Expanded Guidelines for Election Season Letters to the Editor

Our basic guidelines for accepting letters to the editor are printed opposite the letters page in every edition we print and are reprinted here:

*Shore Publishing encourages letters to the editor that offer a reader’s perspective on local issues.*

*Writers may submit letters as often as every two weeks (four weeks in the months preceding the election; see our printed policy in each issue for current frequency). Letters must include the writer’s name with address and phone number included for verification purposes. Letters must be 300 words or fewer and are published at the discretion of the editor; we reserve the right to edit all submissions.*

*For letters endorsing a candidate, we will accept one endorsement per candidate, per writer. Letters with negative content are not accepted for the two issues preceding the elections to allow for candidate rebuttal.*

*Letters must be received and confirmed by 5 p.m. Thursday, seven days before publication.*

During elections, we often encounter more in-depth questions regarding the policy. Our goal in our letters section is to include as many unique voices as possible in a civil forum as an aid to readers seeking to make an informed decision on the issues; doing so in the highly charged atmosphere of local politics means we often must play a very active role as referee. Below we’ve provided some frequently asked questions and their answers to help those submitting letters understand why their letters may be declined or altered for publication.

What is considered an endorsement?

For the purposes of our letters to the editor, an author endorses a candidate by directly or indirectly supporting that candidate in the coming election. It may be as straightforward as stating, “I support Candidate Y in the November election” or “I support Party X” or as oblique as, “I feel Candidate Y is substandard, so I encourage your readers to get out and vote in November.” As the latter is a call to action following a critique of Candidate Y, it would be considered an endorsement of Candidate Y’s opponent.

What letters of endorsement will you print?

Shore Publishing accepts letters that reflect a uniquely local perspective; for elections, this means we only accept letters addressing local candidates. As with our news coverage, we consider state senate districts (and now, some probate districts) to be the largest district considered local. The author must also be a part of the electorate that the endorsed candidate would represent—basically, if the candidate endorsed won’t be on your ballot, we’ll decline your endorsement.

As the candidate I’m endorsing is running for regional office, will my endorsement appear in all papers in that region?

No. Letters from individual authors run only in the paper that covers the author’s residence. An exception is made for letters submitted by the regional candidates themselves; those letters appear in each applicable paper.
What is a blanket endorsement?

Some authors choose to endorse all members of one party in one letter through a blanket endorsement (“I’m supporting the entire Y Party...”). Other authors, in the process of intentionally endorsing one candidate, unintentionally submit a blanket endorsement (“I’m voting for Candidate X and the entire Y Party...”). A blanket endorsement is considered the author’s one endorsement for the election season.

If I endorsed a candidate in the primary, may I endorse the same (or another) candidate in the general election?

Possibly. Some primary endorsements include wording along the lines of “I endorse Candidate Y in the primary and in November”; this obviously consists of that author’s one endorsement for the season. If the primary endorsement clearly applied to the primary season only, the author may resubmit an endorsement for that candidate for the general election.

For the two weeks leading up to the election, you do not accept letters with negative content. How do you define “negative content?”

A letter is considered to contain negative content if it is an outright criticism of a candidate (“Candidate Y is incompetent”); makes a comparison between candidates (“Both Candidate X and Candidate Y are great people, but Candidate Y has more experience”); or contains superlatives about a candidate (“Candidate Y is the most experienced person for the job”), as that implies the opponent is inferior.

My letter was 299 words when I sent it, but I got a message back saying it was too long—why?

All letters are edited to standard newspaper format, changing items like “9%” to “nine percent” or “$5M” to “$5 million”; this can add a substantial number of words to some letters. Also, if an author cites a previous story or letter, a full reference must be made (format is: In Joe Schmoe’s Aug. 1 letter “Local Issues Matter,”...). If an author fails to include that citation and the information is readily available to the editor, the addition will be made, possibly necessitating a reduction in words somewhere else. If that information is not readily available, the letter will be declined. NOTE: Letters citing other media sources should be sent to those sources; we will decline those letters.

My letter was declined for failure to meet civility standards. Where does a criticism become uncivil?

A general rule: You can say that someone did something stupid, but not that the person is stupid; that same spirit applies to all forms of criticism. Unsubstantiated allegations will also be declined, as will personal attacks.

I’ve endorsed a candidate, but another author made an allegation about my candidate that I feel compelled to correct. Can I do so?

Yes—if the rebuttal does not also constitute an additional endorsement, which is difficult to do. It can work if you are rebutting a specific item (“Joe Schmoe stated Candidate Y voted for this bill, but the candidate in fact did not”), however, rebutting general criticisms of a candidate often falls under the endorsement category (“Joe Schmoe stated Candidate Y is not respected in the community, but I believe the candidate is respected”).
An author referenced my letter and I would like a chance to immediately rebut. Do I still need to wait the full, two-week (four weeks in the months preceding the election) period?

Yes.

Your policy appears to allow someone to say something positive about a candidate just once, but places few limits on how often an author can criticize a candidate. Why provide a lopsided forum?

Our letters section provides more than just a place to endorse candidates; it is a forum for the electorate to hold its elected officials accountable. Because of this, we allow authors multiple opportunities to lodge complaints. Letters that express what we deem to be substantially the same opinion as a previous letter from that author will be declined, however.

The letter printed in the paper wasn’t exactly as I submitted. Why did you change my words?

The letters to the editor section is an edited, moderated forum. All letters receive editing; as with all reputable news sources, we only accept letters that are subject to editing without approval. Our goals in editing are multiple: we want the letter to be clear and concise and so edit for spelling, style, and grammar and we want to keep as many voices active as possible so will make modest edits to bring and oversized letter within our 300-word maximum or make modest alterations to passages that violate some of the above policies, allowing the majority of a writer’s perspective is printed. If a letter requires editing to the point the editor believes the author’s perspective would be lost or become unclear (such as might be the case with a letter far above our 300-word maximum), the letter is declined.

I sent my letter in before the deadline, but it was not accepted for that issue. What happened?

Letters must be received and confirmed by phone by 5 p.m. on the Thursday preceding publication. Late letters are most often caused by delays in postal service or fax backups; emailing (with text in the email body or as a Word document) to news@shorepublishing.com is the best option for submission. We often receive letters in time for deadline, but are unable to reach the author by phone in time to confirm the letter; please be sure to include a phone number at which we can quickly reach you for confirmation. We also receive more than 100 letters a week in the lead-up to elections and we make efforts to confirm them as we receive them; letters that are sent in at 4:45 p.m. are very unlikely to be confirmed by 5 p.m. in that situation and will be moved to the following week’s queue.

If I have a very important perspective to share, will you make an exception to the maximum word count, deadline, or any above policies?

No. Our letters forum provides a level playing field for all authors. We will never knowingly violate that commitment to the readers.