

Writing Effective Letters to the Editor

By H. Paul Payne

The letter to the editor is one of the best tools for the grassroots activist to use in order to get his or her message out to the public. They are easy to write and every community has at least one newspaper in which you can submit your letter. Sending letters to the editor can help you achieve your goals because they:

- ³⁵₁₇ reach a very large audience.
- ³⁵₁₇ can be used to rebut information not accurately addressed in a news article or editorial.
- ³⁵₁₇ create an impression of widespread support or opposition to an issue.
- ³⁵₁₇ are widely read by community leaders and lawmakers to gauge public sentiment about current issues in the news.

The purpose of submitting a letter to the editor is to have it published so that you will influence your targeted primary audience, the readers of the newspaper. The letters to the editor section of the newspaper is one of the most popular features in many newspapers.

If your letter is not published, write another one. Most newspapers receive many more letters than they can print. Even though they are not published, all letters are read by the editors, and may influence them in determining which topics should receive further attention or follow-up articles.

Don't hesitate to send letters to weekly, on-line, or community newspapers. By submitting your letter to newspaper with a smaller circulation, it is often easier to get your letter published.

The following techniques should help you when writing your letter to the editor:

SIX SIMPLE STEPS

1.Type or Write Clearly. Hand written letters are the best. Make them legible. Your letter doesn't have to be professionally written or fancy, but you should use a typewriter or computer/word processor if your handwriting is hard to read or messy. Hand sign your letter, whenever possible.

2.Addressing Your Letter Correctly. If you are mailing or delivering you letter, you should address your letter "To the Editor" or "Dear Editor." If you are sending your letter via email or fax, type "Letters to the Editor" in the topic or subject heading.

3.Keep Your Letter Short and on One Subject. Letters should never exceed one page. Many newspapers will edit your letter before publishing it; in order to ensure a minimum amount of editing, always try to keep your letter smaller than 150 words in length. Keeping your letter brief will help assure that the newspaper does not edit out your important points. In the opening paragraph, state the purpose of your letter and stick to that topic. Make sure to follow the paper's letter submission guidelines, which are usually found on the editorial page of the paper.

4.Always be Factual. Don't embellish your story or statements. And never openly attack the paper or other readers. Include statistics, documented facts, and studies in your letter in order to enhance its effectiveness. But, too many statistics will tend to bore or confuse the reader and your point will be lost to them. Only make statements that you can back up. A good rule to follow is, "If you can't prove it, don't include it."

5.Write About Current Events and News, Not Old Stories. Stick to recent issues. Respond promptly to anti-gun stories and editorials. Mention your support for pro-gun legislation or opposition to anti-gun legislation. Make references to recent stories that you read in the newspaper. Although some papers will print general commentary, many will only print letters that refer to a specific article or editorial.

Included, are a few examples of ways to refer to articles in your opening sentence:

- ³⁵₁₇ I was disappointed to see that...
- ³⁵₁₇ I am deeply saddened to read that Congressman (insert name) is...
- ³⁵₁₇ In your editorial of (date), you missed an important point...
- ³⁵₁₇ I strongly disagree with the view expressed by (author's name)...
- ³⁵₁₇ I'm sure that many readers were confused by...

6.Include Your Daytime Contact Information. Most newspapers will not print a letter until they verify its authenticity. Therefore, they require that your letters be signed, addressed, and daytime phone number be included for verification. It would be very unusual for a newspaper to print anonymous letters.