

# Science communication:

## How to write an op-ed or letter to the editor



### Why it is important to write an op-ed or letter to the editor

Writing an op-ed (short for “opposite the editorial page”) or letter to the editor gives you the chance to raise awareness of the importance of Earth and space science, its contributions to society and the need for public support and federal funding.

An op-ed allows you to draw attention to an issue in your community that may not have already been covered, such as a national policy-related issue impacting the local environment. A letter to the editor allows you to respond to an article in a publication—either supporting the issue or countering it.

Typically, letters to the editor are under 250 words while op-eds are under 750 words, so be sure to do your research and visit the outlet’s website to understand submission policies and guidelines, such as word count. Most outlets have specific requirements and you can usually find the information you need in the opinion or letters section of the website. If not, check the “contact us” section to find information for the opinion editor.

If your piece is published, amplify it further by sharing it with your networks, social media accounts and sending a copy [to your legislators](#).

### Writing an op-ed

Often, op-eds are persuasive and written in reaction to a specific event or seasonal occurrence. An op-ed can tie in policy issues and demonstrate how government support matters on a local level. It’s also a good way to make yourself visible in your community as an informed, engaged and accessible expert on scientific issues.

Make sure to emphasize both your expertise as well as the importance of the issue, especially as it relates to the news outlet’s readership. For example, “Hurricane season is beginning on 1 June. As a scientist who studies hurricanes, I understand how government funding supports the research that improves hurricane prediction and allows us to issue the early warnings that can protect our health, homes, communities and local economies...”

[This is an example of an op-ed](#) published by a member of AGU’s [Voices for Science](#) in *Scientific American*.



### Quick tips to writing a successful op-ed:

- State your position. Make your position obvious in your submission email and in your piece why citizens, leaders and decision makers should care about the issue. One way to “hook” the reader is to be relevant and local. Include specific examples related to your work and how the issue impacts the local community and its citizens.
- Be brief and clear. Stay under the word limit and follow a simple format. Your op-ed should have an introduction, supporting paragraphs, a strong statement of your key message and often a request that the reader take an action, such as supporting a bill or calling for more funding.
- Include your affiliations and contact information. At the end of your op-ed, include your personal information (title, university or other affiliation, means of contact and physical address). Please mention you’re an AGU member.
- Consider working with the public information officer (PIO) at your university or institution. PIOs can offer unique insights and tips on the preferences of your local outlets.
- Don’t be discouraged. If one outlet declines to publish your op-ed, you can submit it to another one. Many outlets will not accept an op-ed if you have submitted it elsewhere and it is pending acceptance. Never submit an already published op-ed.

## Writing a letter to the editor

Writing a letter to the editor (LTE) brings your voice and expertise to bear on an important policy issue that has been lacking representation or needs greater support in the news.

Letters to the editor can be submitted by anyone, although the outlet cannot publish every submission. Your letter should offer a strong, personal opinion, while adding something new and fact-based to the conversation, on a specific issue that has been covered by the outlet.

[This is an example of a letter to the editor](#) published by a member of AGU's [Voices for Science](#) in the *Winston-Salem Journal*.



### Quick tips to writing a successful letter to the editor:

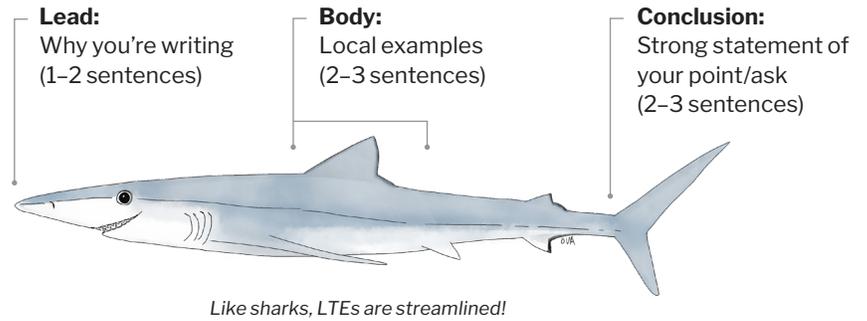
- Be timely. One of the most important tips to getting a letter to the editor published is your response time. Typically, you need to submit an LTE no more than 48 hours after the article you're responding to has been published.
- State your position. Make your position clear in your submission email and in your letter why citizens, leaders and decision makers should care about the issue. Include specific examples related to your work and how the issue impacts the local community and its citizens.
- Be brief and clear. Stay under the word limit and follow a simple format. Letters to the editor often have a word limit of 250 words. Yours should be composed of only a few sentences, including an introduction, a few supporting examples and a conclusion.
- Include your affiliations and contact information. At the end of your letter, include your personal information (title, university or other affiliation, means of contact and physical address). Please mention you're an AGU member.
- Don't be discouraged if your letter isn't published. Outlets can only publish a few of the hundreds of letters they receive weekly. Your LTE may be published next to one with the opposite opinion, as newspapers typically publish LTEs on each side of an issue.



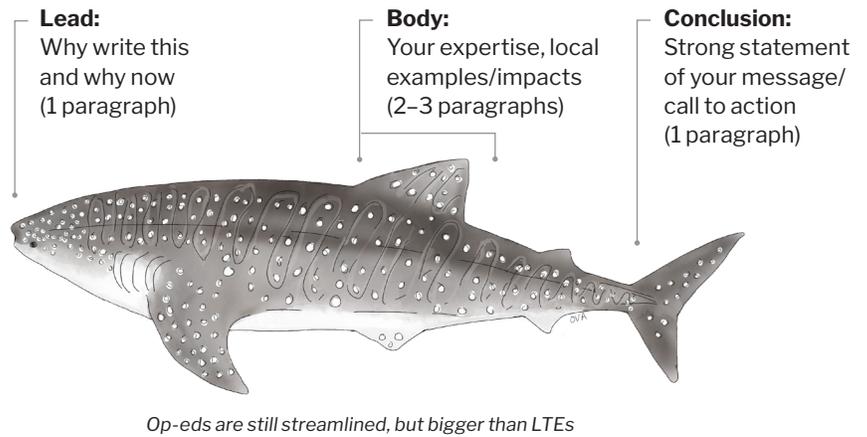
### Interested in more science communication opportunities?

AGU offers interactive science communication workshops around the country. Our full- or half-day workshops provide scientists with skills and best practices in science and policy communication, as well as outreach to members of the media and legislators.

# Anatomy of an LTE



# Anatomy of an op-ed



## Outline your LTE or op-ed:

1. Lead: Why are you writing this? What article (LTE) prompted it, or what occasion, event or issue (op-ed)?

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2. Body: What are some locally relevant examples that support your points (impacts on economy, health, etc.)?  
(If an op-ed: What expertise do you have that makes you the right person to discuss this?)

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3. Conclusion: What is a strong statement of your main message or "ask"?

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