

Chapter 40

Writing Letters to the Editor to Promote Environmental Citizenship and Improve Student Writing

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Introduction

Resolving environmental and sustainability issues is complex and fraught with debate. Civil, community discourse that includes a myriad of stakeholder perspectives is necessary to educate and involve the public (e.g., see Chaps. 19 and 31). Successful engagement requires that citizens be able to understand, assess, and successfully communicate their own and others' perspectives about complex issues across scales (Jacobson 2009; Pezzulo 2010; Chaps. 29 and 39). To help students improve these skills, the process of reading and writing “letters to the editor” (LTE) provides an experiential and authentic assignment that also fosters learning about timely environmental problems and politics (Wermuth 2006). LTE writing can be “situated as [an] actual activity in which [students] participate in real-world settings” (Doyle 2000, p. 1) thus engaging them as environmental citizens in their communities. This chapter describes how reading and writing LTEs can be used to help students develop and articulate their personal perspectives about environmental and sustainability issues and improve their writing skills.

A benefit of using LTEs as pedagogy is that they can easily be submitted for publication, which provides an external audience and added motivation to enhance student engagement. Because the LTE section is one of the most widely read parts of newspapers and news websites (Jacobson 2009; Sierra Club North Star 2014), students who write LTEs that are subsequently published can reach a wider audience

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with their environmental perspectives. The assignment can also be empowering for students who may not have many opportunities to have their voices heard in a public forum. In the author's experience, 40–50 % of submitted student LTEs per class have been accepted for publication (see two examples in Electronic Supplementary Materials (ESM-A)). After 4 years of facilitating this activity, it is evident (through written student evaluations) that students (and instructors) appreciate how reading and writing LTEs helps them acquire useful skills while simultaneously connecting them to their communities through environmental advocacy.

Learning Outcomes

After completing this activity, students should be able to:

- Analyze and critique the framing of complex public policy issues/problems within popular media.
- Frame and write succinct and persuasive arguments about their environmental perspectives for a broad public audience of community members (e.g., businesses, elected officials, and agencies at multiple levels of government).
- Engage in public environmental discourse with confidence and civility.
- Recognize the value and role of engaging in public environmental discourse for communicating their environmental perspectives.

Course Context

- Developed for an upper-level environmental policy course for environmental studies majors with 15–30 students
- Time needed to complete the full activity is two 80-min classes but adjustments can be made for one class and shorter periods
- Adaptable to courses that include discussions of US public lands and oceans policies, environmental communication, environmental governance and management, or other sustainable development and sustainability issues

Instructor Preparation and Materials

This activity is taught in two parts and requires computers for student use in the classroom (if available). If computers are unavailable in the classroom, it is suggested that instructors reserve a computer lab (e.g., in the library). For [parts 1](#) and [2](#), instructors should provide a handout (LTE guide) to students that describes the reasoning and logistical process of writing letters to the editor. The most useful resource

for this process has been created free for public use by national chapters of the Sierra Club (ESM-B). Instructors should edit this information as needed for their course.

For [part 1](#), instructors should choose a collection of opinion-editorial (op-ed) essays on one topic for the students to read before class that they will write about in a practice letter. Although this activity could be used with many topics, it was designed to coincide with the discussion of current media events and environmental policy decisions. The chosen op-eds should provide students with a broad enough spectrum of public perspectives so as to better understand the diversity of stakeholder interests in the issue. A set of three example op-eds about salvage logging on Bureau of Land Management lands in southern Oregon is provided in ESM-C. This sequence of op-eds was carefully selected for advancing student analytical and writing goals, as they represent varied legal, anthropocentric, and biocentric values of community stakeholders, thus highlighting the complexity and diversity of arguments within the environmental decision-making arena.

For a briefer implementation, durations for [part 1](#) suggested below can be reduced and/or step D (letter writing) can be completed as homework before the in-class peer review. Alternatively, it is possible to skip the practice LTE assignment altogether and begin with [part 2](#). (In the author's experience, the longer and shorter approaches work, but the in-class writing and peer review process provides more continuity between writing and editing and receiving immediate feedback for improvement.)

Activities

Part 1: The Practice Letter to the Editor

- (a) As homework, hand out the chosen op-eds (e.g., ESM-C) that students should read before the letter-writing class. Students should be instructed to highlight the strongest arguments in each of them. Tell students that in the next class they will be required to take a stance on the issues discussed in the op-eds and that they will be writing a letter to the editor that is informed by these pieces.
- (b) On the day of the exercise, hand out the "letter to the editor guide" (Sierra Club 2014, ESM-B). Discuss the benefits of LTEs as mentioned in the Sierra Club guide, and discuss the main points for successfully publishing a LTE (10 min). Consider inviting a journalism professor, an environmental journalist, or an editor (if available in the community or via Skype) as a guest speaker who can provide an insider's perspective about the publishing industry.
- (c) Instruct students to take on a fictional community role for their practice LTE (for the logging case study, e.g., a bird watcher, hiker, logger, Earth First!er, mountain biker, ecologist, fisher, wilderness advocate, botanist, motocross

fanatic, government resource management agent, etc.). This community stakeholder's perspective will be used for writing their practice LTE. Alternatively, the instructor may choose to assign students their roles randomly.

