

Letters to the Editor – Your Voice in a Crowded Landscape

by Steve Saus

There is a quick and easy way to spread our message: Letters to the Editor. The "Opinion" page is one of the most read sections of the newspaper. It is read more often than the comics are. Letters that appear on those pages are short statements that have as much respect and influence as the paper's "official" editorials.

Getting Published - Not Such A Big Deal

Being published is not the only reason to write letters to the editor. Unpublished letters can influence which letters do see print. Editors like to publish a representative selection of letters. The more letters that agree with you, the more likely your point - if not your letter - will make it into print.

Letters have even changed the minds of editors in the past in papers as large and influential as The Washington Times.

Before Writing - Getting It All Together

Select a previously published article to reference, if possible. This can be a specific or loose reference (see the appendix below for an example). Referencing a local article can often give your letter that extra chance of being published. Referencing an article also lets them know that you are reading their work.

It never hurts to read the paper you are writing to. That can give you an idea of what sorts of coverage and editorial position of the paper. Especially if writing about a mistake or oversight, avoid blanket attacks on the media in general - or the newspaper in particular.

Finally, do not just look at your major local paper. Community papers nearly always have room for letters to the editor, as do an increasing number of broadcast news programs (60 Minutes, All Things Considered, etc.). You can also submit to major papers in other locations, and large national papers. This is especially feasible in the age of the Internet, but can be accomplished the "old-fashioned" way just as easily. See our Media Contact Information appendix for contact information.

Writing the Letter - ERIC and General Tips

EPIC stands for *Engage*, *Propose*, *Illustrate*, and *Call to action* (or *Commitment*). It is an easy format you can use to write your letter. It makes opinion writing much quicker and easier.

- **Engage:** Engage the reader with a startling fact, a visceral image or a strong statement of a serious problem.
- **Propose:** Make a specific proposal

- **Illustrate:** Illustrate how the proposal would work and why it is important. Give a few details or examples to make it concrete.
- **Call to action or Commitment:** Call for a specific action or express your commitment to solving the problem.

There are a few general guidelines while you are working within the ERIC format.

- Be to the point. Focus exclusively on one topic, and just concentrate on a few powerful points.
- Use simple language. You are trying to get the message out to anyone who can read it.
- Write honestly, and with passion. Avoid being overly dramatic, and avoid personal attacks (see the appendix below for an example).
- Keep it short. Use about 150-300 words for print and only about 100 words for TV or radio.

After Writing - A Few More Guidelines

Proofread your letter. It is best to have a friend check the written copy. Also, read it aloud. If part of your letter sounds "wrong" when you read it out loud, you may want to re-write that part.

Be sure to sign your letter with your real name, address, and a good daytime phone number. If you're sending your letter by e-mail, add a note: "Dear Editor: I'm sending this by e-mail so I can't sign it. If you need confirmation of this letter, feel free to call my voice number."

Find others to write letters when possible. This will show that other individuals in the community are concerned about the issue. If your letter isn't published, perhaps someone else's on the same topic will.

Be email savvy. If you submit by email, paste your letter into the text of the email. Do not send attachments. Many papers will not even open an email with an attachment.

Wrapping It Up

So there you have it. How many times have you gotten mad at the newspaper or television? Take that energy and frustration and do something with it - write a letter to the editor!

Sources

- <http://www.bread.org/howtohelp/activist/LTE.html>
- http://www.jubileeusa.org/jubilee.cgi?path=/take_action&page=april04_media.html
- <http://www.realjournalism.net/publish.htm>

- <http://www.psychlaws.org>

Loose and Specific References - An Appendix

Let us say that an article runs about privatizing school bus drivers. A specific reference would talk about why privatizing is a good or bad idea. A loose reference could talk about tax policy ("We wouldn't have to even consider this if the local megastore would pay taxes into the community like the rest of us."), globalization ("Privatization - like outsourcing - affects our local community."), and so on.

Attacking the Individual - Another Appendix

Good: "Secretary of State Whitebad has misused taxpayer money and broken the rules. He should be held accountable for what he's done wrong."

Bad: "Secretary of State Whitebad is a no-good S.O.B."

Of course, the "bad" example may be completely true - it just may not be useful in getting your letter published.

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