

Letters to the Editor

Writing letters to the editor of your local or regional newspapers (or even national, for some issues) is an easy and effective way to inform your elected officials and the general public how important a particular issue is to your community and the nation. "Letters" pages are one of the most highly read sections of newspapers and magazines. From the standpoint of congressional offices, letters to the editor are impossible to overuse. For many public officials, the press represents the overall buzz in the community. Moreover, having your name in the paper as a frequent letter writer makes you "somebody." Thus when you send a press release or make any other contact with a reporter, or when you seek to go on a talk show, people can Google your name and see the letters you've written. That will give you credibility. So write often and everywhere.

The best ways to use letters to the editor are to correct or interpret recently released facts or biased articles, to explain the connection between a news item and your issue of concern, or to praise or criticize a recent article or editorial.

Here's an example of a letter to the editor of the *Washington Post* written in October 2008 and accepted for publication.

Dear Editor,

The Washington Post got it right ("What Colin Powell Also Said," Tuesday, October 21, 2008; A16) when it commended Colin Powell for standing up for Muslim Americans in the wake of claims that Barack Obama is a Muslim (he isn't) and that this would somehow be an un-American thing. But now could someone please stand up for nontheists, who are slandered more than any other "religious" group when it comes to running for office? After all, people have also stated that Obama is un-American because his mother was a secular humanist. Yet when does anyone of prominence stand up and say that there's nothing wrong with that, either? The U.S. Constitution stipulates that there shall be no religious test for public office, and that encompasses both freedom of and freedom from religion. In that spirit, a nontheistic child should also be able to dream that one day she or he could be president.

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TIPS ON WRITING LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Know the policy of the paper regarding publishing letters to the editor. Some papers have specific requirements about the length of letters, how they are to be e-mailed, or where they are to be postal mailed. Most won't publish a letter if you don't include your full name, address, and phone number (although your address and phone number would never

be printed). Rules are posted on the Internet. Letters are usually to be short and not posted elsewhere.

Be timely. A letter to the editor has the best chance of being printed if it is in response to a recent article, op-ed, or editorial. (If the letter is a response, be sure to mention the name and date of the article in the first line of your letter.) You can also capitalize on recent news, events, or anniversaries. For example, the anniversary of an Act or other landmark legislation, the introduction of new related legislation, or the release of a new report that has implications on the issue provide good hooks for writing a letter to the editor.

Stay on message. Be sure your letters are concise, informative, and to the point. Focus on one subject. Keep the length to no more than three or four paragraphs. Have only one or two points to make. Write your first line so it is short and compelling, and don't be afraid to be controversial.

Get local and personal. When it comes to local or regional publications, community is an especially big focus for newspapers. Editors often prefer, and thus print, letters that demonstrate local relevance. Also, by showing the importance of your message to local issues, it will likely have a greater impact on readers.

Use local statistics.

Use personal stories.

Use names of legislators or other public officials where relevant.

Use your credentials. If you have expertise in the area you are writing about, state it.

Follow up. Don't be discouraged if your letter isn't printed. You can send a revised letter with a different angle at a later date or to a different publication. If your letter is published, you might want to send a copy to your local and national politicians, with a personal note attached.

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