (the chances are not high that they will print the photo, but if they do, it makes your letter a lot more visible).

Link to letters that get published on your website, FB, etc.

How to submit

Newspapers prefer to receive letters to the editor electronically. Send your letter via e-mail, with your letter in the body of the e-mail, and a descriptive subject line.

Include your name, e-mail, phone number and address at the close of your letter. They will publish your name and city, but require your contact information to consider printing your letter. They may contact you to verify if you sent the letter, and occasionally to follow up with an opportunity for a story or guest column.

If your goal is to sway decision makers, cc your letter to members of Council (or the appropriate decision makers).

Local newspapers

The two main local newspapers are:

Northern Life: editor@sudbury.com

The Sudbury Star: sud.letters@sunmedia.ca

If it is a matter of public interest, or you wish to reach a grassroots audience, you might also like to send it to the Sudbury Working Group of the Media Coop:

grassrootssudburymedia@gmail.com

If you are writing in French, Le Voyageur is the main local paper:

levoyageur@levoyageur.ca

Send separately, or use bcc – they don't like to think you're sending to everyone.

If you wish to cc to members of Council, the current list is:

brian.bigger@greatersudbury.ca; mayor@greatersudbury.ca;

mark.signoretti@greatersudbury.ca; michael.vagnini@greatersudbury.ca;

gerry.montpellier@greatersudbury.ca; evelyn.dutrisac@greatersudbury.ca;

robert.kirwan@greatersudbury.ca; rene.lapierre@greatersudbury.ca;

mike.jakubo@greatersudbury.ca; al.sizer@greatersudbury.ca;

deb.mcintosh@greatersudbury.ca; fern.cormier@greatersudbury.ca;

lynne.reynolds@greatersudbury.ca; joscelyne.landry-altmann@greatersudbury.ca

Subject line: Letter to the Editor re: *title*

Simple salutation: e.g. “To whom it may concern:”, “To the Editor:”, “To the Editor of...*paper name*”, or “Dear *editor name*”

If you are writing in response to a specific article or story, include an **RE: line** with the title of the article, or a clear reference to the story, preferably with the date it was published. Do this only for the newspaper in which it was published. If you wish to address the issue in other publications, refer to their story, or start out with a more general reference to what is now public knowledge.

Body of letter

DO

- grab the reader’s attention with your opening sentence – what are you writing about and why?
- if you are referring to a recent news article, reference this at the top
- explain why what you’re writing about is important – don’t assume everyone already knows
- be concise – keep it under 200-300 words. Read it through and remove unnecessary words.
- keep your most important points in your first paragraph – they may trim your letter down from the bottom up
- focus on one important point
- use plain language that is easily understood – don’t use jargon and acronyms
- write clearly
- make it relevant – refer to a recent event, or a recent article
- make a human connection to the readers – how will they be affected
- Support your argument with facts, emotion, and/or personal stories. Use verified facts
- Include an action where applicable

DON’T

- *overstate or exaggerate*
- *insult others*
- *use jargon or acronyms*
- *use ALL CAPS or **bold***

Name

Title adds credibility, and transparency about your connection to the issue

Phone #

E-mail

Address

SOME RECENT EXAMPLES

N. Life Feb. 13

I'm writing about the conditions of the bus shelters in Sudbury, especially the ones on Lasalle.

I'm 85 years old. I was born and have lived here all my life. I have been living on Lasalle for 14 years, and let me tell you, the one in front of my building is the worst bus shelter.

For the past month, a whole side of the shelter has been missing. It's full of snow. The person who broke it is the guy who plows the sidewalk. Of course he works for the city.

I have phoned the city four times and told others about it. Well, nothing has been done.

Monday morning, I had a 9 a.m. appointment with my doctor. The windchill was in the -30s.

Well, it would have helped me to be able to wait in the shelter, but how could I with the shape it's in? I don't understand why the city is in such a mess. There are a lot of seniors in my building in their 70s to 80s, but I guess the city doesn't care about them anymore.

And what is the mayor doing? Doesn't she know that the people that work for her city are not doing their job?

It's about time people wake up and do something about the bus shelters.

Pauline Belair
Greater Sudbury

At 219 words, this is a great length for a letter to the editor. The writer uses the story of her personal situation to make the point and make it relatable – you know what happened to her, agree it is unacceptable, and are on her side by the end. It's obvious this is a general problem – not just for her. The negative comments about city staff and the mayor at the end are understandable, but not helpful to the letter. As you can see below, this letter got results.

N. Life Feb. 25

I would like to thank you for printing my letter in your paper Thursday [February] 13 about the messed up bus shelter.

The very next day the city was repairing it.

