

TIPS FOR WRITING LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

An underused resource in grassroots advocacy is the local media. Letters to the editor can be powerful vehicles for influencing or inspiring public debate, making the case for your issue or responding to related events. In addition, decision-makers often read the opinion pages of their local paper because it gives them an idea of what members of their community think. The trick is to write a letter that the editors find compelling enough to print. Use these tips to write a letter that is more likely to be published.

1. **Know the rules.** Do your homework about how to submit a letter and what information you need to include in order to get published. Usually this information is printed on the opinion page of the newspaper itself.
2. **Capitalize on current events.** Find ways to tie stories in the news with your issue. Open your letter with a reference to the recent event, and then quickly build a logical bridge to your issue. Cancer issues cut across topics such as health insurance, employment, health care delivery, community support, education, faith and leadership. These and other angles can help illustrate survivorship in your community's current developments.
3. **Keep it brief.** Most letters to the editor should be less than 250 words. Edit your letter aggressively.
4. **Paint a personal picture.** All grassroots strategies rely on personal stories to convey larger issues. Touch both the minds and hearts of the reader by giving both the broader facts about cancer and your personal cancer experience. Share *your* story!
5. **Be clear.** This may seem obvious, but a surprising number of letters that don't get published just plain don't make sense. Avoid jargon, use common vocabulary and let a few friends or colleagues review the letter for you before you send it.
6. **Use word cues to underscore your point.** For instance, preface your major conclusion with "The important thing is ..." If you have research that makes your case, preface the facts with "Research proves that ..."
7. **Don't overlook neighborhood weeklies and smaller papers.** Often these publications have more room for letters, and community papers have very large readerships.
8. **Include a call-to-action or solution.** If you are illustrating a need or making a case for a specific action, include a line about what people can do to help.
9. **Don't be afraid to toot your own horn.** If you or your organization is involved in work that addresses the issue, include that in your letter.
10. **Be passionate, but not poisonous.** There is a difference between fire in the belly and righteous indignation. Avoid sarcasm, and if you're angry, cool off a bit before sending a final version.
11. **Consider the online editorial page.** Some papers will accept letters to the editor online and some even print additional letters in their online publications.
12. **Don't stop once you're published.** Use your printed letter to the editor to further educate others. Send a copy of your letter to people who want to learn about what you are seeking to change. Friends, family, book club members, support group members, physicians and healthcare professionals with whom you've worked, and the decision-makers themselves, are good places to start.