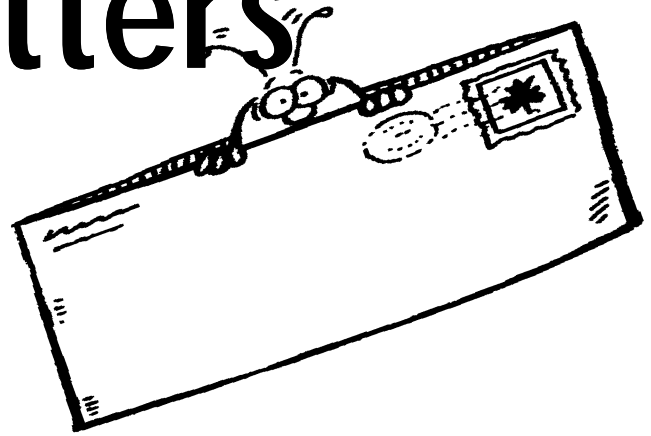


Writing letters



A good campaign letter – whether to an MPP or the editor of your newspaper – is personal, short and focused.

You are writing to a busy person who wants to get your point as quickly as possible.

Write to criticize a bad editorial, to urge action on a campaign, or to congratulate a stand you agree with. People like to be told they are doing a good job even more than they like criticism.

Editors

- Editors love controversy.
- Smaller papers are crying for letters.
- Big papers get more mail than they can use. You should still write. They usually run letters in proportion to what they get. If there's a lot of mail on a subject, they'll count the letters pro and con, and publish in that ratio. They'll pick the best of each group based on arguments made, writing, and diversity of reasons given.

Politicians

Politicians don't edit your letters, but they also appreciate short and clear communication. The features of a good letter to the editor are the same as for a good letter to a politician.

Teamwork

You can draft letters for other people to sign – co-workers, family, friends, neighbours.

Working together on letters makes a lot of sense.

Breaking your subject into three or four themes. Then you and two or three friends each write a letter on one of the themes. Exchange them, edit and make suggestions on each other's letters to make them as good as you can. Then send in the four letters (separate envelopes), and what do you have? Four letters, expressing different aspects of the same thing, clearly showing a groundswell of public support (or opposition) in the debate. The editor has to take notice. The community is speaking. And they are short and easy to run.

What makes a good letter?

- **It's short.**

Aim for a 350-word maximum, and expect it will get edited. The shorter you are, the less there is to cut, and you get to make the cuts so the focus stays where you want it.

- **It's timely.**

Write while the subject is hot.

- **It's clear.**

Make no more than three points. If the subject is more complex, get some friends to write other letters on the other points. Keep your argument simple and easy to follow. Leave out all unnecessary information.

- **It's polite.**

Don't use strong language and don't be abusive. Attack the argument or the policy, not the person.

- **It's signed.**

It has your name, your address and phone number. Papers get crank letters, so they check these things.

- **It's humorous (maybe)**

If the subject lends itself to the treatment, try for a bit of humour. But don't force it. Badly done humour doesn't work, and some subjects aren't funny.

- **It's accurate.**

Check your facts, and the spelling of any names involved.

Model letter for MTO campaign

This model letter goes through the sections of a good campaign letter.

It works like one of those menus where you take one choice from each course. Pick one paragraph from each numbered section. If necessary rearrange it a little to fit yourself and your style (hold the onions, extra fries). The result will be a good campaign letter.

1. The normal stuff

Date, address, salutation

2. Introduce the subject

In **one** sentence state your main point. Here are three examples:

I oppose privatization in the Ministry of Transportation as I believe it opens the door to serious abuses.

or

I am afraid that privatizing driver testing will lead to unsafe drivers on our highways.

or

I am concerned that the government plans to open many highway operations to corruption.

3. Introduce yourself

Why are you writing this letter. If you have any personal connection to the subject, state it. Here's a couple of thoughts:

I am a transportation enforcement officer with the Ministry of Transportation. I inspect trucks to ensure they are safe and properly maintained. I check loads to ensure they are securely attached and to be sure dangerous goods are properly transported and documented. I check the qualifications and logs of drivers for hours of work.

or

I understand the government is planning to privatize driver testing. I have a teenage son and I want to be sure that when he and his friends get drivers licences it means they really do know how to drive.

or

I drive a lot in my job as a home care nurse, and it's important to me that our highways are as safe as

they can be.

4. Explain one aspect of the problem

Don't try to cover everything. Take the one area that you feel most comfortable with and write about that. Pick and choose among the following themes and write two or three paragraphs only.

The government has introduced a bill called the Road User Customer Service Improvement Act (Bill 137).

This law opens the door to gutting the Ministry of Transportation and turning its responsibilities over to the private sector. All aspects of "road user safety" are on the block.

Profiteering

The government has already asked for proposals to privatize driver testing. It's a gold mine for the private sector, but it will lead to inconsistent testing across the province.

Privacy

A lot of personal information connected with drivers licences will move to the private sector, where controls are nowhere near as clear as in the public sector.

Accountability

As citizens, we lose the accountability we have in the public sector. Public servants take an oath of secrecy which is not required in the private sector. Public services are subject to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. We know what they are doing and we have a right to know.

Corruption

Privatization also opens the door for corruption. Driver examiners are regularly offered bribes to pass the test. And every driver behind the wheel of a vehicle which he or she is incompetent to control is a hazard to every other person on Ontario roads – or sidewalks for that matter!

Privatizing driver examinations does nothing to improve road user safety in Ontario. It is a move in

Model letter for MTO campaign

the exact opposite direction.

Inspections

I'm worried about the enforcement of trucking regulations.

With just-in-time delivery, truckers are under a great deal of pressure to meet hour-by-hour deadlines. If they are detained over a serious infraction, their livelihood is at stake. Higher gas prices have hurt profit margins in the industry.

Inspectors have been assaulted for detaining truckers, to the point they need special training in defusing tense confrontations. This work is wide open to potential bribery and threats.

Safety

When I'm driving in traffic I want to know that someone is enforcing safe load limits on trucks, that truck drivers aren't exceeding their maximum time behind the wheel, and that dangerous goods are properly secured. I don't want to join the toll of drivers killed by flying truck wheels.

History

The first privatization in the Ministry of Transportation was road maintenance. The Tories downloaded that in 1996. It actually costs a great deal more now and the maintenance levels are much lower. The profit comes from doing less work, and from cutting corners. And profit-motivated operations aren't going to forego the profit in the interest of public safety.

5. Conclusion

End with your suggestion for a better future. Say what you want the reader to do.

Here are some examples:

Privatizing water monitoring is one of the chief suspects being investigated in the Walkerton Inquiry. In Walkerton, seven people died on the altar of "small government."

Let's not kill more on our roads.

or

Please oppose privatization of highway safety.

All our lives hang in the balance.

or

This work is too important to be farmed out to the lowest bidder. We need to be sure that our highways are safe.

or

Some of this work used to be done in the private sector, but the government took it over because of corruption and wide spread abuses. We don't need to go down that road again. We know it doesn't work.

6. Sign off

End with a polite closing, your name, address and a phone number.

Most sincerely,

Signature

Name

Address

Phone number

