

Guide to Writing Letters to the Editor (LTEs)

What is a Letter to the Editor?

The Opinion section of a newspaper is like a public forum where the newspaper's editorial board, columnists, and readers share their views. Readers can submit their opinions by submitting an LTE, which the editor may choose to publish. LTEs are relatively short; most publications have word limits between 200-300 words.

Why write an LTE?

- You can **spread your message** to the broader community.
- You can **get your representatives' attention** on policy issues that you care about.
- You can **correct errors or deficiencies** that you notice in an article.
- You can **signal to the newspaper that readers care about campaign finance/ethics reform, and good governance** and encourage them to publish more opinion pieces on the topic.
- Readership of your LTE will likely expand beyond the newspaper subscribers through social media.

How to start writing a Letter to the Editor

Before you start writing, identify the Virginia paper where you want to publish the letter. They have different requirements and word limits. Some papers have specialized areas of coverage. For example, the Washington Post covers federal legislation more than most other papers, the Virginia Pilot covers more military issues. Click [here](#) for a list of Virginia papers. Check to how the newspaper accepts LTEs. Most will accept letters through an online form or by email. Don't get discouraged if the letter doesn't get accepted. Keep writing and trying.

Think about the structure of the letter before you start writing. Letters are more powerful if they:

- **ENGAGE** the reader-get their attention through a strongly stated title or first line. Try not to make the key message political but based on a more universally accepted value. Examples might include: "Billionaires shouldn't be allowed to buy our elections," "Legislators need to earn the trust of their constituents," "All Virginians support good governance principles that strengthen confidence in our elected officials."
- Identify the **PROBLEM** that needs to be solved.
- **INFORM** the reader about a solution
- End with a **CALL TO ACTION** so people know how to help solve the problem.

Helpful Hints to boost your chances of publication

- **Start with a "hook."** The first sentence should be catchy and/or refer to an article that the paper has already published. Newspapers like to have references to their articles or to read your passionate reasons for the letter. Timing is important also. Try to submit a letter in response to a story, opinion piece, or a current event.
- **Engage the reader** by using creative techniques such as innovative imagery. Include a personal perspective, mentioning relevant to current events, asking a question, using quotes from legislators, or including statistics that can be expressed clearly and briefly.
- **Read your letter aloud to check for punctuation and smoothness.** At [BigMoneyOutVA](#), a non-partisan group working on promoting campaign finance reform, we routinely edit each other's letters. We're more than happy

to read through your letter and provide suggestions. You can send an email to: moneyoutva@gmail.com to get guidance and support.

Key messages on good governance and the need to get big money out of politics

Some points to include in the letter. See language in the sample letters below that can be paraphrased and personalized for you.

- Virginia's poor ranking among the states for accountability and transparency to its citizens, 46 out of 50, according to an analysis by the [Coalition for Integrity](#).
- The fact that Virginia candidates can legally divert campaign funds for their own personal use is contrary to most people's sense of right and wrong.
- [The people of Virginia](#) recognize that we should have better ethics and campaign finance laws.
- A small number of wealthy donors provide the bulk of the campaign dollars. It's only human nature that they expect a return on their investments.
- Trust in government has eroded since the 1950s with only 1 of 10 citizens believing that the government works for them (source: [PEW research polling](#))
- End by suggesting that the reader get involved with the issue by looking up the Virginia Scorecard, considering ethics the next time they vote, or by contacting their current legislators to voice their opinion on the issue.