



Persuasive Writing Through Letters to the Editor

Time needed: 90 minutes

Purpose

This activity introduces students to the process and strategies of writing persuasive letters to the editor. Letters to the editor are short, yet impactful mechanisms to participate in civic dialogue. The exercise encourages students to develop their own opinions on the information they are learning about Juristac, and to practice sharing their views with a broader community.

Materials

- [Background primer on Juristac](#) and/or San Jose Inside 11/28/19 article: [Fight over Proposed Sargent Ranch Quarry is Shaping Up to be Silicon Valley's Standing Rock](#) (Both available in Resources Section of [protectjuristac.org](#))
- Sample Letter to the Editor (below)
- National Education Association sheet, "Writing Effective Letters to the Editor" (below)
- List of Bay Area news outlets and where to send letters to the editor (below)

Directions

Part I: Background Information

1. Divide students into groups of three to five and hand out the background primer or news article to each group, along with the sample letter.
2. Ask students to read the background primer or news article in their groups and then discuss them. Suggest that students select at a minimum 2–3 questions to discuss from the list of ideas below.
 - Meaning and importance of Juristac
 - What is the historical and cultural significance of Juristac for the Amah Mutsun people?
 - How does the protecting and reclaiming of sacred lands at Juristac by the Amah Mutsun people support the tribe's process of healing from a legacy of colonial violence and displacement?
 - What is the importance of Juristac in regard to regional wildlife habitat linkages and habitat conservation planning in the greater Bay Area?
 - Competing interests
 - Who are the different parties that are debating the future of Juristac? What are their central interests?

- How does the article describe how each of the parties is trying to influence the outcome of the permit approval process?
 - Chairman Valentin Lopez states that the Amah Mutsun tribe’s spirituality has been ignored, erased, and destroyed for over a century. What interests have been furthered as a result of the suppression and destruction of Amah Mutsun spiritual practices?
 - Organizing
 - What approach to organizing for social justice are the tribe and coalition to protect Juristac taking?
 - What social, cultural, or economic factors do you think affect the choice of this form of organization?
 - What conditions might an approach like this require to be successful?
 - What makes the Amah Mutsun campaign to Protect Juristac different from a typical campaign to preserve open space or wildlife habitat?
 - What similarities do you see between the movement to Protect Juristac and other social movements?
3. Bring the entire group back together and ask one person from each group to briefly describe what stood out as the most important or interesting item(s) in their group discussions. Limit the items to one or two so the whole group has an opportunity to contribute. Help to identify any recurring themes for the entire group.

Part II: Understanding and Analyzing Letters to the Editor

4. Introduce the class to letters to the editor. This can be a good time to introduce students to the different sections of print or online newspapers, pointing out the distinctions between editorials, opinion pieces, and articles written by reporters. Review reasons why people may write letters to the editor, such as, to comment on issues being currently debated in public discourse or considered by a governing body. Letters to the editor are short and can be quick to write and get published. Local politicians and governmental bodies frequently pay attention to letters to the editor as a way to gauge public opinion of their constituents.
5. Send or hand out the sample letter to the editor to each group. Ask students to read the letter together and answer the questions below. Remind students that they are looking at the letter to understand how the author makes assertions, uses evidence, and persuades their audience. Students should note if the author is making one major argument with several pieces of supporting evidence or if the author makes multiple arguments within the letter. Students should also note if they think reasoning or evidence is missing to support the argument, and what kinds of language are used in the letter to persuade the reader.

Questions for discussion:

- What is the author's main point?
 - What arguments does the author make in support of their main point? Describe the assertion, reasoning, and evidence for each argument. Are reasoning or evidence missing?
 - What key words or phrases stand out as descriptive or persuasive in the letter? Select at least three.
 - In what ways could the author improve the letter? Be specific.
6. Brings students back together and lead a discussion drawing out the students' analyses of the letter. Consider having a marked up version of the letter with key elements and language underlined.