It had been like that since last month.

It pays to address things with Northern Life.

Again, I thank you so much.

Pauline Belair
Greater Sudbury

N. Life Feb. 25

I couldn't believe what I read in Thursday's Northern Life.

A bylaw intended to ensure residents can safely get out of their driveways is going to be enforced, making homeowner Bobbi Jo Gorman cut down a cedar hedge that has been on her property for over 50 years.

This makes no sense. When this bylaw is challenged in the court system and the court system cannot see that this bylaw needs some adjustments, that is just so wrong.

Ward 11 Coun. Terry Kett said he can think of more than 2,000 hedges that would have to be cut down. Well I can tell you that number is much higher.

So let's just get out our chain saws and start cutting down all of these beautiful growing hedges because here in the City of Greater Sudbury there is a bylaw that states anything above three and a half feet is breaking a city bylaw.

What about all of the creatures that have found shelter, food and a home in Bobbi Jo Gorman's cedar hedges? Most importantly, one tree supplies oxygen for about 80 people a year. Gee, I wonder how much oxygen a 20-foot cedar hedge supplies?

Considering our city is famous for its greening program, how archaic that we have this city bylaw that is still being enforced.

It's 2014, and it's about time that this bylaw be amended or changed. Coun. Kett has some good suggestions on improving this bylaw.

Bobbie Jo Gorman is correct in stating that cutting these hedges from 20 feet to three and a half feet will more than likely kill them off.

Bobbi Jo, I am backing you 100 per cent in your fight to save your cedar hedges. I am hoping that our mayor and city staff stand up and do the right thing.

Sue Vaillancourt

Greater Sudbury

At 300 words, this is also a good length. This letter is an emotional response to a story in the Northern Life. It makes some strong points, but the overall tone is outrage at the ridiculousness of this bylaw, and it is hard to disagree. The writer gives a call to action to Council at the end – hopefully, she also sent copies to members of Council

This letter was published in the Star and N. Life at different times.

Nov. 2013

Greater Sudbury 2014 capital budget all about roads - looking for a budget that meets the needs and priorities of our community

How is your tax money being spent? Now is a good time to find out, with the City's capital budget overview for 2014 now on-line (part of the budget process, expected to be complete in January).

There's a lot to read in this overview, but what you won't find is any analysis of how well the budget supports our priorities as a community. This omission is perhaps an answer in itself.

As a City of Lakes, being able to enjoy our many lakes and rivers is a big priority for residents. Increases in blue-green algae blooms and other problems has put protecting

water quality top of mind. This year, Council unanimously supported a motion to get watershed studies done, so that smart decisions can be made about our water. But you won't find a corresponding change in the budget. Annual funding remains at \$35,000. At that rate, it would take over 50 years to complete the remaining 16 watershed studies identified as necessary in the last Stormwater Background study.

As in previous years, the biggest chunk of money goes to roads, taking up 40.5% of the capital budget. There's no question road infrastructure is essential to the City, but does this dominance in the budget jive with overall priorities? First step in getting an answer is to ask this question as part of the budget process.

There is a big shortfall between the amount of road maintenance needed, and the amount that can be funded. Yet, ~¼ of the capital budget for roads is dedicated for new roads or road expansions. All of these projects add even more maintenance costs for every future year. Often, the rationale for these road expansions is to reduce congestion. That leads to a few reasonable questions. What is the cost of this congestion? What impact will the planned road expansions actually have, and for how long? Studies have shown that in most cases, new and wider roads only reduce congestion temporarily. Investments in transit are usually more effective. What percentage of the capital budget goes to transit? 1.1%.

The question is unavoidable. How do the costs and benefits of investing the money in new roads and road expansions compare with investing that same money in transit and long overdue road maintenance to existing roads? Going by studies done elsewhere, the odds are on transit.

And let's not forget cycling routes, another growing priority in our community. You won't find a line item devoted to priority cycling projects. Council has requested that staff add one in as consideration as a budget option. There are a lot of people hoping that budget option gets approved.

But the thing is budget options are, no surprise, optional.

Clean water and safe, convenient cycling routes are not optional 'extras'. And those are just two examples. We're waiting for a budget truly tied to the priorities and needs of our community.

Naomi Grant
Chair, Coalition for a Liveable Sudbury

At 503 words, this is a longer piece written on behalf of a community group, and taking a factual approach. Being a bit longer, there is time for more points, but each are dealt with briefly – another approach with this type of letter could be to choose one or two points and develop them further. Some of the techniques used are: making statements in a straight forward manner and hopefully in a way the reader can relate to; asking questions to get the reader thinking; comparative analysis.

