

## Taxes and health equity — letter to the editor tips

Adapted from [Berkeley Media Studies Group's \*Tips for Writing Effective Letters to the Editor\*](#)

Letters to the editor can signal community interest about a particular public health issue and send a message to policymakers. But what makes for a compelling letter, and how can advocates increase their chances of getting published?

To support public health advocates in writing effective letters to the editor on the importance of how taxes can advance health and equity, the Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG) and Public Health Awakened created this resource.

This resource includes:

- General tips for writing effective letters to the editor
- Specific tips on writing letters to the editor about the role of taxes to advance health and equity
- A letter to the editor template about the importance of taxes to protect everyone's health
- Examples of framing taxes as a public good for health and equity

### General tips for writing effective letters to the editor

Letters should be short and punchy, about 100 to 200 words, and if the subject matter is in response to a news article, it's best to respond the same day the article is published. As with other media strategies, always keep your overall objective in mind. It can be tempting to respond with anger to an article or column "to set the record straight," but will your response further your overall advocacy goal? What would you like readers, or your policy target, to do? What solutions would you like them to support as a result of reading your letter?

When writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine, keep the following tips in mind:

**Respond quickly.** If you read or see something you want to respond to, send your letter by email (or use the news site's online form if they have one) the same day, or by the next day at the latest.

**Mention your reason for writing, preferably in the first sentence.** If you are responding directly to an article you've read in the publication, state the article

headline and publication date. If you are commenting on a local current event, be specific about the issue or event.

**Take a strong position.** Editors look for fresh facts, honest statements of opinion, and creative takes on news. If you can, offer a compelling fact that shows the urgency or importance of your issue. Include a call to action.

**Make sure to include your full name and contact information.** You may be contacted to verify your identity before the letter is published.

**Check with your organization before including any information about their work in the letter.** Organizations will have different policies about how employees interact with the media, and it's important to understand them before identifying yourself as an employee. You can always use more generic terms if you want to include info about yourself, such as, "As a public health worker/nurse/researcher/student, I'm concerned about ..."

**Look up the editorial policies for each outlet you submit to.** Some have different word count restrictions or policies on how many letters they will accept from the same individual in a specific time period.

**Don't send the same letter to competing publications.** Newspapers and magazines want to publish original content. Engaging your allies may be a way to have several different letters published that are worded differently but point to the same policy solution. Also, follow the news your target follows. Your choice of where to submit your letter should be a strategic one.

## **Tips for writing effective letters to the editor on taxes and health**

Upcoming events will trigger news stories related to taxes — Tax Day on April 17, new legislation, anniversaries of key events, like the Boston Tea Party, government shutdowns, presidential speeches and tweets, Congressional decisions, political campaigns, disasters and emergencies, and budget shortfalls are just a few. There might also be positive stories on government-funded programs that you can link to taxes and health. You can also tie stories about public health issues to the need for taxes and a strong social safety net. For example, you could respond to articles about opioid use with a letter about how taxes fund education, job training, housing options, and more — all of which are needed to address opioid use. Use the tips below to take as many opportunities as you can to expand our public discussion about the relationship between taxes and health.

**Start with a goal and stick to it.** What do you want to achieve and who has the power to make that change? Are you concerned about federal, state, or local tax policy? Is there an upcoming decision you care about? Who will be making the decision and what do you want them to decide? Knowing what you want before you start writing will help you prioritize what info goes into the letter and what information you reserve for another time.

**Limit the content to one or two key points.** A letter to the editor is a concise statement or argument, not an in-depth analysis. Since letters typically respond to current news, think about how to piggyback from the article you are responding to and connect that to the overall message you want readers to get from your letter. Do you want to focus on how federal tax cuts will wipe out social supports needed for healthy communities? Do you want to illustrate that a program on the chopping block is effective at saving lives? Do you want to focus on how tax cuts will increase inequities? Or maybe you want to share a personal story from your unique public health perspective and relate it a broader policy. All of these are important, but you can only focus on one at a time, and even within each one, you can only make one or two points. You can always write multiple letters that take different viewpoints and submit them to different news outlets.

