



Letter to the Editor Toolkit

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Part 1: Why do letters matter?

Laguna Woods Democratic Club member and frequently-published LA Times letter writer Marcia Goldstein explains in this short essay titled, "I'm Telling!"

Children, if they are lucky, live in a home where justice and fair play are the norm. So when your big brother, yet again, messes with your doll house and puts the toilet in the kitchen and the bed on the roof, you say, "I'm telling!" You run to your mother, and she deals with the situation. Johnny is made to apologize and put everything back where it belongs. He gets no dessert after dinner that night, and you feel safe once again.

We former children all know that it gets a little trickier as we venture into the wider world. In grade school we quickly learn that, although adults are ostensibly in charge, on the playground there are some time lapses in justice that cannot be addressed by "telling."

As we grow in years, we expand our concerns to the wider society. Sadly, it happens that, at this particular time in our history, we are reeling in a world where it seems that no responsible adult is in charge.

We see injustice with no redress. We see racism in its most naked form in decades. We see our air, water, soil, and ocean polluted. We see lawmakers selling themselves and the country out to their wealthy donors. We see the poverty of low-wage working people and their resultant poor housing, poor education, poor nutrition, and poor health.

Worst of all we see our government led by a president and enabled by a Republican party with no standard of ethics, morality, or decency – or even any obligation to honor the offices in which they serve. We gnash our teeth at the usurpation of power by the corrupt and self-serving and despair at the frightful rise of ideological fanaticism.

So what are we going to do in a world where no responsible adult is in charge? Who do we "tell" about this? Do not lose hope. There are short run and long run options to deal with your concerns. The first option is as near as your keyboard.

Put your thoughts down on paper and share them with a wider audience that will be interested in what you have to say. Start with the editor of your newspaper or magazines you subscribe to. Don't forget your clubs' newsletters. Share your take on a problem and offer your solution. Point with pride and view with alarm.

Do not underestimate your unique background, perspective, and expertise on all of the social issues that we confront. You will feel better when you have shared your

thoughts with others and you will get back some of that feeling you had as a child, that you had someone to “tell,” and they listened.

In the long run you will feel even better if you work to ensure that our world rights itself. Keep in mind that it is not such a long run, really, with an election coming up in November. Of course you will vote – that is a given – but you will find great benefit in putting more energy into volunteering in local political activities.

Knowing that you are doing your part to replace a government that shamelessly inflicts harm on this country and injustice on its citizens will bring you a great deal of psychic relief. As concerned citizens, we vote, we volunteer, we work toward social justice. We become the adults in the scenario, the ones upon whom the less fortunate must rely when it is time to “tell” someone about injustice.

Marcia Goldstein
Submitted August 19, 2020

Part 2: How to Write Great Letters to the Editor

Video Tutorial

Watch a 1-hour training session produced August 22, 2020 on Zoom by the Democratic Party of Orange County, with special guests Marcia Goldstein and Tim Geddes. Download video file: [08/22/20 Zoom Video Training](#)

Blog Tutorials

NEA Guide: <http://www.nea.org/home/19683.htm>

ACLU Guide: <https://www.aclu.org/other/tips-writing-letter-editor>

NRDC Guide: <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/how-write-successful-letter-editor>

Expert Tips

Submitted by Marcia Goldstein, Laguna Woods Democratic Club, frequently-published letter writer in the LA Times. These notes refer to the LA Times for examples, but can be applied to many other publications.

I. General Advice - How often to write

- You need to write a lot. Like fly casting, you need to enjoy doing it.
- Read letters published in the paper to get a sense of how they read and what the editors choose
- Check out the Saturday *LA Times* -- it summarizes letters received by total and by topic.
 - **Saturday, August 22:** 855 usable letters; 164 re U.S. Postal Service; 114 re presidential election; 56 re fires in California.
 - **Saturday, August 1:** 827 usable letters; 97 re COVID-19; 82 re *LA Times* call for suggestions on remaking California; 78 re protests in Portland.
 - Note they say 'usable' letters which makes you think about what makes a letter usable: Vulgarity, ranting, insane rambling, hatred? Don't do that! Or maybe it was just too long.
- A brilliant letter on an obscure topic may not make it into the paper. But if the topic is important to you, don't shy away from writing it. It will be noticed and counted.
- If you join hundreds of people writing about the same article, your chance of being noticed is small. Write it to stand out. Remember, hundreds of letters on a topic means that it is important to the readers and the editors notice, so write and get counted.

II. WHAT TO WRITE

- Go with your gut reaction to a specific article. Why does it seem important to you, especially how it relates to Democratic values.
- Editors want content to engage their readers. What unique slant or interesting insight can you bring to the issue? Many letter writers will express the same point of view. You want to offer something different that others have not thought of.
- Can you think of a snappy, attention-getting first line?
- Do you have facts or first-hand experience that would add perspective to readers? Make sure your facts are accurate!
- Editors are concerned with your thoughts more than your feelings.
- You can always write directly to the author of an article. This will not be published, but you can share your insights, information, or experience, as well as provide feedback to them. We don't want to leave them alone with their thoughts.

