

Navigating Media Outlets

Want to make your message about the benefits of music education public?

Media coverage is important because it carries your message to a much larger audience than you can reach by yourself. The media influences many facets of the public: youth, parents, community leaders, educators, businesses, and elected officials at all levels of government. When used properly, the media will help draw positive attention to your issue, identify supporters of your cause, and assist you in persuading your target audience to make necessary changes.

There are many different ways in which to work with the media. This guide addresses how to write a letter to the editor and an Opinion/Editorial (Op/Ed).

Writing a Letter to the Editor (LTE)

After the front page, the Letters to the Editor section is the most widely read section of a newspaper. This high readership offers you and your issue a cost-effective way to increase the visibility of your issue and to spread your message. NOTE: A letter to the editor is usually written in *response* to a published article, an opinion piece, or current news. As a result, a LTE must be *timely*. If your schools' music programs are under fire, chances are it is making your local newspaper. This is the perfect time to submit a LTE regarding the importance of music education.

Strategy

When writing a letter to the editor, use the **five C's**:

- Current** – Do not wait more than two days after the publication of the article to send in a letter to the editor. It is best to email or fax your letter the same day the article appeared.
- Concise** – Be sure to keep your letter short (under 250 words) and to the point.
- Controversial** – Question another's position but avoid personal attacks.
- Contagious** – Send your letter to several newspapers, but be sure first to check their policies on multiple submissions. (See "Navigating CapWiz" to learn how to find the contact information of the various newspapers in your local area).



•**Contact Information** – Be sure to include this! The newspaper will need verification that you are real or may need more information before it will publish your letter. Be sure to also include your name, city, state, daytime phone number, and any school or professional affiliation. Note: The paper will not print your phone number.

Writing an Op/Ed

An op/ed is an opinion piece submitted by you to make the case for your issue. Publishing an op/ed is solely at the discretion of the newspaper's editors – make sure your op/ed will stand out! An op/ed does not need to be as timely as a LTE, but the article will be more powerful when it's published at a critical time. Here's how to write an effective op/ed:

Strategy

•**Set the goal of the op/ed.** What are you trying to achieve? *Keep a music program, start a music program, or expand your program?* Do you wish to raise public awareness about the impact of your issue? *What will happen if your music program is cut?* Do you want to take your issue and put a young person's slant on it? *Encourage your students to take a stand!*

•**Define the audience.** Are you trying to motivate the community, persuade your local politicians, rally supporters, or someone else?

•**Identify the appropriate newspaper.** Send your op/ed to the local paper most likely to reach your desired audience. (Again, see "Navigating CapWiz" to find contact information.)

•**Determine the best time for placement.** Is your school board or city council about to vote on policy regarding your issue? Submit your op/ed prior to this vote! Did you just find out that your school's program is in danger of being cut for the following school year? Submit your op/ed now! Note: If there is some type of national issue that supersedes your issue, hold on to your op/ed until the national issue calms down.

•**Identify an original angle.** Use original, creative, fresh and groundbreaking thinking to draw attention to the issue or bring a new perspective to its coverage. For example, personal stories are usually strong angles.



Content

- The op/ed must be no longer than 700-750 words, typewritten and double-spaced. Remember – shorter is better!
- Sentences should be short and punchy (10 or 11 words max). Keep sentences active; avoid passive writing.
- Address only ONE main point in the op/ed.
- Avoid jargon, technical phrases, and acronyms.
- Be sure that all names are spelled correctly and all quotations are accurate. Cite your references for extra impact and validity.
- Include the following four pieces for an effective op/ed:

- 1) ***The attention grabber*** – An op/ed should always start with an effective attention getter.
 - **Use humor** – an anecdote or joke and relate it directly back to your issue.
 - **Talk about people** – talk about yourself and other specific individuals to help the reader identify with you and the subject.
 - **Keep it current** – an op/ed must be about a current issue. Talk about something specific that happened recently and that underscores the issue.
 - **Cite** – use an alarming statistic.

- 2) ***The body of the op/ed*** – after the opener, immediately state your message and where you stand. Do not confuse your readers – make sure you are clear about why you are writing. Write a few paragraphs that offer arguments in support of your message. The body may include:
 - **Statistics:** Easy to explain with clear, numerical analyses, but not TOO many.
 - **Quotes:** From authorities, public figures, or another reliable source. Be sure to cite when you use quotes.
 - **Agency Positions:** The position of a known governing agency on the issue. For instance, the *No Child Left Behind* Act defines the arts as a core academic subject.
 - **Analogies:** Use analogies to connect ideas for readers who may not be familiar with the issue.
 - **Case Studies:** Make the issue concrete and memorable for people. There is plenty of evidence that shows how music education is beneficial to everyone. (See “Talking Points” or “Support Our Strings!” for facts and findings regarding music education).



- 3) **The conclusion** – Briefly sum up your point. Answer any question you may have posed at the beginning of the piece.
- 4) **The goodbye zinger!** -- This is the counterpart to the attention grabber and hammers home the message.

Submitting an Op/Ed

Submit your op/ed via email to larger newspapers or via fax to smaller papers. Call the paper first to be certain which the editors prefer.

Follow up with a phone call to ensure the paper received the op/ed and to provide additional information if needed by the editor or the newspaper.

Be sure to include your school or other affiliation, day and evening phone numbers, and your e-mail address.

Additional Resources

Remember, the media is a powerful tool; when used properly, you can shine a positive light on your issue. If you have further questions, please visit the following websites for more information on music advocacy:

- ✓ ***Dr. Tim's Essential Advocacy Resources for Music***
 - ✓ <http://www.amc-music.org/pdf/Essential-Advocacy-Resource.pdf>
- ✓ ***Influencing Attitudes and Behaviors for Social Change***
 - ✓ <http://www.radpsynet.org/docs/wollman-attitude.html>
- ✓ ***Music for All Foundation***
 - ✓ <http://music-for-all.org/>
- ✓ ***Support Music***
 - ✓ www.supportmusic.com/

