



Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

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Guidelines for Letters to the Editor and Op-eds

Letters to the Editor and Op-ed pieces are a very important way to increase the public's awareness, comprehension, and support for important social justice causes. A letter to the editor should be very short and to the point. Op-ed pieces are a bit longer, but should also be quite concise.

Each newspaper will have its own rules about the length of letters and op-eds, as well as other guidelines. If you are unsure, you should call the editorial department and ask about these. You also can ask if they would prefer the piece to be sent by e-mail, regular mail or fax. For e-mail submissions, many newspapers prefer the text to be sent in the body of the e-mail and will not open an attached file. If in doubt, check with the newspaper.

Letters to the Editor

- **Keep it short and focused on only one subject.** In most cases, there will be a very short word limit which is strictly enforced. For some, it could be as low as 100 words, and the maximum is no more than 300 words.

- Whenever possible, **the letter or op-ed should refer to a specific article recently published by that paper or magazine.** Cite the specific article in your letter, including the headline, and the date and page it was published.

- **Timing is critical**, especially at major metro newspapers. Because of the volume of submissions, the sooner a letter is submitted the more likely it is to be published. If possible, send the letter the same day the news article appears.

- **In your letter, state why you are responding to the article** – or editorial or op-ed. Focus your letter on one point and on one subject. Your letter should raise a point that was not in the article or was in the article but you disagree with it.

- **You must not submit the same letter to more than one publication at the same time.** However, be sure to consider weekly community newspapers, where you can send a similar but revised letter on an issue and you will probably have an even greater chance that it will be published.

- **Include your contact information.** Many newspapers ask for a **daytime phone number** (not for publication) so they can call with questions or for confirmation. **Include your full name and address** (the paper will not publish your street address but may need it for verification).

Op-eds

“Op-ed” pieces, as they are often called because of their location in the newspaper, are opinion articles published opposite the editorial page. They are longer than letters to the editor and are held to more rigorous standards of composition and journalistic significance. Given their length and the limited available space, they are often more difficult to get published.

- **Timing is important.** Plan to submit an op-ed when the issue is featured prominently in the news, or the issue is frequently in the news.
- **Most newspapers have clear guidelines about the length of op-eds**, generally ranging from 500 to 750 words. Frequently the paper’s guidelines are published on their website. If in doubt, check with the paper’s opinion page editor.
- **Personalize the op-ed with an anecdote.** Using a personal experience to support an argument gives your piece an additional element of unique and often compelling appeal..
- **Editors often are looking for an unusual or provocative opinion** on a particular issue. Use fresh arguments and avoid rehashing points already made by previous writers on the opinion page.
- **Read other op-eds** to get a feel for how they are constructed. A common format is to write a brief introduction stating your thesis, identify and write two or three major points in support of your point of view, and conclude with a brief summary and persuasive final argument.
- Check your article for **grammar, spelling, and style**.
- **If you have expertise on the subject** about which you are writing, find a way to incorporate this into the op-ed or state it as biographical information in parentheses at the bottom of the piece.
- **You must not submit the op-ed to more than one publication at the same time.** After 2-3 days, contact the newspaper’s opinion page editor to ask if they plan to publish the op-ed. If not, you are free to submit it to another paper.
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