III. HOW TO WRITE

- Strictly follow the outlet's guidelines. For example, *LA Times* has a 150-word limit, and you must respond to a story that appeared in the Times.
- Write your letter off line, review it carefully, check for spelling, grammar, accuracy, etc., then copy it into the text box of your email. Submit to the address letters@latimes.com.
- Be quick about it and write your letter as soon as you have gathered your thoughts. Letters in response to a specific article will be published within a matter of days after the article. The beauty – and curse – of email is rapid response.
- Word processing software has a feature that counts the number of words so you can easily know your word limit.
- I don't bother with Dear Sir or Madam or Dear Editor. Just begin with your text.
- In the Subject line, put the name of the article in quotes, followed by the date it appeared in the paper.
- Be SURE to close with your name, street address, telephone number, and email address. They will (often) contact you before publishing your letter – but sometimes you are surprised.
- BTW, they reserve the right to edit your letter. I have never been upset with what they have done, usually they want more space, but once their edit seemed to dilute somewhat my point.

IV. HOW **NOT** TO WRITE

- Don't even *think* about satire. People don't get it, they believe the absurd scenarios created, and this spreads disinformation.
- Do not rant, but OK to describe your reaction to what you read, e.g., "I feel angry, upset, heartsick, disgruntled, etc" But also, "I was pleased, encouraged, relieved."
- Do not make personal attacks. Stick to values and principles.
- Do not submit canned propaganda. Do not write overt political content for a candidate that feels like campaign materials.
- No letter-writing campaigns. Why would they publish a lot of similar letters, anyway?
- No anonymous letters.

Part 3: Sample letters

All sample letters listed below were written by Marcia Goldstein, Laguna Woods Democratic Club, and were published in the LA Times.

From Marcia: "My 'guess' is that the letters were chosen because 1) they had a point that had not yet been made by other letter writers or 2) they had a snappy turn of phrase that attracted the editor's attention. And, of course, I followed the guidelines faithfully."

1) **July 5, 2020** re Supreme Court ruling that not allowing a state government to subsidize religious education if it subsidizes secular schools would be 'discrimination': "Under this Supreme Court, our constitutional right of freedom of religion can be compared to a man sitting in the chair of a bad barber – it is getting chopped at and not looking very good."

2) **April 15, 2020** re Trump's denial of responsibility: "It is a basic principle of management – accountability cannot be separated from authority. If you are in charge of something, you are answerable for the results."

3) **August 27, 2019** re tariffs on Chinese imports. First I showed the math which revealed that in less than nine years the tariffs American consumers would pay would make up for the \$1 trillion tax giveaway to the wealthiest individuals and corporations. Then I wrote: "Think about this while you wonder how to put shoes on your kids' growing feet..."

4) **April 14, 2018** re Speaker Ryan resigning: "Nice try, Speaker Ryan, but jumping ship is not going to keep your name out of the history books. Historians may debate whether you and your fellow Republicans were merely Trump's enablers or his active collaborators."

5) **December 13, 2017** re Trump being an unwelcome presence at an opening ceremony for Mississippi's new Civil Rights Museum: "...his ride into office was powered by his hatred of President Obama. He appears to be consumed by anger at the fact that he, a white man, is outclassed by Obama, a black man whose gentlemanly demeanor, intelligence and calm show Trump up at every turn."

6) **November 22, 2014** re Speaker Boehner's accusation that President Obama's actions would 'poison the well' on immigration legislation: "Now Obama has gone and done it! He has acted on immigration and poisoned Boehner's well, just as [Boehner] said he would. Let's face it: Obama was never going to get as much as a

sip from that well. That's the well with the big sign on it saying, 'We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone, especially you, Mr President.'"

7) **September 9, 2014** re the Tesla battery factory going to Nevada not California: "Before we start crying into our beer over not winning the Tesla factory, let's reconsider the value of adding a polluting industry to our state, waiving our environmental laws and paying \$500 million to get 6,500 jobs. ...we really dodged a bullet."

8) **July 27, 2014** re organizing humanitarian refuge for children in Central America: "While we are making plans to organize humanitarian refuge for children in Central America who face gang violence, crime, poverty and corruption, can we think of any way to provide asylum to American children who are in the same boat? They are already living in the country to which much of the world looks for rescue."

9) **January 11, 2014** re Governor Christie's denying involvement in Bridgegate, New Jersey's blocking the George Washington Bridge to punish the Democratic mayor of Fort Lee who would not endorse him: "Christie may say the traffic tie-up was the action of rogue staff, but he must accept responsibility for presiding over a moral swamp in which such a vicious scheme would even be considered."

