



HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

1. **Select an article or publication.** Scan your local paper, follow writers or editorial boards that cover prison, jail or budget issues, or respond to a current event. Remember that the more popular and widely read publications receive hundred of letters. You have a better chance of getting your letter published in a smaller publication.
2. **Respond in a timely fashion.** If you are responding to a current event or article you've read, be prompt. Try and get your letter submitted within 24 hours. Don't wait a few days or your topic will be old news.
3. **Read other letters that the paper has selected:** Each paper's letters will differ slightly in form, style, tone, and even in length, so you should read those letters to get a better idea of how to phrase your letters and to see what appeals to the editors of that paper.
4. **Read the instructions.** Most publications provide clear guidelines, including total word count, where to submit the final letter, and what other important information to include. You will have fierce competition and you don't want your letter to get disqualified just because you forgot to write your email address or didn't submit it in the proper format.
5. **Include your name, address, email address and phone number.** Editors often require this information, so they can verify your identity and get your consent prior to printing. If you don't want your name or other information published, state so clearly. Include these directions in a separate paragraph. For example, you can say *"Please note: I do not want my full name published with this letter."*
6. **Decide on your angle.** The most common types of letters either refute an issue or make a clarification of an issue, but there are other types of positions that you can take on the topic. Here are a few more:
 - Praise an article. You can write a letter praising how a certain issue was presented and showing why it was important.
 - Appeal to your expertise. Use your position and experience to take issue with an article.
 - The informational letter. Use the article as a reason to provide more information to readers, such as sending them to a website or organization to get involved with an issue.



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- Set the record straight. If you think information in an article is incorrect, provide fact-based information to oppose it. Add some information of your own to further your point.
- 7. Be concise and focused.** Most letters are 150-300 words long, so remember to be as concise as possible. Write your letter in pithy, clever, and simple to understand statements. The paper can edit your letter, so you should get to the point early. Don't bury your point inside a lengthy argument. Remember that short, concise letters sound confident. Long, wordy letters give the impression that you might be trying too hard to make a point.
 - 8. Write a simple salutation.** There's no need to be fancy here. Just write "To the editor" or "To the editor of The LA Times."
 - 9. The first sentence.** If you are responding to an article, say so right away. Name the article and date of publication in the first sentence of your letter.
 - 10. Limit your writing to two or three short paragraphs.** Here is a simple format to follow:
 - In your first paragraph, introduce your problem and sum up your objection.
 - Provide some evidence to support your view this could include a recent event, statistics, data, or a personal story that tells a larger point.
 - Say what should be done. Point the readers to actions items, a way to find more information or instruct them directly (vote, call your legislators, attend this event)
 - End with a great summary and a clever, punchy line.
 - 11. A few more tip to keep in mind.**
 - Find a way to put a new spin on an old issue.
 - Address just one issue or article per letter.
 - Try not to appear overly emotional.
 - Limit the use of exclamation points.
 - Avoid slang or acronyms.
 - Avoid insulting or oppressive language.
 - Stay respectful even if you disagree with an issue.
 - 12. Think about your signature.** Sign off with your name, your city and state. If you are using your authority to support an issue or your title or position is relevant to your letter, then please include.

Oliver Zerrudo



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*Student at University of California Berkeley
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- 13. Proofread your letter.** Editor will ignore poorly written rants, or bad grammar. The CURB media team can help proofread your letter for grammar and content.
- 14. Submit your letter.** If the publications allows, submit your letter by email. This format enables the editor to cut and paste your letter. Once you have sent in the letter keep an eye out for an email or call from the paper. Wait a month or two before submitting another letter to the same paper. Share a final copy of your letter with a member of the CURB Media Team.
- 15. If you get published:** Let the Media Team know! CURB will circulate your letter to our email list and post it on our social media. Printed letters to the editor also count towards our media hits (link).

