



Writing a Letter to Your Newspaper

Putting pen to paper can be a powerful media tool.

Writing letters to the editor of your local newspaper can serve several purposes. A letter can help highlight an issue, or one angle of an issue, not previously covered. It can also point out a job well done, or not so well done, on the part of public officials or the media. Letters can also give editors and reporters hints as to what their readers are thinking. Journalists scan commentary pages for story ideas and clues as to what positions to take on editorials.

Finally, letters show other like-minded individuals in your community that they are not alone in their attitudes and beliefs, while giving them a lead on what action they can take to address an issue of concern.

What makes a good letter?

Try the **personal-facts-action method**:

◆ **Personal** — Why am I writing? What is the problem or issue? What point of view do I offer that hasn't been offered before?

◆ **Facts** — Here are some statistics or pieces of information that support my argument. Maybe this is information not commonly known, or ignored.

◆ **Action** — Here's what we can do to address this issue: attend a meeting on this particular date at this particular location, contact your representative, joining a grassroots group, boycott a certain product, etc.

The basics of a letter

- ◆ Keep the letter to 250-300 words or less.
- ◆ Limit it to one topic.
- ◆ Include your full name and address, as well as day and evening telephone numbers and e-mail address. Telephone numbers and e-mail addresses won't be published in the newspaper, but editors need that information so they can confirm you wrote the letter.
 - ◆ No personal attacks.
 - ◆ Controlled anger is a fine tool to use in letters. Rage is not, especially when used to make a personal attack against an individual. Humor works well, but satire

should only be used when it can be made crystal clear that it is satire.

◆ Never include rumors or questionable facts.
◆ Having someone proofread the letter for clarity is good, but don't allow it to sit on your kitchen table for a week before sending it. The sooner the letter is sent to a newspaper, the better. The issue you are writing about this week may not be a hot topic next week.

◆ Don't be afraid to write a letter applauding a reporter for a job well done, even if it's on a story that has nothing to do with the issues you are interested in. Such a letter can pay off down the road when the reporter covers your issue.

◆ Have a letter writing party. Get a group of your neighbors together and share facts and viewpoints in an informal setting. By the end of the evening, each person should go home with a letter they will be sending to the local newspaper within 24 hours.

◆ Do not send form letters. Editors will reject a group of letters once they recognize a form letter pattern.



When sending

◆ Find the name and exact address of the newspaper staffer who is responsible for letters to the editor. Watch the letters page of the newspaper for personnel changes. If unsure, call the newspaper to find out.

◆ If relevant and useful, send the letter to several newspapers at once.

◆ E-mailing the letter is best. Do not send the letter as an attachment. Put the text of the letter into the body of the e-mail and in the subject line put the words, "Letter to the Editor." After the phrase "Letter to the Editor," write a few words that describe the subject of the letter.

◆ Never assume your letter will be printed. Some newspapers receive more letters than they can print. In addition, an editor may feel the particular topic you are writing on has been covered to death. However, if you feel "the other side" is getting its letters printed while your viewpoint re-

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mains buried, it is worth calling the editor to point this out in a friendly, but firm, way. It's nice if the editor recognizes your name. It's not so nice if you become known as an unreasonable pest. Pick your battles.

◆ Be prepared to get feedback from others in the community after your letter is published. Often it will be positive; sometimes it will not.

A few sample letters

◆ Dear Editor:

My husband and I live on the family farm about one mile from the proposed MOPRO site. We are the fifth generation to live on and operate this farm. We raise crops, milk cows and raise horses. Now MOPRO wants to move into our community.

Why Writing

Facts

The size of this proposed project is frightening — 2.5 million chickens and 25,000 animals units. These chickens will produce as much animal waste as 62,500, 55 pound pigs or 17,857 dairy cows. Can you imagine having a feedlot that size in your neighborhood?

Personal Concerns

We worry about increased flies causing disease in our animals and a decrease in our cows' milk production. We worry about our water supply becoming contaminated. We worry about the air we breathe containing pathogens that will make us, our neighbors and our animals sick.

Community Concerns

We hear people in the area say the Austin community is dependent on agriculture. They want young people in the area to get started and remain in agriculture. My husband and I have been in business about two years and want to continue farming; but our future, our success and our quality of life is now threatened by this industry claiming to be agriculture.

Hard Questions

There are other farmers and nonfarm businesses in the area who will also be adversely affected by MOPRO. If one corporation puts several other businesses out of work, does the community really prosper? Is that progress? Is more profit for a few fair to those of us who have to live with a polluted environment?

Parting Thoughts

It is everyone's responsibility to be good stewards of those things that God has blessed us with. We must protect and preserve the environment.

— **Karen Naatz, Austin, Minn.**

Why Writing

Personal

Facts

Humor

Action

◆ Dear Editor:

As merger mania continues with no end in sight, corporations attempt to alleviate the fears of farmers and consumers by citing the tired old argument that all this consolidation makes the economy more "efficient." Farmers get higher prices while consumers pay less for food, goes this argument. So, say agribusiness officials, imposing a moratorium on mega mergers would be counterproductive.

As a member of the Land Stewardship Project, which has within its ranks farmers as well as consumers, I can assure you both parties are getting the raw end of the deal.

Between 1984 and 1997, the price of a market basket of food (adjusted for inflation) rose by 2.8 percent, according to C. Robert Taylor, an agricultural economist at Auburn University. That's not a huge increase, but it's not drop either.

During those same years, the amount of money farmers received for the food they produced dropped by almost 36 percent, according to Taylor.

The rate of return on equity during the 1990s has been 18 percent for retail food chains and 17 percent for food processors, says Taylor. Farming's return on equity averaged 4.5 percent during the same period.

Hmmm, can someone remind me how Cargill, ConAgra and Smithfield Foods are passing on the benefits of consolidation to family farms and consumers?

Call your senator or representative and tell them we need a moratorium on mega agribusiness mergers.

— **Don Maronde,
Wood Lake, Minn.**

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This fact sheet is brought to you by the members and staff of the Land Stewardship Project, a private, nonprofit organization devoted to fostering an ethic of stewardship for farmland and to seeing more successful farmers on the land raising crops and livestock. For more information, call 651-653-0618 or visit www.landstewardshipproject.org.