- (d) In class, using a computer, students will individually write a ~250-word LTE (30 min). Explain that students who are having difficulty writing their LTEs will soon have assistance from a peer editor.
- (e) When they are finished writing their LTE, students should choose or be assigned a partner for peer editing. Suggest to students that this step is helpful because chances are, if the peer editor does not understand something in the LTE, the editor of the newspaper will also be at a loss.
- (f) The peer review process (30 min) involves students sharing their practice LTEs with their partner (e.g., via email, Google Docs, or switching computers). Instructors should explain that peer reviewers should write comments related to grammar, content, organization, and any additional information that is needed to clarify and/or improve the main points and arguments in the LTE. While preparing their comments, reviewers should follow the instructions in the LTE guide (ESM-B). After both students finish writing their comments, each should, in turn, provide them to the author and verbally summarize their comments and suggested edits. Note that it may be helpful for students to edit their partner's LTEs if they assume the role of a newspaper editor or member of the general public. Instructors may also choose to request that peer reviewer comments are turned in for evaluation.
- (g) Students should make edits to their LTE in class or at home. Instructors may wish to collect these for evaluation based, in part, on common issues that will arise such as exceeding the 250-word limit; failure to include a witty title; failure to mention the author, date, and title of an op-ed or article to which the LTE is referring; failure to explicitly state the desired outcomes; failure to use multiple short paragraphs as opposed to one giant block paragraph; failure to stick to one or two main points; and lack of new/unique compelling arguments in relation to their chosen or assigned stakeholder role.
- (h) As appropriate, the instructor can facilitate a 10-min whole-class discussion to debrief about the class' opinions (e.g., preferred outcomes for the proposed salvage logging sale on public lands; see ESM-C).

Part 2: Letters to the Editor for Submission to a Newspaper

Building on [part 1](#), part 2 asks students to write an LTE for submission to an actual media outlet, most likely a newspaper or possibly a weekly or bimonthly magazine. Part 2 should commence in the class immediately following [part 1](#).

- (a) Students should be asked to browse newspapers (online, 30 min) from their hometown or the community in which the university is located to find a recent article or op-ed related to the class material (they should have been published

within the last 2 weeks to increase the probability of students' letters being published). This can be an article that students feel strongly about or that contains content for which they're curious or even unfamiliar. The importance of finding a "hometown" or university community article is somewhat important, as newspapers are more likely to publish letters from their local readership/residents. However, students in the author's classes have also had success publishing nationally regarding more general domestic and international environmental issues (e.g., climate change, endangered species, and public lands). Instructors should explain to students that they will have a greater likelihood of publication success if they choose a smaller newspaper, instead of a high-profile national paper.

- (b) Students should be instructed to find the LTE submission process for the publication of their selected article and note the word limit (usually 150–400 words).
- (c) Once students have read their article or op-ed, they should be given 30 min for the LTE writing process in class.
- (d) After the letter writing, they will again work for 20 min with a peer editor to improve their LTEs (see step (f), [part 1](#) above). If some students are working more slowly and do not have time to both read the newspaper article and also write their LTE, students can work at their own pace and finish the process outside of class.
- (e) When students have finished their edits in class (if time permits) or later at home, they should be asked to submit their LTE online to the publication and their instructor. To confirm submission to the publication, students should either carbon copy the instructor on an email submission or take a "screenshot" of the completed Web page submission form (or confirmation page) where they have submitted their LTE. As noted in the Sierra Club guidelines (ESM-B), students can also be invited to send the letter to their local elected or agency officials to increase the impact of this assignment and their citizenship engagement.
- (f) Instructors should ensure sufficient time for debriefing about the value of this lesson, highlighting the extent to which students learned to critically read about, reflect on, and assess complex environmental issues and their ability to express themselves concisely in writing with conviction and clarity. Discussion can also focus on the value of LTEs in relation to the potential broader impacts of contributing to the public discourse (e.g., what difference does it make if people write LTEs and to what extent can anyone's mind be changed by a letter?).

Follow-Up Engagement

- After students submit their LTEs to a newspaper, they should look online for successful publication. Students should send the instructor online links to the LTE publications. Instructors and students can then discuss any public replies/comments that have been posted online in relation to the student LTEs. Further, environmental issues that have been resolved after publication of the LTE can be highlighted as part of a class discussion.

- One option for increasing the rigor of this assignment is for students to write an opinion editorial (op-ed) on an issue, typically about 800–1,000 words in length (see ESM-C). For this, students, individually or in groups of two or three (possibly in conjunction with a community stakeholder, NGO representative, or other “community influential”), contact an editor of a newspaper with an initial writing proposal (lede) to obtain the green light for formal submission and possible publication. Tips for writing good op-eds, hooks, and ledes can be found online from *The OpEd Project* (www.theopedproject.org/). Alternatively, a collective, whole-class op-ed piece can be written regarding one agreed-upon topic, with each student writing pieces that are integrated into one op-ed (by the instructor or as a class project, perhaps online in a shared document). (See Wermuth (2006) for an example of this process.)
- A further extension is for instructors to post students’ LTEs and the original op-eds online in a classroom management platform and have students comment (civilly) on each other’s ideas.

Connections

- Because students are writing persuasively about contemporary and pressing environmental issues and problems, there will be fruitful future ground (at other times in the course) for instructors to call upon students in class to discuss what they have written about in their LTEs. In the author’s experience, students genuinely care about the complex issues they read about and become de facto experts on them and are thus more likely to contribute and participate in class discussions and debates.
- If the LTE and op-ed writing process is a student’s first foray into writing for environmental advocacy, they will acquire a better understanding of the challenges and complexity of the environmental communications and policy arenas. A desired longer-term outcome of this heightened understanding (and the writing process) is that the acquired skill set and experience will provide a foundation for future community engagement efforts (e.g., leadership roles; see Chap. 7).

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