How to Write a Letter to the Editor

Letters that are intended for publication should be drafted carefully. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Make one point (or at most two) in your letter. Be sure to identify the topic of your letter. State the point clearly, ideally in the first sentence.
- Make your letter timely. If you are not addressing a specific article, editorial, or letter that recently appeared in the paper you are writing to, try to tie the issue you want to write about to a recent event.
- Familiarize yourself with the coverage and editorial position of the paper to which you are writing. Refute or support specific statements, address relevant facts that are ignored, offer a completely different perspective on the issue, but avoid blanket attacks on the media in general or the newspaper in particular.
- Consider your audience (the newspaper’s editors and readers):
  - What does your audience currently believe about the issue? Why?
  - How will they respond to you? Why?
  - What can you do to persuade them to change their minds?
  - How will using slanted language affect your credibility and persuasiveness?
- Check the letter specifications of the newspaper to which you are writing. Length and format requirements vary from paper to paper. (Generally, roughly two short paragraphs are ideal.) You also must include your name, signature, address, and phone number.
- Look at the letters that appear in your paper. Is a certain type of letter usually printed?
- Support your facts. If the topic you address is controversial, consider sending documentation along with your letter. But don’t overload the editors with too much information.
- Keep your letter brief. Type and spell-check it. Have a peer edit it.
- When possible, find others in the community to write letters to show concern about the issue. If your letter doesn’t get published, perhaps someone else’s on the same topic will.
- If your letter has not appeared within a week or two, follow up with a call to the newspaper’s editorial department.
3.11

As You Read

- Jot down any questions you have about the letters to the editor in the My Notes area.
- Highlight any words or phrases that indicate the writers’ tone.

Letters to the Editor

**Letters: The NYC Subway Is Not ‘Beyond Repair’**

*From The Atlantic*

June 13, 2018

Last weekend, Peter Wayner advocated for a radical overhaul of the city’s current subway system, proposing instead a network of subterranean highways filled with hoverboards, scooters, and autonomous vehicles.

**Letter 1**

After reading “The New York City Subway Is Beyond Repair,” I felt compelled to respond to what I see as basic inaccuracies that undermine the piece as a whole. I have a degree in infrastructure engineering and am an engineer-in-training in the field, but the inaccuracies in question are not nearly so arcane as to require such credentials.

The respective capacities of free-flowing vehicular lanes and subway transit are well established. Generously, a freeway lane might carry 2,000 vehicles per hour, which—again, generously—might each carry somewhere between one and two travelers, on average. This gives us a high-end estimate of moving 2,000 to 4,000 people per hour in a single direction.

An MTA subway track, such as Mr. Wayner effectively proposes to replace with a single lane of traffic, is capable of carrying in excess of 30,000 people per hour. This is not a small difference and makes one wonder whether the author has considered it.

This is the simplest critique, as it relies on simple math, but the challenges with Mr. Wayner’s proposal are legion. For the geometry alone, there are a number of difficulties with using passenger vehicles rather than trains.

Vastly larger stations would be required to accommodate all the spaces for cars picking up and dropping off pedestrians. In order to prevent delays for vehicles not stopping, additional bypass tunnels would need to be excavated at every station. To permit safe operation, much of the signaling equipment that...
Mr. Wayner wanted to rip out would instead need to be replaced with much more sophisticated and expensive Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) to coordinate a far larger number of vehicles.

These are all massive challenges, with huge price tags, that would, again, result in a tremendous decrease in capacity for the system as a whole. It’s a pleasant fantasy to believe that innovation and a Silicon Valley mindset are all that’s necessary to solve one of America’s most intractable infrastructure challenges. The truth, much less attractive, is that it requires massive and consistent funding, collaboration across a range of stakeholders, and time.

Patrick Zerr
North Vancouver, Canada

Letter 2

Peter Wayner proposed that we should replace trains in the New York City subway with autonomous cars and hoverboards. He sounds like a modern-day Robert Moses, obsessed with automobiles as a replacement for public transit, proclaiming that cars will be more convenient and efficient for us all. Robert Moses built a system of roads on which only cars and trucks may travel—which are and have always been notoriously congested, especially during the rush hours. Subway riders must tolerate stops at stations they will not get off at because other passengers might be boarding or exiting the train, but automobile passengers must tolerate stops for traffic jams that serve no purpose for anyone.

The New York City subway is not broken beyond repair; for all its faults, for all the mismanagement, the subway remains the lifeline of this city. Mr. Wayner suggests that modern technology—autonomous cars, personal transit devices—can replace trains, but it is not as if trains have not benefited from modern technology as well. Computers, artificial intelligence, robotics—all these things are being applied to railroads, improving efficiency and reducing costs for both passenger and freight systems. There is a lot of potential in the subway; unlike most other metro systems that are double-tracked, the New York City system has numerous triple—and quadruple—tracked lines, which are currently used to allow express trains to pass local trains but which could be used to even greater effect with more modern control systems (for example, to allow a super-express service that skips more stops).