Part III: Writing a Letter to the Editor

7. Give students the National Education Association tips sheet on "Writing Effective Letters to the Editor". Read through the recommendations together.
8. Ask students to work independently to each write a letter on the topic of Juristac. Letters should be around 200 words. You could also suggest that students look at the Bay Area publications list to identify a specific publication they are interested in writing for. Once they have selected a publication, they can review sample letters to the editor to get a sense of the publication's tone.

This activity is based off of the Teaching Tolerance lesson on Letters to the Editor - <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/letters-to-the-editor>

Materials:

Sample Letter to the Editor from the organization Water Watch,

<https://waterwatch.org/get-involved/speak-up/how-to-write-a-letter-to-the-editor/>

To the Editor:

The water flowing through our rivers and streams is one of Oregon's most precious natural resources. It provides habitat for fish and wildlife, outstanding recreational opportunities, and much of the scenic beauty that makes Oregon such a wonderful place to live. This water is also a public resource, but it is being given away at an alarming rate. Even worse no one knows just how much is being used.

That is because Oregon does not require water users to measure how much they take from our rivers and streams. The state gives farmers and other water users permanent rights to draw a certain amount from our waterways, but it does not require them to measure how much they actually use. With no way of knowing how much water is being used, enforcing our water laws is nearly impossible. The results can be seen each summer in the bone-dry streambeds of many creeks and rivers.

The Oregon Water Resources Department should require measurement and reporting from all water users. This is a no-brainer. Water users are being given one of Oregon's most precious resources – for free. Measuring how much they take is a small price to pay for the use of this precious resource.

Sincerely,

Name, Location

National Education Association: Writing Effective Letters to the Editor <http://www.nea.org/home/19683.htm>

Writing Effective Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editor can be effective in influencing public opinion and legislators' views. The "Letter to the Editor" section is one of the most widely read parts of most newspapers, offering a chance to reach a broad audience. Letters to the editor can provide readers with information and insights on issues with which they may be unfamiliar, and can also inspire readers to take action.

- **Keep it brief** — Keep letters to 200 words or less. Discuss only one issue in a letter. Many newspapers will edit letters. Keeping the letter short will help ensure that the newspaper does not edit out important points.
- **Get to the point** — Start with a compelling introductory sentence. Follow the introduction with short, clear factual points. Don't make broad statements you can't back up with facts. Focus on what is most important rather than trying to address every aspect of the issue.
- **Relate it to home** — Newspaper readers care about how an issue will impact them or their families locally. Including brief information on the economic or other impacts of an issue in the community will draw readers' interest.
- **Personalize the issue** — Provide an example of how the issue impacts a real person in the community to help readers understand the issue and encourage them to take action. Avoid submitting "form" letters.

- **End with a call to action** — Ask readers to follow-up, such as joining in calling on policymakers to address the issue.
- **Be timely** — Try to place letters when they will be most effective. For example, letters supporting or opposing legislation will have the most impact when legislators are considering the issue.
- **Be professional** — Letters should be typed or neatly handwritten and should follow the submission rules of the particular newspaper. Language should be polite but persuasive.
- **Identify yourself** — Sign the letter personally. Include any information highlighting your expertise on the issue. Provide contact information, including an address and daytime phone number so the newspaper can verify the letter's authenticity.

Sampling of Bay Area Publications Pages for Letter to the Editor Submissions

- San Jose Inside: <https://www.sanjoseinside.com/contact/>
- Metro Silicon Valley: <http://www.metro silicon valley.com/contact/>
- The Silicon Valley Voice: info@svvoice.com
<https://www.svvoice.com/category/letters-to-the-editor/>
- Gilroy Dispatch: <https://gilroydispatch.com/contact/>
- Mercury News: <https://www.mercurynews.com/letters-to-the-editor/>
- Santa Cruz Sentinel: <https://www.santacruzsentinel.com/submit-letters/>
- San Francisco Chronicle:
<https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/letters-editor/item/How-to-submit-Letters-56188.php>
- Watsonville Pajaronian: <https://pajaronian.com/letters-to-the-editor-policy/>