Writing Letters to the Editor—Guidelines

1. **Be quick.** Newspapers typically only consider letters that they receive within 24 to 36 hours of a piece’s publication in the paper’s print edition. Ideally, you should submit your letter (via email) on the day of the piece’s publication, or at the latest by 5 pm on the day after. Don’t wait more than 2 days to submit your letter—after that point, it almost certainly won’t get published.

2. **Be selective.** You might find several points in a particular article that anger or inspire you, but focus your letter on one. You’ll find that you can only make one argument effectively in 150-200 words.

3. **Be brief.** The *New York Times* won’t print letters longer than 150 words. The maximum for the *Washington Post* is 200. Check your paper’s website for guidelines. If word length isn’t specified, use 200 as your standard.

4. **Be unique.** As a physician, you will stand out in the letters pile — editors want to publish letters from experts. But don’t rely on the degree in your signature to establish your authority. Identify yourself as a doctor in the body of your letter (e.g., “As a family medicine physician …”). Connect your work with the issue at hand: “Every day, I see the women who would be affected by this policy …” Refer to the document “LTE Examples” for models.

5. **Be inclusive.** Your letter must make sense to someone who hasn’t read the article. Before you begin your own argument, reiterate the point in the piece that you are criticizing or supporting. For examples, see the first lines of the letters in the “LTE Examples” document.

6. **Be vivid.** Don’t rely on statistics. Speak from your own experience with patients. Tell a story or add a detail or two to help the reader see the human impact of your argument.

7. **Be concise.** Make every word count, especially in the first sentence. Use active verbs. Don’t use the same word twice if you can avoid it.

8. **Be respectful.** Your tone can be angry but not malicious. Focus your fire on the argument, not the person making it.

9. **Be optimistic.** If your letter isn’t published, try not to be discouraged. Newspapers track the letters they receive, sometimes changing their coverage as a result.

10. **Be positive.** Don’t forget to write letters to praise good coverage of reproductive health care when you see it. This is important for two reasons. One, even if your letter is not published, every letter a newspaper receives is forwarded to the author of the piece you are responding to. Two, for every piece about reproductive health care, a newspaper will receive many letters from anti-choice readers. So it’s important to express appreciation for good coverage.