

Writing a Letter to the Editor

Writing a letter to the editor of a consumer newspaper, magazine or web publication, or contributing a comment to the listener/viewer response departments of TV and radio stations, is a simple, direct and effective way to publicly express your thoughts, ideas and opinions about a particular autism issue or event.

Letters that get published or comments that get aired can be powerful tools in delivering important information to readers, viewers and listeners. Your message may reach politicians and lawmakers, health-care officials, autism advocates and others who may have a particular interest or even influence in instigating change in autism treatment, funding, school support and so on.

As well, when publications and TV and radio stations receive an influx of letters on a topic, it may lead them to dedicate more coverage to the story, which will further keep the subject on the public radar. In other words, your letter has the potential to influence public opinion and, as part of a greater advocacy movement, may even help to spark social change.

While providing input to TV or radio stations about news topics can certainly be effective, this document will mainly deal with how to write letters to the editor of a publication. The reason is that a letter can often achieve greater effect than radio or TV feedback, because:

- printed documents are tangible products that have staying power – letters may be held onto for a while and shared with others, and may get archived on a publication’s website
- more opinions and information can be included in a letter, as publications often have enough space to publish long letters that are well-written and informative

PURPOSE OF A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

- To correct or clarify information or misperceptions
- To provide additional information
- To express an opinion or point of view
- To introduce or reinforce a message

HOW TO START

Timeliness

One of the most important aspects of writing a letter to the editor is making sure it relates to a current autism-related event or issue. Pay regular attention to autism-related news and events – when such news unfolds, that’s the time to write your letter. Publications will usually run letters about their stories within a few days of their run date. Some publications may have actual guidelines about when they publish readers’ letters, e.g. within three days of a story running, so find this out before you send your letter.



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Choose a publication

Decide on the publication to which you'd like to submit your letter. Major national and local daily newspapers have larger circulations, so if your letter publishes in them, they'll achieve the widest exposure. However, letters published in small local papers can also be powerful, as they're more likely to influence their community's MPPs. Below is e-mail information for three major daily papers:

The Toronto Sun: torsun.editor@sunmedia.ca

The Toronto Star: lettertoed@thestar.ca

The Globe and Mail: letters@globeandmail.com

Format

To ensure your letter reaches your target publication(s) quickly, in time for it to be considered for publication before the issue of the day fades, and to efficiently reach multiple publications, an e-mail letter is your best bet. Review the letters section of the publication(s) you're targeting and pay attention to which types of letters typically get published. Then, tailor your letter so that it has a suitable tone, so as to increase its chances of getting published. Also, check if the publication has a limit on the length of reader letters, and develop your letter accordingly.

Just the facts

When responding to a news report about autism that features inaccurate or misleading information, try to stick to the facts. Being objective and intelligent rather than reactionary and emotional will make your letter credible.

First, be sure to point out the accurate parts of the story, and even praise the publication for running a story on the subject – publications and journalists need to be commended for good work/efforts, and positive praise will help your cause.

Then, think about which errors or omissions you'd like to address. Try to stick to the few most glaring inaccuracies and address them by priority. Remember, you do not have to answer every error in the story or letter, only the most significant ones.

If you suspect the information in the news story is inaccurate, but you're not sure, get a second opinion from someone with experience on this issue. Consult your local autism support group or association, or research established and respected autism-related websites.

Personal stories, big picture

Usually, it's not misinformation in autism news stories that cause concern, but the autism-related government policies being discussed in them, and their resulting social injustices. Stories about wait times for publicly funded health care, benchmarks for cutting off autism therapy funding, and the lack of IBI therapy provided in schools for kids with autism, are among the hot-button issues on which families dealing with autism want to make their voices heard. In these cases, letters to the editor can become useful tools in raising awareness about the social, political, economic and cultural ramifications of the gaps in autism services.



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When writing a letter from this perspective, start by describing how the issue affects you personally. What kind of impact is this issue having on you and your family members' lives, particularly the person with autism? What emotional, mental, social, economic, physical and spiritual toll is this issue on you and your loved ones? If these issues continue to go unaddressed, what will the future look like for your loved one with autism and your family? If possible, include personal details about your situation that you feel comfortable revealing to help paint a compelling picture and connect readers to your story.

Then, move onto the bigger picture – how does this issue affect the scores of families affected by autism in your community/province/country? What are the social/economic/health consequences, now and in the future, if these issues go unresolved? How does the emotional and mental stress caused by the issue affect social trends, e.g. rates of autism families declaring bankruptcy or leaving the province/country for better autism services? Providing the big picture gives heft to your argument by reflecting that the issue isn't just a personal one, but a societal one.

Making the broad social argument will likely require some research. You'll want to get sufficient and accurate information to help you make your points in a credible and effective way. Browse established autism research, advocacy and community service websites for information on your subject, or connect with them directly for leads to the most current autism reports and studies. When mentioning factual or statistical information in your letter, be sure to reference your sources.

While these issues may stir up heated feelings for autism families, be careful of being too accusatory in your letter – this will create a negative tone to your piece and may prevent it from getting published, or if it does get published, may turn off readers. Focus on the subject, not individuals involved. Letters containing derogatory or libelous statements will be edited or rejected entirely.

Expand your reach

The issues of autism – health care, education, government policy – are broad and far-reaching, and often there's a connection between these issues and other news stories. In such cases, it can be useful to write a letter responding to these news stories that show a clear link to autism issues. For example, if there's a story lauding a politician for being very involved in her community, but you know that this individual is very inactive on autism issues, writing a letter to the editor reflecting this inconsistency would provide a unique and interesting perspective to the overall picture.

Before sending your letter...

Once the letter is written, read it over. Are your ideas clear? Is there repetition? Can the letter be simplified? Get a second opinion from someone you trust. Also, make sure to check your letter for spelling, grammar and clarity.

Address the letter to publication's editor, and refer to the date and title of the news item up front. State your position clearly and concisely in the first or second sentence. Include your name, address, phone number and e-mail address, as the publication may wish to verify the authenticity of the letter before they publish it.