

LESSON OF THE DAY

Expressing Opinions With ‘Letters to the Editor’

In this lesson, we invite students to write a letter responding to an article in The New York Times and submit it to an upcoming contest.



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Lesson Overview

Featured Column: “Letters to the Editor”

Readers have been writing letters to The New York Times since the newspaper was founded in 1851. When Adolph S. Ochs purchased the paper in 1896, one of his aims, he wrote, was to “make the columns of The New York Times a forum for the consideration of all questions of public importance, and to that end to invite intelligent discussion from all shades of opinion.”

Today, The Times receives up to 1,000 letters a day from readers from all over the world, a handful of which are selected to be published in the Letters to the Editor column. These letters, written by ordinary people and experts alike, comment on a broad array of stories in The Times — from vaccines and gun violence to religion, social media, education and family.

What do you have to say about what’s in the news? In this lesson, we invite you to respond to a Times article of your choice. You’ll read previous letters to see how the writers expressed strong, clear opinions in just 150 to 200 words; and did so with a certain stylishness, wit and charm. Then, you’ll write your own letter to the editor and submit it for publication.

Ideas for Teachers

- *Use this lesson to prepare your students to submit letters to The Times’s high school Letters to the Editor competition. The deadline to enter the 2022 contest is Monday, April 25, at 10 a.m. Eastern time.*
- *Many local newspapers also publish letters to the editor. You can use the activities in this lesson plan with any publication of your choice.*
- *This lesson can also serve as an introduction to our annual Summer Reading Contest, in which we invite students ages 11-19 to tell us what they’re reading in The Times and why. It begins June 10, 2022. For more on how to write rich reader responses, see our related lesson plan and our unit plan on independent reading and writing.*

Warm-Up

The Letters to the Editor column invites readers to respond to an article in The Times that has appeared within the last seven days.

What recent news stories have caught your eye? What have you read that has outraged you? Inspired you? Moved you? Delighted you? What articles have made you feel “seen” or brought up a memory from long ago?

Spend a few minutes scrolling through The New York Times to see which headlines speak to you. If you can’t find anything that interests you there, choose a section (found at the top of the home page), such as Politics, Sports, Science, Style, Smarter Living, World or Opinion, and skim the recent articles.

Choose at least three different articles about which you think you might have something to say, whether it’s a critique, praise or a personal connection. Just make sure that whatever you choose was published within the past week.

You’ll return to these in the Going Further section.

Texts

Choose at least THREE of these letters to the editor written by teenagers that won the 2021 high school letter-writing competition.

If none of these inspire you, you can choose any three letters from the Letters to the Editor column.

Questions for Writing and Discussion

As you read your chosen letters, annotate and take notes about what you notice. Here are some questions to consider:

1. Identify some basic parts of the structure of letters to the editor: How do they all begin? How do they all end? Which article is each letter responding to? How do you know?
2. What is the letter writer's opinion or point of view on the article they are responding to? Underline or highlight at least one sentence that captures the letter's main idea or argument.
3. The Letters editors encourage writers to make their arguments "forcefully and clearly." Do the letters you read do that? What words, phrases or lines convey the writers' opinions or attitudes toward the subject in a clear, concise and strong way?
4. The Letters editors say that readers should be able to judge the "credibility and motivation" of letter writers. What credibility, expertise or personal connections do the letter writers have to the subjects they are writing about? Can you tell what motivated them to write in?
5. Analyze the writers' use of language and style. What makes this letter interesting to read? What words, phrases and grammatical structures do they use that are particularly affecting? How do they use wit or humor, if at all? In what lines can you hear the writer's voice coming through the page?
6. Among the hundreds of letters that are sent to The Times, what do you think made these letters stand out to the editors? What unique angle or perspective did the writers offer on the articles they commented on? What else did they do well?
7. Which "writer's moves" from any of the letters you read would you like to try in your own letter to the editor?

Going Further

Now, it's your turn: Write a letter to the editor about any Times article of your choosing.

Step 1: Read advice from the Letters editors and writers.

This step is optional, but before you choose your article and write your letter, you might want to find out what exactly the Letters editors are looking for.

In "To the Reader," Thomas Feyer, the Letters editor since 1999, explains what qualifies as a publishable letter to the editor. As you read, highlight or underline Mr. Feyer's suggestions.

You can find even more advice in these articles:

- "Editors' Note; The Letters Editor and the Reader: Our Compact, Updated"
- "'To the Editor': What Happens When Readers Write Back?"
- "From the Letters Editor: Meet the Regulars"

Step 2: Choose an article to respond to.

Return to the articles you chose in the warm-up activity. Read them thoroughly and then choose one that you want to respond to in your letter to the editor.

You can write about any issue, big or small, but keep in mind that timeliness is key, so make sure that whatever piece you choose was published no more than seven days before you submit your letter. Mr. Feyer writes, "We're in an age of fast-moving news and virtually instant reaction; letters about an especially timely topic often appear within a day or two (and almost always within a week)."

Step 3: Write your letter to the editor.

Here are the requirements:

- Letters should be about 150 to 200 words.
- They should include the headline and a link to the Times article they are responding to.
- They should refer to an article that has appeared within the last seven days.

Beyond that, your letter can agree or disagree with the ideas expressed in the essay or article. And feel free to be creative with your language and writing style. Use the letters you read earlier as examples of what makes a great letter to the editor.

Step 4: Submit it for publication.

If you are in high school, you can submit your letter to The Times's annual student letter writing competition until April 25, 2022. Please be sure to read all the rules carefully before submitting.

You can also submit a letter to the editor any time by following the instructions here.