

# Letters to the Editor<sup>1</sup>

Having letters to the editor (LTEs) published is an effective tactic for media coverage for a grassroots campaign. The LTE section of the paper is widely read and reacted to and relatively easy to break into. Anyone can write into the paper and, given a good letter, anyone can get published. LTE tactics can be tied into a larger communications strategy easily and effectively.

The first principle of getting LTEs published on a regular basis is to **know your paper**. Each paper has its own set of **rules regarding submission, length, timelines, and exclusivity**. Find out what they are. Next **cast a wide net** and include all the papers in your area, including those that are small or have a focused constituency. Finally, **remember both quantity AND quality count**. An issue becomes hot if many people suddenly write into the paper about it, but your paper isn't going to publish poorly written material.

## Rapid Response Teams

If your campaign or organization needs third-party response in support or opposition to articles in the paper or actions taken by opponents, you should establish a rapid response team that can be ready to move. A model LTE rapid response team will have two main components:

1. **The people who write the LTEs**
2. **The people who submit the LTEs**

The first team, the writers, is adept at concise clever writing on short notice. These people may be on staff with your organization or be volunteers with the gift of good writing. They can and should submit their own LTEs, but the newspaper will not publish the same LTE author over and over again. This is why you have the second group. These people are on call to receive, modify/personalize, and submit LTEs drafted by the first group. This second group must personalize their letter – the paper will not publish obvious form letters. The second group is much larger and can encompass your entire volunteer base and should include ordinary people as well as grass tops leaders. Three people can flood a paper by spending a few minutes drafting LTEs and finding 12-15 submitters.

## Pro-Active LTE Seeding

Why wait to respond when you can start setting the tone on the editorial page? Have your LTE team ready to seed the editorial page with letters friendly to the organizations' current (or upcoming) message. If the organization is set to discuss local unemployment numbers, have a few LTEs printed asking for public elected officials to stand up and take a (friendly) stance on unemployment.

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<sup>1</sup> *Democracy for America Campaign Academy Grassroots Campaign Training Manual, 2009.*

## HOW TO GET YOUR LETTER PUBLISHED

**Reactionary** – Newspapers like to print LTEs which react to or reference stories they recently ran. An explicit reference to a previous story is often posted at the beginning of the letter. If you get creative; you can make just about any article in the paper related to your issue.

**Timely** – LTEs referencing a story are best submitted within three days of that story's printing.

**Concise** – This is an important trait of a good letter. Papers can only print only so many letters and prefer to print those which fit nicely into their limited space. Get to know the paper's word count (usually 250-300 words) and undershoot it by 50 or more words every time. Focus on one issue. Brevity trumps eloquence for LTEs.

**Localized & Personalized** – LTEs are the most personal and local part of the paper. Even national issues should have a local angle. Use personal pronouns and local place names. On the LTE section, a personal story trumps a list of facts. Statements like "two-thirds of the state's waterways" are less powerful than "the creek in my backyard."

**Grammar & Tone** – Proofread even the shortest LTE. Avoid diatribes.

**Smart & Witty** – Citing a fact or two does add credibility. Stating that fact in a clever way is an even bigger bonus.

**Contact Info** – Most papers require verification of the letter's author before printing.

**Follow Up** – Another way to impact your chances of getting published is to follow up after submitting your LTE. Ask if they received it and if they will publish it.