It is also important to remember that the subway system provides service to neighborhoods that are currently underserved by taxis, and which would almost certainly be underserved by autonomous cars operated by competing, for-profit companies. The most profitable places to serve will be in the city center where there are always people waiting to ride the vehicles; but the people most in need of subway service tend to live far from the city center, and to pick them up the vehicles will be forced to make long and unprofitable trips without passengers, just like subway trains. The reason the government took over the subway and commuter railroads was to maintain a vital but unprofitable service.

Scaffolding the Text-Dependent Questions

3. How does Zerr conclude his letter? Is it convincing? Skim the text of Zerr’s letter and then closely reread its sixth paragraph. What are his last words about his own ideas? What are his last words about Wayner’s? Whose ideas seem more strongly supported? Why? RI.11-12.5

4. In the second letter, Kreuter compares Wayner to Robert Moses. What is the effect of this comparison? Reread the first paragraph of the second letter. What does Kreuter find similar about Wayner and Robert Moses? What tone does his comparison set for the letter? RI.11-12.3

5. Summarize Wayner’s claim that Kreuter rebuts in paragraph 2. What reasoning and evidence does Kreuter present in his rebuttal? Examine paragraph 2 of the second letter. What claim has Wayner made that Kreuter takes exception to? Why does Kreuter disagree? RI.11-12.2
Several readers responded on Facebook:

Isaac Brumer wrote: For all its problems, the NYC transit system is not “beyond repair.” It safely serves millions of people every day, 24/7. How will those people get around while you’re ripping out the tracks, repairing the tunnels, then retrofitting them for the transportation system you’ve dreamed up? And all transportation systems need costly maintenance over time. Does the author believe the new system will be maintenance-free?

Andrea Abarca Coutts wrote: What ever happened to all the flying cars and buses I was promised by movies and TV? Eight year old me definitely thought we'd be hovering around cities by now.

Peter Wayner replies:

1 Mr. Zerr and Mr. Kreuter make the same mistake that many do by assuming that the autonomous vehicles will flow like human-driven cars. Consider as a thought experiment a line of hoverboards a mile long with 10 feet of empty space behind each one. That's 528 people. If they move 15 miles an hour, the tunnel will carry 7,290 people per hour.

2 Hoverboards are slim and we can slice the tunnel into three, four, or maybe five lanes and carry 23,760, 31,680 or 39,600 people per hour. Thinner lanes are a big advantage because a mishap or planned maintenance in one slim lane wouldn't block everything. That speaks to Mr. Brumer's point.

3 Interested readers can repeat the same experiment with two lanes of five-foot-wide autonomous cars spaced 20 feet apart, carrying four passengers and going 30 miles an hour. These can offer airbags and other safety features missing from trains. These are just two hypothetical models that could deliver the same throughput as the one train—when it can follow its official rush hour schedule of approximately sixteen trains per hour.

4 Why can these autonomous vehicles compete with one train that can carry 2,000 people? Local trains need large gaps because the stops take so long. Autonomous vehicles will stop only at their destination, when they zip out of the flow. They can use the large gap.

5 As to Mr. Kreuter's point about the outer boroughs, the competing fleets may still be owned by the city or heavily regulated. We can have both plenty of choices and a differential pricing model with room to help whomever the politicians favor.

6 I agree that we need to sweat many details, but there's plenty of opportunity. The hoverboards might zip over to the next line or carry the passenger to the street. The corridors and roads upstairs are fair game. They could give the handicapped more time to board than the subway at rush hour.

Scaffolding the Text-Dependent Questions

6. What is the rebuttal Isaac Brumer is making in this Facebook post? Reread Brumer’s post. What does Brumer believe would happen to public maintenance while Wayner’s proposals were being adopted? What does Brumer think about the cost of maintaining Wayner’s proposed system? RI.11-12.6
There's also plenty of room. The platforms are 600 feet long and Disney loads their rides in much less space. And there's also plenty of budget. We're already being asked to shoulder a $19 billion bill. We can either redesign the signaling and everything else for the last generation or aim for the future.

Making Observations

- Based on words and phrases you highlighted in Letters 1 and 2, how does each writer feel about Peter Wayner's proposal?
- Which letter to the editor do you respond to most strongly?

