



Heal the Bay

POWER OF THE PEN: How to Write an Effective Letter to the Editor

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Know your audience

Think about the types of readers a given publication attracts and what their hot button issues are. What is their level of sophistication and interest in your topic? There's a big difference between The Sunday New York Times and the Ventura County Star website. Tailor your tone and comments accordingly. For community media, localize as much as you can to show that you have roots and a vested interest in the well being of neighborhoods. For national media, don't try to solve worldwide issues single-handedly. Point out that an issue being tackled in your hometown has broader policy implications that can inform other municipalities.

Keep it tight

Editors drown in a sea of copy every day. You significantly raise your publication chances if you write clearly and succinctly. (An effective letter to an editor shouldn't be more than 150 words long.) Write in an active voice, avoiding run-ons by using short, declarative sentences. Write and rewrite to cut clutter and repetition. Have a friend proofread your letter to make sure spelling, punctuation, grammar and syntax are correct.

Speak from the heart

While it's essential to buttress your assertions with accurate statistics, what will really hook readers is emotion and storytelling. Back up theory with real-world examples that average reader can relate to – economic concerns, quality of life issues. Make sure that your rhetoric is grounded in everyday life and shared experiences. Anyone can Google facts about plastic debris in the marine environment. But only you can provide real-world anecdotes that will bring the issue to life, e.g. sharing what you discovered taking an early morning walk in the Outer Banks seashore with your daughter. People like to read about other people – not policies and procedures.

Write with a smile

Readers will better respond to your arguments if you inject a sense of humor or self-deprecation into your comments. Speak with authority, but get off any high horses. No one likes being lectured by a know-it-all or sourpuss. It's okay to strongly articulate your beliefs, but do it in a humble manner that recognizes others may have differing points of view.

Stay positive

Avoid doom and gloom. In a world filled with so much dysfunction and strife, people like to read about people fixing problems. When you point out shortcomings in a given policy, make sure you offer some ray of light. Suggest solutions that readers can rally around.

Ask for something

Hopefully you've engaged readers, persuaded them and primed them to act on your behalf. It's critical that you set the hook. End your letter with a very specific request to the reader – bring a reusable bag to the corner grocery store, come to our beach cleanup next Saturday, email your city councilman, etc.