



Influencing Editorials: An editorial board meeting primer

Community members, policy makers, donors, volunteers and many others are often influenced by editorials. A favorable editorial on your issue can help you advance toward your goals, while one that supports your opposition's viewpoint can impede your progress.

It's important to note that an editorial is different from an op-ed. Editorials are written by staff at the newspaper and express the paper's opinion on an issue. Op-eds may be written by staff or outside contributors and express solely the author's opinion. For more information on writing and submitting an op-ed, see **Opinions Count: Writing and submitting an op-ed** in this toolkit.

The following offers tips on requesting, preparing for and conducting an editorial board meeting, as well as basic information about how a newspaper's editorial page generally operates.

What is an editorial board?

The editorial board is the group of individuals at a newspaper that determine what the paper's position will be on an issue and pen editorials expressing those views. In a nutshell, the editorial board is the writers and editors of the editorial page.

From one newspaper to another, editorial pages vary greatly in their number of staff. A large paper such as the *Los Angeles Times* has several editorial writers with beats, similar to news beat reporters, along with an editorial page editor, that make up the board. Smaller papers may have only one editorial writer and an editorial page editor that comprise the board.

What is an editorial board meeting?

During an editorial board meeting, one or more spokespeople for an organization or members of a coalition meet face to face with some or all of the editorial board members at a newspaper. During that meeting they have an opportunity to brief the editorial board on an issue and field questions.

Who you meet with will depend both on the size of the newspaper and the scope and priority of your issue. At a larger newspaper, if your issue is fairly narrow and falls under the purview of one editorial writer, you might meet just with that writer. That writer could also be joined by one or more interested colleagues. For high priority issues or those that span the interest areas of several writers, you might meet with the entire board. At a smaller paper, you're more likely to simply meet with the entire board regardless of your issue, because the board itself is smaller and its members are less likely to have assigned issue areas.

When should we request an editorial board meeting?

Meeting with the editorial board of a local or regional newspaper provides you with the opportunity to get across your point of view to the people that determine what the newspaper's

opinion will be about a particular issue. There are several times when it may be useful to request an editorial board meeting:

- When you are launching a campaign or new program, and wish to ask the newspaper to editorialize in support of your efforts.
- When you release a report or otherwise have new information that you wish to share with the editorial board. (In this case, simply sending a letter and a copy of the report may suffice.) However, if the new information is extremely newsworthy and leads to a necessary call to action for policy makers or community members, you can meet with the board to ask them to call for relevant decision makers to act.
- After a newspaper prints one or more editorials opposing your position, in order to share your side of the story with the board.

In general, an editorial board meeting gives you a chance to influence the board's opinions in your favor or, if the paper seems likely to oppose your viewpoint, gives you the opportunity to try to move the coverage of your issue in a more favorable direction.

What's the best way to request an editorial board meeting?

In preparation for scheduling the meeting, research editorial coverage to see if they have editorialized on your issue in the past. (If they have editorialized recently, and are on your side, you might not need to schedule a meeting right now, unless you have something new to add to the story. In this situation, it would be more appropriate to send a letter to the editor expressing your support for the coverage.)

Based upon your research, decide the one to four people (depending on the issue) who should serve as the spokespeople at the meeting. These may be staff from your organization, members of a coalition, etc. It's a good idea to assemble a team that will all have the same message but can offer slightly different perspectives. For example, an editorial board meeting about an educational issue might include the president of an educational advocacy group, a principal, and a parent who is active in the PTA.

Contact the editorial page with a letter sent via e-mail, fax or mail. (A sample letter follows.) If you can find out the name of the person that writes on your issue, address the letter to him or her. If you're unable to do this, address the letter to the editorial page editor. In general, the person that writes on your issue will take the lead in scheduling the meeting and will help to shepherd you through the process.

When asking for a meeting, briefly outline your position, the people that will attend, and suggest a time frame for the meeting, such as a few days of a particular week. Be sure to include any information about why the meeting is timely, such as an upcoming event, anniversary, vote on a piece of legislation, etc.

How should we prepare for the meeting?

Once the meeting is secured, ask if you should send materials in advance of the meeting, or bring them with you. A background packet should include appropriate press releases, fact

sheets, and op-eds that have been written in support of your issue. You may also include past editorials on the issue by the paper that you are meeting with.

It's a wise idea for the meeting participants to talk in advance of the meeting about how it will go, who will speak, and what will be said. Each participant will want to plan to speak for three to five minutes. It's best if everyone is in agreement on key messages to use and what they are asking for.

What happens during the meeting?

When you go to meet with the editorial page, one participant should act as the moderator. The moderator will outline the reason for the meeting, introduce himself/herself and ask other participants to briefly introduce themselves. Each participant will then speak for three to five minutes on his or her perspective on the issue at hand. The moderator will then ask for questions and direct them to the appropriate member of the team. Make sure to conclude by asking if there is any more information that you can provide. Finally, close the meeting by asking the editorial board to do something. This ask will depend on the situation. If the newspaper has not editorialized on the issue, you may ask them to editorialize in support of your side. If they've written editorials in the past that oppose your position, you might ask them to consider the new information that you have provided when writing future editorials on the issue.

What should we do after the meeting?

Follow up after the meeting with a letter thanking the editorial board members that you met with for their time and restating your position. Include any materials that you promised to send.

Sample Letter for Editorial Board meeting

Dear [Name of Editorial Writer or Editor]:

The first paragraph should identify who you are and the issue you are concerned with. Name the problem and the desired solution:

Child Health Organization is working to ensure that all kids have access to quality healthcare. We must maintain funding for Medicaid in order to make sure that America's children have the opportunity to grow up healthy.

In the second paragraph, make the case for your solution in two to three sentences. First, describe the harm to the community that the problem is causing. Then explain what benefits the solution will bring.

[X percent] of children in Los Angeles rely on Medicaid for health coverage because their families are unable to afford private insurance. Through Medicaid, these children get the regular check ups that are necessary for all kids, as well as quality care when they are sick. If Medicaid funding is cut, our children's health will suffer.

In the third paragraph, explain why a meeting is necessary now, who would participate in the meeting, and the time frame within which you would like it to occur.

As our kids get ready to go back to school, it's even more important to ensure that they have access to health care. Studies have shown that kids with untreated medical problems have difficulty concentrating in school and ultimately have higher drop out rates. Jane Smith, president of Child Health Organization; Dr. Fred Jones, a local pediatrician; and Mary Lewis, a Los Angeles parent whose children rely on Medicaid, would like to speak with you within the next two weeks about the need to preserve Medicaid funding.

I will follow up with you via phone to schedule a meeting. Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,
[Name]