Getting it on the page

1. Take a moment to choose your topic and objective: are you responding to something that happened to you? A recent change around the city or in your neighbourhood? A media story? Are you raising awareness about a timely topic? Why are you writing the letter, and what do you hope happens as a result? E.g. if you are hoping to sway Council, then you will want to cc them on the letter.

2. What is your main message?

Write down the main thing you want people to take away from your letter.

3. Choose the best approach:

- Do you have a compelling personal story to tell that gets the point across?
- Do you have an emotional response to something that others will share?
- Do you have compelling facts to make your point?

4. Once you've chosen your main message, and your approach, write down the four or five things you want to say. E.g. it could be the beginning, middle and end of your story. Or it could be a statement, your 3 strongest facts, and a conclusion and call to action.

I sometimes find it helpful to write my main message in the middle of some scrap paper, and write my points around it. Then I can strike some off until I'm left with the top few – this is a lot faster than writing 2 pages and cutting it down to half a page.

Remember to start with something strong. And remember to keep your points relatable (i.e, not just to people who already agree with you.)

5. Write one or two sentences for each of these points – you will now have a 200 – 300 word letter with 1 strong message supported by a few of your best points. Give it a read through – and if you have someone handy and aren't sure of your editing, it can be helpful to have a second person have a read as well.

6. Send it quickly – newspapers like things to be timely. And – it's a letter to the editor – you don't need to spend a whole day on it – it's okay if it's not perfect.

EXAMPLE

Let's say I want to write a letter about pedestrian safety. It's on my mind because of the rash of recent accidents. My main message that I want to get across is that people should feel safe crossing the street, and that we should take steps to make that the reality. I have a few choices.

1. I could write a letter in response to coverage of the recent accident, focused on my own emotional response. I could choose the points: I am sad and outraged that yet another pedestrian has been injured or killed; crossing the street should not mean taking your life in your hands; the status quo is unacceptable.

E.g Re: *'title of recent story'*

Two people were hit and seriously injured this week, simply trying to cross the street. I feel for their families, and am outraged that these are simply framed as 'accidents' as if nothing could have been done to prevent them. Sadly, I am not surprised, because this is just another of too many recent reports of people being injured or killed crossing the road. This is unacceptable. Crossing the street should not be a high risk activity. It is something we do every day. It is something children do every day. The fact is there are reasons so many people are being hit and there are choices we can take to make streets safer for people. Making those choices might make a commute just a little slower, but last time I checked a body count wasn't an acceptable cost for a slight bump in traffic flow. Let's get our priorities straight.

2. I could write a letter in response to the recent accident, sharing a personal story of my own close call as a pedestrian, or one that impacted me or my family.

Two pedestrians were seriously injured this week, crossing the street. Two families are in distress. How many has that made already this year? Too many. It is not a statistic when it is your family member who has been hit. A few years ago, my daughter's best friend's father was killed crossing a neighbourhood street to go to the corner store. A familiar crossing they, and we, made often. A girl lost her father that day. Her baby brother lost the chance to ever know him.

Crossing the street is something we all do every day. It should not mean taking our life in our hands. All these 'accidents' are telling us something. City Council, Sudbury police, are you listening? Something is wrong, and it is time fix it.

3. I could write a factual response letter, using statistics about pedestrian safety. E.g., I might like to use the points that Greater Sudbury committed to being the most pedestrian friendly City by 2015; that Portland recently suggested a goal of zero pedestrian deaths, whereas Sudbury has no such goal or action plan; that an 8-80 City where you can cross the street safely whether you are 8 or 80 benefits everyone; and conclude that to reduce pedestrian accidents and deaths we need to take fact based actions.

E.g. It's an often touted fact that Greater Sudbury aims to be the most pedestrian friendly city in Ontario by 2015. With less than a year to go, it's been all talk and no action so far. Just listen to the news – crossing the street can be highly dangerous in this city. Two people were seriously injured just last week.

It's time to get serious, make some real goals, and take real action to reduce pedestrian injuries and deaths. The city of Portland recently set a goal of zero pedestrian injuries and deaths – yes, that's zero. More importantly, they are taking actions to meet that goal. Fact based actions, like lowering residential speed limits, which has been shown to dramatically reduce the chance of severe injury or death. It's time to take that kind of serious action here.

There's a principle called 8-80 that is both simple and powerful. When we make our streets safe for both an eight year old and an eighty year old, we make them safe for everyone. When your eight year old child can cross the street on their own without giving you nightmares, we'll know we've gotten it right. Let's get to it.

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These are three very quick examples – I haven't fact checked as I would be sure to do before sending in an actual letter. But, I hope they give a good idea of how a letter to the editor can be quickly put together, using a few different approaches.