**Remember your audience.** Are you trying to reach a senator? City council members? Do you want their constituents to take action? Most likely, your audience will not be immersed in the world of public health. Use simple language and easy to understand data that resonates with those outside of the field of public health.

**Focus on the solution.** Our tendency is to spend the most time and space on the problem. Try to flip that emphasis and devote more of your letter to the solution.

**State your values clearly.** Why does this matter to *you*? In public health, our values include health but also interconnection or the idea that “we are in this together” versus “you’re own your own.” Research shows that people are proud to pay taxes because it helps them feel connected to others as a member of civic society — letters illustrating how our taxes improve the public’s health can build on those deeply held values, engage the base of people who care about this issue and, as the Haas Institute puts it, “[widen the circle of human concern](#)” among a growing number of people.

**Use data, but explain them.** Data and research should support your goal and key points. If you are focused on the need for social supports, use data on social supports. If you are focusing on taxes and health equity, use data and

research focused on equity. One or two key facts will be enough. And just a reminder — while you should always use accurate data and research, you do not need to use citations for letters to the editor or op-eds. Instead, work the citation into the text (e.g., “According to the National Institutes of Health, ...”).

**Act quickly.** Be prepared by drafting letters ahead of time. Start writing now, and then when opportunities appear in the news, you will be ready to tailor your letters and send them right away. Use a portion of staff or coalition meetings for quickly writing and/or reviewing one another’s letters.

**Portray government as part of the solution.** There are clearly areas of our government that we need to improve and many community-based organizations and coalitions have important critiques of government. However, the government is an essential part of the public health system that can improve conditions for whole populations. If we talk about government only as part of the problem, it is hard to advocate for funding to improve our public health system and other sectors that impact health, like education and housing. Use your letter to remind people that taxes can improve health, lead to equity, and build on what’s working in government to support and increase the positive impacts.

**Avoid otherizing language.** For example, using terms like “them” or metaphors that indicate distance or gaps can be otherizing (e.g. “too many people are falling behind”). It can be easy to slip into language about the government or a non-profit helping “others.” Instead, use language that helps show interconnectedness and shared fates (e.g. “we can create a community where everyone can thrive.”).

**Avoid the scarcity frame.** While in public health it never seems like we have enough resources, the fact is that everyone in the United States could have housing, food, educational opportunities, safe places to play, and more if we allocated our resources differently. A scarcity frame makes this vision and opportunity invisible. Instead of arguing about how to split up a small pie, help people move toward thinking about how we can have a society that values, includes, and provides for everyone.

**Avoid passive voice.** When we use passive voice, it obscures who is (or should be!) taking action, whether it’s a positive action we support or a negative action that we want to stop. Passive voice can also add extra words that you don’t need in short letters. For example, instead of saying “a tax cut was passed” we can say “Congress cut taxes.”

**Avoid elephant triggers.** George Lakoff describes how once someone says “[don’t think of the elephant](#),” all you can think about are elephants. An elephant

trigger is when you repeat your opposition's argument. This often happens when we focus on rebuttals. You have very little space in a letter to the editor — instead of rebutting the opposition, reframe the issue, speak about why it matters to you, and talk about taxes and health equity in your own language.

**Repeat your favorite phrases.** Some succinct phrases we like are:

- Taxes are shared resources.
- Taxes are simply a way to pool our resources so, together, we can accomplish together what is impossible to do alone. It took all of us to go to the moon or build the Golden Gate bridge. It takes all of us to maintain and build the community we can thrive in together.
- Everyone pays taxes that help build healthy communities — when they work, through payroll taxes and income, and when they buy things, through sales and excise taxes.
- Taxes are how we come together and invest in the things we need for strong and healthy communities.
- Taxes fund our future — they help create schools and hospitals, keep our parks and libraries open, and ensure that our children have the opportunity to thrive.
- People in the past paid taxes to build what we currently have — we have a responsibility to do the same for future generations.
- When we invest in the public sphere through progressive taxation — or taxes where high-income earners pay a larger percentage than low-income earners — we create a more stable and just society, with more opportunities for everyone.

