



## Writing a successful letter to the Editor

### GIVING VOICE TO YOUR CONCERN.

Getting your position into the public domain is vital to getting others on your side. The traditional method of making your opinion public was via a letter to the Editor of your local newspaper. Today electronic media and the use of blogs, web page responses, Facebook, Twitter and the endless other methods are now commonplace, making it difficult to get one's message across to others simply because of the vast array of these methods. All the electronic methods now have their own frameworks, rules and parameters for communicating one's view on an issue. This paper deals with the traditional method of writing an opinion letter to the Editor of a print newspaper, although no doubt these comments below may well be applicable to other media.

### PURPOSE OF YOUR LETTER

People write letters for many reasons, here are some:

- To propose a public policy idea
- To agitate and protest something
- To share an opinion on a public policy issue and raise public awareness
- To respond to a previous letter or previously published article
- To support a candidate
- To oppose a candidate
- To complain about the state of something
- To provide new or corrected facts previously reported
- To get something off your chest about an issue

..... and many more. Be clear about the core purpose of your letter, and keep to one purpose.

### LETTER STRUCTURE

Most newspapers limit the letter length to about 150 words, so structuring the letter to get your point across fast and succinctly is important. Using the following format or structure may help you construct the main argument or point of your letter.

**Opening reference point** – a previous article or news report, a public statement made by someone, your core position on something, keep this to one sentence, and describe your main point right up front.

**Main proposal** – the main reasoning for your response or proposal. This second paragraph provides the reason for your letter, so refer to the list under PURPOSE above and make your point firmly and succinctly.

**Support or justifying facts** – these must bear scrutiny, otherwise you will not be taken seriously. Referring to real data sources makes your argument more forceful and authentic.

**Define what you want done/or want others to do** – be persuasive and clear about what you want changed and what you want others to do. Repeating your core proposal plus a forceful data point drives home your argument.

**Wrap up with a positive statement** – make this statement bold and clear.

**Get someone else to proof read it or provide feedback just to improve it.** Thanking the editor for publishing the letter is an option.

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This series provides congregations and individuals the skills to build and deploy justice ministries and advocacy methods. Other methods in this series include:

\*Building a relationship with your elected representative

\*Writing a letter or email to your elected representative

\*Writing a letter to the press, blog or website

\*Organizing a rally or protest meeting

\*Building a congregational justice ministry

\*Proposing legislation

\*Parish based Community Organizing

\*Creating a Conference Resolution

\*Asset Based Community Development

\*Challenging legislators

\*Community Listening

The Board of Church and Society provides advocacy and justice programs for congregations.

<https://nccumc.org/christianformation/church-and-society/>

## ADVOCACY BUILDING

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### Letter to the Editor

#### ALTERNATIVE LETTER STRUCTURE

Many letters to the press are short and pointed, some even a single sentence. These use the language of sarcasm, humor, cynicism, anger, affirmation, disgust, protest, kindness, endorsement, frustration, and many other emotions to give vent to an issue or the opinion of another person or public figure. These are legitimate forms of public expression, but note that Editors typically publish these if they are written immediately an event or previous article or letter has been written, because news that is two days old is old... so be sure to get this type of letter in fast. Fortunately the internet provides a fast response vehicle. All newspapers provide email addresses so use this method.

#### STORY TELLING

A letter can be an individual life story that in itself provides a point of view for others to note. Using personal circumstances that illustrate a point is useful, but needs to be carefully done. Do not use someone else's life circumstance as your own. Your personal experience that demonstrates a poor or positive public policy application to your own life experience adds to the value of your point of view.

Most letters are from individuals or two or three people that are clearly identified as joint authors. Sometimes the organization you belong to wishes to state its opinion or position in relation to a public policy issue. In this case your letter should clearly state that this position has been voted on by the organization, and the letter should be sent in the name of the authorized organization official whose status is also identified, like the Chair person.

If you are a frequent letter writer you will find that only a few of your letters get published. Editors get hundreds of letters, often making the same point you are making, so they have to choose. They do recognize regular writers, and seek to honor their passion, but they only have limited space to publish so don't get despondent if you don't see your hard work in the press. Keep writing, and you will be noticed.

If you are part of a group that cares about an issue, get everyone to write in, but don't provide a standard format. Get everyone to write in their own way, this shows the editor that there are many out there with this point of view and is then more likely to publish at least one of the letters.

#### SOME DON'T'S

- **Plagiarize** – always acknowledge your sources and give credit to them.
- **Make statements that insult, are blatantly untrue, or so wildly disproportionate to the facts that it is unlikely to be believed.**
- **Whine.....** we all have complaints, try to be positive, even when complaining about something. Offer positive alternatives.
- **Avoid potentially libelous statements.** Editors will typically avoid publishing these.

#### TYPICAL PRESS REQUIREMENTS

- Usually there is a word limit. Stick to it..... this helps you to be succinct.
- You must identify yourself, plus provide your contact information like an email address, residential address or phone number. Check the newspaper's requirements.

This document was created by Brian Heymans while he served on the Board of Church and Society.