Tips were pulled from:

- <http://www.wikihow.com/Write-Letters-to-the-Editor>
- <http://homeworktips.about.com/od/politicalscience/ht/lettertoeditor.html>



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Sample Letters

Jail Reform in California

March 16, 2014, New York Times

To the Editor:

We at CURB (Californians United for a Responsible Budget) welcome your call for a sentencing commission to propose desperately needed sentencing reform here in California ("[A Sentencing Commission for California](#)," editorial, March 10). Our coalition works to curb prison spending using well-studied approaches and redirection of the savings to diversion and community-based alternative programs. We advocate for investment in low-income and communities of color, which are affected most by incarceration, instead of the same old approach we've seen here in California: building more costly prison and jail beds.

These only create incentives for more tough-on-crime policies that are preventing us from investing in real solutions to prison overcrowding.

In order for a commission to be most effective at moving California away from a punishment model, we need a commission that is similar to that of Oregon, one that is tasked with substantially reducing the number of people we lock up here in California.

We hope that the commission will help California rouse itself from the drug war stupor and the ruinous punitive bluster that has misdirected policy for decades. Surely it's time for California to be released from those.

EMILY HARRIS JOE MAIZLISH Oakland, Calif., March 11, 2014

The writers are, respectively, statewide coordinator for CURB and a member of the group's media team.

To the editors

'U.S. Prison Populations Decline' (25 July) points out that 'about half' of last year's reduction took place in California,

Since 2009, the US prison population has declined by 44,474 people. California's has declined 35,895 during that period -- so 80% of the US total.

Looking at the numbers for people in women's prisons is even more dramatic. Since 2009, nationally the reduction is 4,619, in California 4,886 -- so in the other 50 systems, incarceration in women's prisons has grown -- California accounts for 105% of the decline.



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As dramatic as those numbers are, they might understate the case, because the prison population decline in California began not in 2009 but in 2006-7. Nationally there were 2,339 more people in prison in 2012 than there were in 2006. In California during that same period, the prison population has shrunk by 39, 593.

A national trend?

Craig Gilmore

To the editor:

As I read "Prisons chief says more releases could 'unravel' realignment" (Apr 26), I wondered if the *Times* has hired the Mad Hatter to compose headlines. There is no mention in the article of anyone having been released from prison as a result of realignment, probably because there have been no such releases, as Secretary Beard and Gov. Brown often remind us.

'Take some more tea,' the March Hare said to Alice, very earnestly.

'I've had nothing yet,' Alice replied in an offended tone, 'so I can't take more.'

'You mean you can't take LESS,' said the Hatter: 'it's very easy to take MORE than nothing.'

Sec. Beard crying wolf about the alleged dangers of reducing the prison population by another 9,000 willfully ignores the experience of New York that has made deeper cuts in their prison system and closed prisons without compromising public safety.

Craig Gilmore

Three Strikes in Crosshairs

April 19th, 2013 – San Diego Tribune

Dear Editor,

Let's be clear: Tough sentencing laws like Three Strikes should be blamed for terrible overcrowding in our prisons.

I disagree strongly with Hedgecock's analysis. Governors for years have been trying to build more prisons and fill them with anyone they can find. This includes Gov. Brown, who is pushing forward millions of dollars of prison and jail expansion.

Luckily the tide in California is turning and public opinion shows that the vast majority of



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people don't want our tax dollars spent on building more prisons and jails. Instead we want to see a reduction in the number of people locked up in our state and have our resources invested in real community-based alternatives that will address the violence and harms that Hedgecock outlines.

Realignment has not resulted in the massive crime wave that Hedgecock, sheriff's and Republican legislators' fear-mongering wants us to believe. If we continue with the locked-up mentality that led to three strikes and the massive prison boom in California, we'll be broke and horrible violence will only continue to happen in our communities. We need real solutions. – **Emily Harris, Californians United for a Responsible Budget, Oakland**

Solving prison problems takes more than education

April 8, 2013 - LA Daily News

Re "Sheriffs are banking on rehabilitation" (Editorial, April 4):

While jurisdictions should offer programs to those held in custody, the larger point is missed. Training, rehabilitation and education have lasting and beneficial effects when combined with supportive services.

The majority of those in custody can be released without hazard of committing interpersonal offenses. Programs can be accompanied by appropriate, well-crafted forms of supportive supervision if necessary.

Much needs revision as our society wises up to the costly and counterproductive imprisonment craze of the last 30 years. Law enforcement should have a role in the revision process.