ACTIVITY 3.11 continued

7. Describe the tone Peter Wayner uses to respond to the letters to the editor. Cite examples of diction and syntax in your response. Skim Wayner's response. What tone does he create with his diction? What is noticeable about his syntax? What kinds of words does he use, and how does he address the reader? Does he use any rhetorical devices? If so, why? RI.11-12.4

8. What is Wayner's purpose for including paragraph 6? Reread paragraph 6 of Wayner's response. Think of Wayner's reply as a thesis. What part of a thesis is exemplified by the first sentence of paragraph 6? How does the rest of the paragraph relate to that sentence? RI.11-12.6
Returning to the Text

1. Based on paragraph 1 of Patrick Zerr’s letter to the editor, what is his purpose for writing?

   Zerr’s purpose for writing his letter is to address the “basic inaccuracies” that he feels undermines Wayner’s entire argument.

2. Summarize the evidence that Zerr provides in paragraphs 3 and 4 to rebut Wayner’s proposal.

   Zerr uses well-established data of the capacity of free-flowing vehicular lanes and subway transit to make a comparison between how many travelers are serviced by the subway versus how many would be serviced by Wayner’s proposed single lane of traffic.

3. How does Zerr conclude his letter? Is it convincing?

   Zerr concludes his letter by summarizing his previous arguments and rebutting Wayner’s argument.

4. In the second letter, Kreuter compares Wayner to Robert Moses. What is the effect of this comparison?

   The effect of this comparison is to suggest that, like Moses, Wayner may not have considered all the consequences of his idea.

5. Summarize Wayner’s claim that Kreuter rebuts in paragraph 2. What reasoning and evidence does Kreuter present in his rebuttal?

   Wayner claims that modern technology can replace trains. However, Kreuter cites all of the technological advances that trains have already benefited from.
6. What is the rebuttal Isaac Brumer is making in this Facebook post?

Isaac Brumer rebuts Wayner’s proposal by bringing up the people who will be without public transportation while the new system is being created and by noting the maintenance costs.

7. Describe the tone Peter Wayner uses to respond to the letters to the editor. Cite examples of diction and syntax in your response.

Wayner uses an instructional tone in his responses. He uses words like mistake, we, and experiment to guide the readers through his thinking as if they were coming to the conclusion together. He also uses mathematical syntax and rhetorical questions to do this.

8. What is Wayner’s purpose for including paragraph 6?

Wayner includes a concession in paragraph 6.

Exploring Additional Letters to the Editor

9. Your teacher will provide an editorial and several letters written in response to the editorial. Fill in the chart for each of the letters to the editor. The last box is for your opinion on the editorial.

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<th>Agree or Disagree with Original Editorial?</th>
<th>Reasons/Evidence</th>
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ACTIVITY 3.11 continued

In this activity, students may need support articulating the differences between the original editorial and the letters written in response to the editorial.

**Beginning**

Have students work in small groups to use the Idea and Argument Evaluator to dissect the editorial and each letter to the editor in response. Have them use the organizer to fill out the chart.

**Developing**

Have students work in pairs to use the Idea and Argument Evaluator to dissect the editorial and each letter to the editor in response. Have them use the organizer to fill out the chart.

**Support**

Have students read the editorial and letters to the editor as a group. Guide them to summarize each letter and describe how it agrees or disagrees with the editorial.

**Extend**

Have students write their own letter to the editor in response to the editorial. Have them make sure to provide a clear argument in support of or against it and provide evidence to support their claim.
### Check Your Understanding

**Quickwrite:** Which of the letters to the editor makes the strongest argument? What makes that argument compelling?

### Writing Prompt: Argumentative

Write a letter to the editor in response to one of the editorials you have read in this unit. Use the steps outlined in the How to Write a Letter to the Editor section to guide your writing. Be sure to:

- Utilize an organizational structure that follows the specifications of your local newspaper and logically sequences your claim, reasons, evidence, and response to counterclaims.
- Use a variety of rhetorical techniques, including anecdotes, case studies, or analogies.
- Provide a concluding statement that follows logically from your argument.

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**Your Opinion**

- Give students time to respond to the Check Your Understanding task. Consider allowing them to work in pairs or small groups as they respond to the Quickwrite prompt, evaluating which letters are most effective and why.

- Have students respond to the Writing Prompt. Direct them to use the steps outlined in the How to Write a Letter to the Editor section to guide their writing.

**ASSESS**

Student responses to the writing prompt should show an ability to logically sequence claims, reasons, and evidence and to address counterclaims.

**ADAPT**

If students need additional help in writing their letters to the editor, have them pair up with students who have completed the prompt and review the steps outlined in the How to Write a Letter to the Editor section at the beginning of the activity. If applicable, it might be helpful for students to compare what their partner has done with the guidance in the section and revise their own writing accordingly.

**Writing Prompt: Argumentative**

The following standards are addressed in the writing prompt:

- W.11-12.1a
- W.11-12.1b
- W.11-12.1c