

Generating print media in your local newspaper is an excellent way of influencing your member of Congress (MOC). Representatives and Senators have dedicated staff who monitor what local papers are saying and they are particularly interested if their name is mentioned. A sure-fire way to make sure that your member of Congress reads your letter to the editor is to reference him/her — but remember, you want the comment to be constructive — either thanking the MOC publicly for taking an action or calling on that MOC to support a particular issue. Never use public media or social media for a negative message to a Congressional office, as doing that will destroy your relationship. Remember, your goal is to develop a fruitful relationship with your elected official and even if you do not agree with everything they do, always remain polite and positive in your interactions.

Perhaps the most influential way to impact the opinion or actions of a member of Congress is via their local newspaper's editorial page – where the newspaper puts forward its position on an issue and showcases the opinions of its readers. The most powerful tool on this page are the unsigned “editorials” written by the paper's editors. But the opinions of everyday people — that means YOU, the lawmaker's constituents — also carry great weight. Anyone can express their opinion by submitting an op-ed or a letter to the editor.

## **What is an op-ed?**

An “op-ed” is an opinion piece submitted by a guest writer about a particular topic. They are called “op-eds” because originally they appeared opposite the editorial page in print newspapers. Some newspapers have updated the terminology and now call them “guest essays.” Typically, op-eds must be no longer than 750 words, but check your newspaper's guidelines to be sure. The purpose of an op-ed is to convey an opinion, so do not be afraid to firmly state your beliefs. Just make sure to explain why you believe what you believe. Make your piece compelling and catchy. Edit it carefully and ask for input from friends or fellow advocates before you submit it to your paper. Do not submit your op-ed to more than one paper at a time. If your newspaper passes on printing it, then you can submit it somewhere else. Remember to include your contact information so that the newspaper can verify you are a real person and let you know when it will appear. The most efficient way to submit an op-ed is usually through the newspaper's website. Many papers will ask you to fill out a submission form.

*Here is an op-ed written by First Focus on Children President Bruce Lesley that was published in the online journal Inside Sources: [An issue that can unite the country: Kids](#)*

## What is a Letter to the Editor (LTE)?

A Letter to the Editor is a short response or opinion that a reader writes in reference to an article or opinion that has previously appeared in that newspaper. Letters to the editor are easier to generate than op-eds but are still a highly effective method of influencing key decision makers.

Usually, LTEs can be no longer than 200 words, but check your newspaper's particular guidelines to be sure. Remember to scan your paper for an article on which you can "hook" what you want to say. For example, if the newspaper runs a story about a food pantry, reference that piece to write about food insecurity among children and the need for your member of Congress to support school lunches. Again, remember to include your contact information so the newspaper can verify that you are the person who wrote the piece.

*Here is an LTE written by First Focus on Children President Bruce Lesley that was published in the Washington Post: [Opinion | For young and old, the pandemic was upending](#)*

**REMEMBER:** If your op-ed or LTE does not get published, do not lose hope! Try submitting it to another newspaper.

## How long should I wait before submitting my op-ed or LTE elsewhere?

With both op-eds and LTEs, the newspaper will only contact you if they plan to publish your piece. Many newspapers offer guidelines on how many days should pass before you submit to another publication, but if yours does not, you can assume after 3 days that they will not publish your piece. You are then free to submit it elsewhere.

## What should I do once my piece is published?

If your piece is published, email a copy to your elected officials to be sure that they see it. In the subject line, write "LTE/op-ed that mentions [name of MOC]". If it is complementary to them, they will be very grateful and this can serve to develop your relationship. Do not forget to also email a copy to **Leila Nimatallah** at [leilan@FirstFocus.org](mailto:leilan@FirstFocus.org) so that First Focus can track and celebrate your achievement with you and highlight it with your family and friends on your social media feeds! Your success can inspire and educate others!