10) **August 31, 2013** re a story of Newport Beach residents fighting over yachts in contrast to my having seen on TV the degraded condition of the Lincoln Memorial steps behind speakers celebrating Martin Luther King's iconic speech: "Nothing highlights so well the current situation in our country: public squalor as we starve our government amid private splendor, exemplified by those Newport Beach Residents who grapple with the 'issue' of what size mega-yachts will be allowed to dock there without disturbing their views."

11) **June 8, 2013** re teaching Nazi propaganda to 7th grade students to heighten 'analytical thinking': "...the 'lesson' in analytical thinking will be forgotten, and the hateful message will remain. If you don't believe this, consider the right-wing propaganda that President Obama was not born in the United States. According to a CBS News poll in 2011, 1 in 4 Americans believe this fiction."

Part 4: Where to Write: A List of News Outlets and their LTE Guidelines

We recommend sending letters to your local news outlets (if you have ones that accept letters) as well as regional outlets like the Daily Pilot, OC Register, and LA Times. Letters sent to small, local publications are more likely to be published, and they are read by active and engaged community members in your area!

I. **Los Angeles Times**, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/submit-letter-to-the-editor>

- **Guidelines: 150 word limit.** Provide your full name, mailing address, city of residence, phone number and email address in **online form above**
 - They generally do not publish more than one letter from a single person within any 60-day period
 - Letters become the property of *The Times* and may be republished in any format, may also be edited
 - You will be contacted if your letter is a candidate for publication

II. **Orange County Register**,

<https://www.ocregister.com/author/letters-to-the-editor/>

- **Guidelines:** Preference given to letters of **about 200 words**. Include your name, city and telephone number (telephone numbers will not be published). **Email** your letter to: letters@ocregister.com
 - Letters will be edited for length, grammar and clarity

III. **Voice of OC**, <https://voiceofoc.org/civic-engagement/>

- **Guidelines:** They ask for **about 750 to 1000 words**. If you want to submit a community opinion piece, send an **email** to: opinions@voiceofoc.org
 - *Specifics*
 - Do not include all caps
 - Include the author's (your) first and last name, town of residence and a brief biography (1-2 sentences), including affiliations with lobbying, special interest groups, or political parties if applicable
 - Write a headline
 - Include links to relevant documents
 - Include a front page photo, your own photo, maps or other data; please include captions and credits (YOU MUST HAVE THE RIGHT TO REPUBLISH INCLUDED IMAGES)

- Include an excerpt (**50 word maximum**); a short synopsis of what your piece is about. The excerpt should give the reader a reason to read your community opinion
- Once the piece is published share on your social media platforms
- Let them know if your issue is time sensitive

IV. **Daily Pilot**,

<https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/opinion/tn-dpt-me-0208-john-canalıs-column-20150207-story.html>

- Guidelines: They ask for a **500 word limit**; exceptions may be made if subject matter is complex or for op-ed pieces (**700 word limit**). Include your full name, mailing address, phone number, email address and city of residence (will not publish anything more than your name and town). **Email to:** john.canalıs@latimes.com or dailypilot@latimes.com
 - Do not sign your letter with a pseudonym like “Concerned resident” or “Anonymous”
 - Do not send more than one letter a month
 - Will edit for style, clarity, accuracy and space
 - “Avoid name-calling and personal attacks...don’t punch below the belt”

V. **Orange County Breeze**

- Guidelines: **No word limit**. Include full name, city of residence, and phone number. **Email to:** editor@ocbreeze.com

VI. **Newport Beach Independent**

- Guidelines: **400 word limit**. Include name, city, and phone number (number will not be published). **Email to:** christopher@firebrandmediainc.com

VII. **Dana Point Times**, <https://www.danapointtimes.com/letters-editor-policy/>

- Guidelines: **350 word limit**. Include your phone number and address for verification by staff (address and phone number will not be published). **Email to:** lboyd@picketfencemedia.com **no later than 8 a.m. on Monday morning**
 - May edit for length

VIII. **San Clemente Times**, <https://www.sanclementetimes.com/letters-editor-policy/>

- Guidelines: **350 word limit**. Include your phone number and address for verification by staff (address and phone number will not be published). **Email**

to: sraymundo@picketfencemedia.com **no later than 8 a.m. on Monday morning**

- May edit for length

IX. ***The Capistrano Dispatch***,

<https://www.thecapistranodispatch.com/letters-editor-policy/>

- **Guidelines: 350 word limit.** Include your phone number and address for verification by staff (address and phone number will not be published). **Email to: agroves@picketfencemedia.com no later than 8 a.m. on Monday morning**
 - May edit for length

X. ***Foothill Sentry***

- **Guidelines: 250 word limit.** Print comes out every last Tuesday of the month, submissions must be sent 10 days prior. **Email to: editor@foothillssentry.com**