

How to Write A Letter to the Editor (And Legislators!!)

As you write your newspaper, send the same letter to your Legislators. Actually it is easy to submit your letter to the newspaper in your area by email or by submitting it on the web. Here's how to find out the submission guidelines for your local or regional news outlet: Type into your search engine (Google, Yahoo etc.) the words: Submit a letter to the editor NEWSPAPER name here. For example - if the OC Register is your regional paper type - Submit a letter to the editor OC Register. You will get the link to the "letters to the editor" page, click on that and it will take you to the newspaper's instructions for submitting letters to the editor. Do it today!

OPEN THE LETTER WITH A SIMPLE SALUTATION.

Don't worry if you don't know the editor's name. A simple "To the Editor of the *Daily Sun*," or just "To the Editor:" is sufficient. If you have the editor's name, however, you should use it to increase the possibilities of your letter being read.

GRAB THE READER'S ATTENTION.

Your opening sentence is very important. It should tell readers what you're writing about, and make them want to read more.

EXPLAIN WHAT THE LETTER IS ABOUT AT THE START.

Throughout your letter, remember the rule:

- Be quick,
- Be concise, and then
- Be quiet.

Don't make the editor or the general public wait to find out what you want to say. Tell them your key point at the beginning.

EXPLAIN WHY THE ISSUE IS IMPORTANT.

If you are motivated enough to write a letter to a newspaper or magazine, the importance of your topic may seem clear to you. Remember, though, that the general public probably doesn't share your background or the interest. Explain the issue and its importance simply. Use plain language that most people will understand

GIVE EVIDENCE FOR ANY PRAISE OR CRITICISM.

If you are writing a letter discussing a past or pending action, be clear in showing why this will have good or bad results.

STATE YOUR OPINION ABOUT WHAT SHOULD BE DONE.

You can write a letter just to "vent," or to support or criticize a certain action or policy, but you may also have suggestions about what could be done to improve the situation. If so, be sure to add these as well. Be specific. And the more good reasons you can give to back up your suggestions, the better.

KEEP IT BRIEF. 150 WORDS BRIEF.

Generally, shorter letters have a better chance of being published. So go back over your letter and see if anything can be cut or condensed. If you have a lot to say and it can't be easily made short, you may want to check with the editor to see if you could write a longer opinion feature or guest column.

SIGN THE LETTER.

Be sure to write your full name (and title, if relevant) and to include your address, phone number, and e-mail address. Newspapers won't print anonymous letters, though in some cases they may withhold your name on request. They may also call you to confirm that you wrote the letter before they publish it.

CHECK YOUR LETTER TO MAKE SURE IT'S CLEAR AND TO THE POINT.

A newspaper may not print every letter it receives, but clear, well-written letters are likely to be given more serious consideration.

HOW DO YOU GET YOUR LETTERS ACCEPTED?

How likely your letter is to be published depends to a certain extent on the publication you're sending it to. The *New York Times* probably receives hundreds, if not thousands of letters a day, only ten or so of which make it into print. A small-town newspaper, on the other hand, may print every letter it gets, since it may get only two or three a day.

In general, newspapers and magazines will publish letters that are well-written and articulate, and that either represent specific points of view on an issue, or that thoughtfully analyze complex issues and events. Most publications stay away from publishing rants, although they may publish short-and-to-the-point letters that make the same points as a rant might, but in a much calmer and more rational way. Publications also tend to stay away from attacks on particular people (although not from criticism of the actions of politicians and other public figures), and anything that might possibly be seen as libel.

Legally, libel is the publication of a false statement about someone that damages that person's reputation. Thus to falsely accuse someone of a crime would be libel; to inaccurately print that someone had won an award for citizenship would not be.

Here are a few helpful tips for getting your letters accepted by the editor:

- Keep your letter short. Editors have limited space for printing letters, and some papers have stated policies regarding length (check the editorial page for this).
- Make sure your most important points are stated in the first paragraph. Editors may need to cut parts of your letter and they usually do so from the bottom up.
- Refer to a recent event in your community or to a recent article – make a connection and make it relevant.
- Use local statistics and personal stories to better illustrate your point.
- Make sure you include your title as well as your name – it adds credibility, especially if it's relevant to the topic being discussed. If you are a program director, your title may lend credibility to the letter.

Including your title is also important to showing that you're not trying to hide your interest in the topic. If you're a program director and you don't mention that in your letter, there may be a letter the next day accusing you of dishonesty for not revealing it.

- Editors may want to contact you, so include your phone number and e-mail address.
- If your letter is not accepted the first time around, try again. You might submit a revised version with a different angle on the issue at a later date.

You do not have to be the only one to write the letter: letters are often published with multiple signers. You also don't have to be the only one to write a letter. Several people may write letters on the same topic with the same or slightly different points, and submit them a few days apart, so that the issue stays on the Letters page for a period of time. If you have talented writers in your group, you might encourage one of them to write an editorial article or an "Op-Ed" – that is, an opinion editorial that is usually printed on the citizen opinion page. Most of all, don't limit your communications. Brainstorm for ideas in your group – how can you further your goals by speaking to the readers of your community paper?

Contributor

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