



LAND STEWARDSHIP PROJECT

#4 Writing a Letter- to-the-Editor

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. 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.

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, join 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 be old news 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. Building such good will can pay off down the road.
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ Don't send form letters. Editors will reject letters once they recognize a form letter pattern.

When Sending

- ◆ In the "Contact" or "About Us" section of a news outlet's website, find the newspaper staffer who is responsible for letters to the editor. Watch the letters page of the newspaper for personnel changes.
- ◆ You can send a letter to several newspapers at once, but be aware that some major newspapers do not accept letters that have been published elsewhere. One strategy is to submit your letter to a newspaper with such a policy, wait a few days, and then send it out far and wide.

Getting the Word Out Fact Sheet #4: Writing a Letter-to-the-Editor

◆ E-mail the letter and 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. Note: many newspapers now have on-line forms through which you can submit letters and commentaries.

◆ 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 remains buried, it is

worth calling the editor to point this out in a friendly, but firm, way. Back up your argument with specific examples of the other side’s viewpoint getting plenty of ink.

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

More Information

For general inquiries about working with the media, contact Brian DeVore, LSP media outreach coordinator, at bdevore@landstewardshipproject.org or 612-816-9342.

A Sample Letter-to-the-Editor:

Why Writing

Dear Editor:

Winona County is an agricultural community. This is an asset from St. Charles to Weaver to Nodine. For those of us who live in Winona, we support local farmers, and they support us. From sequestering carbon that mitigates climate change, having a reliable source of healthy food, and treating animals and the environment with dignity, we care for each other and our community.

Facts & Background on Issue

For nearly a decade, Minnesota dairy farmers have been in a crisis that continued with the pandemic. Resilient rural communities and a just food and farming system rely on small to mid-sized livestock producers. Winona County Ordinance 8.4.2 states, “No permit shall be issued for a feedlot having in excess of 1,500 animal units per feedlot site.” When Daley Farm in Lewiston seeks a variance (exception) to allow over 5,900 animal units, they are superseding the public’s interest for their own.

Community Concerns

Winona County does not want to lose more farms. Minnesota averages the loss of 300 dairies a year to large, mega-dairy operations, putting our water, our air, and our food system in the hands of corporations. When we prioritize local producers, we value our neighbors and the future of Winona County. Getting bigger is not the solution. Investing in the health of our community is the legacy that we must maintain for family farms and the next generation.

A Call for Action

The Board of Adjustment denied Daley Farms once, and it will do it again because of our county’s strong institutions and civic participation. Government officials represent the voices of community members, not a factory farm beholden to the market that suppresses dissent.

— Sam Streukens, Winona

Other Letter Samples

For examples of other letters-to-the-editor, see landstewardshipproject.org/speaking-for-the-land-farms-communities.