However, banking on new budget-busting jails as classrooms, and retaining non-dangerous people in custody, are not the departures we need from the controlling myths which have helped neither public safety nor community well-being.

- **Joseph Maizlish, Los Angeles**

Prison Overcrowding

January 12, 2013 – LA Times

Dear Editor:

I am stunned that the governor continues to claim that he can interpret what is cruel and



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unusual under the U.S. Constitution better than our federal courts.

How can we have any respect for his criminal justice policies when the response to gross violations of human rights in state prisons under his watch has been to argue that they aren't really so bad?

What's needed is sentencing reform and ending the misguided war on drugs. What we are getting is a disgrace.

Raphael Sperry, San Francisco

Crowded Prisons in California

JULY 29, 2014, New York Times

To the Editor:

Re "[Strong Steps on Sentencing Reform](#)" (editorial, July 22):

The United States Sentencing Commission's vote to give nearly a quarter of federal prisoners the chance to reduce their sentences is a tribute to the tireless work of former prisoners, family members and other advocates to end the peril of mass incarceration.

However, in California, we have not had the "remarkable success" in reducing our prison population that the editorial suggests. Gov. Jerry Brown's administration has fought the court order to reduce the prison population with a tenacity some have likened to Gov. George Wallace's resistance to desegregation.

His main strategy to reduce crowding has been "public safety realignment," which shifted overcrowding from state prisons to county jails, resulting in extensive jail expansion.

Let's be careful not to give California any pat on the back: Mr. Brown has repeatedly promised that he will do everything in his power to avoid "early releases."

ISAAC LEV SZMONKO EMILY HARRIS Oakland, Calif., July 23, 2014

Ms. Harris is statewide coordinator of Californians United for a Responsible Budget, and Mr. Szmonko is a member of Critical Resistance Oakland. Both groups seek to reduce the number of prisons.



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Building more jails won't solve the problem

James Folmer, The Desert Sun 3:30 p.m. PDT August 11, 2014

The Desert Sun received the reaction we expected to our Friday editorial saying the overcrowding the Riverside County jails was unacceptable.

Mark Pereyda of Cathedral City points out that The Desert Sun was among those who opposed the proposed jail in Whitewater, which would have provided 7,200 beds. He's right. We did, and would again based on the study that said it would harm our tourism industry — the lifeblood of the Coachella Valley.

"No one wants a jail in their backyard but, would you rather have these criminals incarcerated or living among you, me and our families in our neighborhoods as they look for their next victims?" he asks.

We also received three other letters from out of our coverage area. "It is my belief that jail overcrowding is a symptom of a broken system and the number of people that return is indicative of the same," writes Vonya Quarles, executive director of Starting Over Inc., based in Corona. She suggests bail reform as an alternative.

Mohamed Shehk of Critical Resistance, based in Oakland, takes us to task for supporting jail expansion. "This argument has been made without hesitation or second thought for the last 30 years in California," he writes. "And what we've seen for the last 30 years is that the more quickly jails (and prisons) are built, the more quickly they are filled with prisoners."

Actually, we support the new Indio jail mainly to replace the unsafe conditions in the old jail, which has blind spots where inmates can be attacked by gang members. We also came out in support of alternatives, such as treatment for drug offenders instead of incarceration.

Emily Harris of Californians United for a Responsible Budget, also based in Oakland, wrote in support of those alternatives. "We can't solve violence and harm by building new jails. ... Investing in out-of-lock-up alternatives to imprisonment such as drug treatment, affordable housing or mental health services for Riverside's most disadvantaged populations would be a much wiser use of county resources, and could address root causes or incarceration," she writes. "Riverside is just another county repeating California's prison boom mistakes of the 1980s."

It's a tough issue. Of course we want our streets to be safe, but the report that the Indio jail was 44 percent over capacity sets off alarms, not only about inhumane treatment of inmates but of putting the county at risk of lawsuits.

What do you think? Should the county keep building jails? Should it dust off the Whitewater plans? Or are treatment for drug officers, home confinement for those awaiting trial and bail reform better alternatives?

Let us know what you think via email at DesertSun.com/letters

<http://www.desertsun.com/story/opinion/2014/08/11/building-jails-solve-problem/13923501/>