These phrases are adapted from the following sources: [Berkeley Media Studies Group](#), the [Center for Community Change](#), [Demos](#), [FrameWorks Institute](#), [Opportunity Agenda](#), [Tax Policy Center](#), and [In These Times](#).

## Activity: Letter to the editor

Here is a sample letter to the editor format to help you organize your ideas. Be creative, clear, opinionated, and succinct — and keep it under 200 words. After you draft your letter using the prompts below, you can revise it to put it in your voice and adapt it to the format of the outlet you are sending it to.

Newspaper name:

Newspaper address, fax or email:

Date:

Dear editor:

Yesterday, you reported that \_\_\_\_\_

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- Some ideas:
  - Legislators are threatening to cut [X] program.
  - Another company that benefited from the tax cut eliminated [X number] of jobs.
  - Our county has seen a drastic increase in [health problem or risk factor, e.g., opioid use, cases of the flu, chlamydia, etc.].

This is [timely/important/ironic] because \_\_\_\_\_

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- Some ideas:
  - It's almost Tax Day, and the tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy that Trump and Congress pushed through could have supported this program.
  - Our county has reported worse health outcomes in numerous areas last year, and access to good jobs is a building block of healthy communities.
  - And yet as we near Tax Day, we are reminded that many of the very things that can help prevent [opioid use, other health issues, etc.] — good jobs, quality housing, educational opportunities — are under threat.

As a [nurse/public health worker/parent/teacher/physician/community member/voter] I see the direct impacts of this every day. For example, [add one data point, research finding, or story]

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What people may not realize is how pooling our resources through taxes improves health for everyone in our community. When we do that, we

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- Some ideas:
  - ... support the programs and institutions that build strong and healthy communities, and these cuts will harm all of us.
  - ... have a community where everyone thrives, which is completely in our reach if our politicians stop making choices to benefit the few at the expense of the many.
  - ... can prevent and treat drug use to create healthy, supportive communities.

One thing that could really make a difference is

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- Some ideas:
  - Ensuring that legislators do not cut this program, or other critical programs that create healthy communities for all.
  - If we fight back against the tax bill and put our country's values first — fellowship to each other, cooperation for the greater good, and strength in standing together.
  - If our Congress puts communities before corporations and prevents further tax cuts that threaten our social fabric. Even better — we should be funding education, housing, and public health at higher levels than before!

Sincerely,  
Signature [Your name, address, email, and phone number so the outlet can contact you and verify you are the author]



**Examples of framing taxes as a public good for health and equity**



The image is a screenshot of a Facebook post. On the left, a photograph of a handwritten note is displayed. The note is titled "Why should I pay indeed?" and is attributed to Barbara Rank from Hidden Oaks Court, Dubuque. The text of the note asks why a 62-year-old man should pay for maternity care, why one should pay for a bridge not crossed, a sidewalk not walked on, or a library book not read. It then asks why one should pay for a flower that won't smell, a park not visited, or art not appreciated. It also questions why one should pay politicians' salaries for votes that don't affect them or loopholes they can't take advantage of. The note concludes by stating that it's called democracy, a civil society, and the greater good, which is what we pay for.

On the right, the Facebook interface shows the post from "Feminist News" dated December 25, 2017. The post has 16,757 shares and 159 comments. A comment from Patricia Anthonie is visible, asking if the concept of shared responsibility for public infrastructure is the same as one's own bodily care, and questioning why one generation cannot coin the term "it's MY body!" to distinguish between personal and public infrastructure.