

# How to Write a Letter to the Editor

Writing letters to the editor is a great way to energize branch members, promote AAUW visibility in the community, and spread the word about important issues. Letters to the editor can be used to correct and clarify facts in a previous news story, oppose or support the actions of an elected official or agency, direct attention to a problem, spur news editors to cover an issue that is being overlooked, or urge readers to support your cause. Letters to the editor are especially effective in local, community papers.

## Tips on Effective Letters to the Editor

- **Research the guidelines.** Most papers have a length limit on letters to the editor. It is usually around 250 words, but be sure to find out before you begin writing. The sentences and paragraphs should be short. If your letter is too long, it may be returned to you, or they may edit your letter.
- **Write no more than 3-4 short paragraphs.**
  - The first paragraph cites any previous coverage of a story: "In the January 2 issue of *The Idaho Statesman* you reported that..."
  - The second paragraph introduces something personal and states your side of the argument: "As a person born and raised in Idaho, I believe that..."
  - The third paragraph moves your key "messages".
  - The fourth paragraph gives a "kicker" to the letter and underscores your stance on the issue.
- **Submit your letter via e-mail, mail, or fax.** If you have e-mail, send that way so the newspaper staff does not have to retype your letter. It is not necessary to contact the editor to check the status of your letter. Depending on the newspaper, it typically takes 1-2 weeks for a letter to be printed.
- **Pick a timely topic.**
- **Find a local angle.** Readers are more interested in an issue when they see how it affects their lives and communities.
- **Assume nothing.** Do not assume that your readers are informed on your topic. Give a concise but informative background before plunging into the main issue. Refer to any newspaper article or editorial to which you are responding by date and title.

## AAUW Idaho Statehouse Lobby Corps

- **Identify yourself as part of AAUW.** Most papers prefer printing letters to the editor written by a local authority or community leader. Signing your letter as an AAUW office holder or member with expertise on the topic can make it more likely to be chosen.
- **What makes someone an expert?** Someone with a closer-than-normal perspective on the issue is an expert. This may include a local lawyer discussing the impact of a Supreme Court nomination, or a teacher discussing how cuts in education translate into the day-to-day situation in her classroom. You should submit your letter not only as an AAUW member, but also according to your personal experience.
- **Avoid form letters.** Do not send the same letter to two competing papers in the same circulation area, or many copies of an identical letter to a single paper.
- **Edit your document:** Have some fresh eyes look it over for the requirements above. Finalize your draft. AAUW policy staff is available to help proof your op-ed if requested via [advocacy@aauw.org](mailto:advocacy@aauw.org).

## Get Creative

- Throw a letter-to-the-editor party! Gather branch members to learn about an issue and write letters to the editor to your local paper. This way, you'll be able to support one another through the writing process and increase the likelihood that several letters will be published.
- Incorporate letters to the editor in your existing activities. For example, if you are having a speaker on school vouchers, ask everyone to write a letter to the editor about a state school voucher bill after the presentation.

## Key points

- Letters to the editor should be brief, preferably 250 words or less.
- AAUW policy staff is available to help proof your letter if requested via [advocacy@aauw.org](mailto:advocacy@aauw.org).
- Make your letter stand out with a local angle and by identifying yourself as an AAUW member.
- Consider gathering your fellow branch members to write letters to the editor together, either as a separate "letter to the editor party" or as part of an existing activity.



## Sample LTE

Dear Editor:

The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act will celebrate five years on January 29. As a member of the American Association of University Women, I'm thrilled that we were able to pass this legislation to reverse the 2007 Supreme Court decision that tried to rob women like Lilly of their day in court to challenge unequal pay. But we need additional legislation to give employers and employees the tools to prevent wage discrimination in the first place – and we've been waiting too long for that.

The legislation designed to help ensure equal pay hasn't been updated in 50 years, even though the workforce has significantly changed since then. That's why Congress needs to pass the Paycheck Fairness Act, which would close loopholes that prevent the original legislation from fully addressing the pay gap. The Paycheck Fairness Act would require employers to prove that pay disparity is based on a legitimate business reason not related to gender, or due to seniority, merit, or productivity. It would also prohibit retaliation against workers who discuss or ask about salary information.

In New Jersey, women face an average pay gap of 21 cents, which translates into less money for feeding their families, paying off student loans, and saving for retirement. Lawmakers who do not actively support the Paycheck Fairness Act are denying women their economic security and simply refusing to acknowledge our state's needs.

Tell your representative and senators: Co-sponsor the Paycheck Fairness Act now and help us work for its passage.

Sincerely,