

Tips on Effective Letters to the Editor and Getting Your Message Out via Talk Radio



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Other tips

Keep an organized archive of your letters on your computer, sorted by topic. Good letters can be used repeatedly with small adaptations (though major papers and magazines want only original creations).

These also may be handy for adapting to post as online comments to articles or blog posts. Treat online posts as you would a brief letter to the editor for greatest impact (proper language, spell-check, etc.), but be sure to add relevant links. (If your link is a long one, shorten it with tools offered by sites such as tinyurl.com)

Develop a writing buddy. Editing another person's work helps you hone your skills while helping them. Committing with a buddy to write at least X number of letters per week also can be great motivation. The way to become a great persuasive writer is to do it regularly.

The letters sections of magazines and newspapers are prime forums for getting your message to a wide audience. Letters to the editor in local and regional papers are read by local activists, government officials, legislators and many community members.

Your letter can support and expand on something already in the news, make a point that was omitted, or disagree with/correct misinformation from a news story, editorial or another letter.

The most effective persuasive writing appeals to both emotion and logic -- incorporate an element of each if possible in the space allowed.

To maximize your chances of getting published:

Do:

- * Respond directly either to breaking news or an article or commentary published in the previous two days (for dailies) or the previous issue of a weekly paper / magazine. Follow the format used in the target publication. The typical format is: *Re "Talking With the Taxman," (national news, Jan. 13). Your report neglected one key fact...*

- * Focus on one important point (don't try to address separate issues in one letter). Be sure to follow the guidelines and word count limit of the target publication (100 to 250 words is typical for local and regional papers, but larger outlets may have a lower limit).

- * Maximize your chance of being published by removing every non-essential word. For example, don't say, "I think..." It's obvious. This also minimizes the chance of editors changing the letter. (If this were a letter to the editor, our advice would be "omit needless words," or "be concise.")

- * Use verified facts. Take the time to check original sources rather than repeating "fact" cited in another media outlet.

- * Create immediacy by indicating how readers will be affected by the issue you address when possible; try to balance criticism with a positive -- ask readers for action when practical. This includes your elected representatives -- by including their names in the letter and asking for action, you can get their attention.

- * Point people to a source for more information or to engage in action whenever practical.

- * When writing to your local newspaper (not recommended for larger city or national publications), follow up with a polite phone inquiry about its status if it doesn't appear within 4-7 days to ensure it was received and considered.

- * E-mail your letter in the body of the email (*never* send unsolicited attachments) and put "Letter re: Your Topic" in the subject line. If you wish to copy others or submit to more than one publication, do so in a separate email. Include your address and daytime phone number for verification.

- * If the publication publishes an online version, hyperlink the relevant websites or emails.

Things to Avoid:

- * Don't overstate/exaggerate your point. Rather than, "corporations will dictate who gets elected" try something like "corporations will enjoy tremendous influence over who gets elected and who chooses to run for office."

- * Don't insult your opponents.

- * Avoid jargon or acronyms (spell out any name the first time you use it, followed by the acronym in parentheses).

- * Never use all capital letters or bold text to emphasize a word. It will rarely be printed that way and may prevent your from being considered. You may italicize one or two words, but most papers will print it in plain text regardless -- the words must speak for themselves. Use quotation marks to indicate the title of a book, article, etc.

On Magazines

Acceptable lengths for letters in magazines vary widely, so look for guidelines and observe the range and style used in each publication. Letters to major news weeklies tend to be extremely short (100 - 200 words).

Consider the typical reader of the publication, and keep her in mind when writing. Many magazines tend to be read by like-minded people, rather than the broader cross-sections of society who read most newspapers.

Notes

- * Send us a draft if it's relevant to our work. We're happy to offer suggestions.
- * Pay attention to letters and comments by others. Note effective and ineffective approaches (*especially letters that effectively argue a position you oppose*), style, length, etc. This will help you improve rapidly.
- * Don't consider your effort a failure if your letter isn't used in larger publications (where even the best letters face long odds). Each letter is read and plays some role in molding the thinking and content selection of the editors.

Please note *ReclaimDemocracy.org* as a resource where applicable. This helps generate interest in our work and lets people know others in their area feel the way they do. One caveat: *do not reference us if you are advocating for or against a politician or political party* or otherwise identify yourself as a partisan in your letter. We are thoroughly non-partisan and must be sure that never is doubted. If you have any questions, please contact us.

We love to get copies of letters written by our supporters and we're happy to offer editing help. Send drafts via our contact form or to info@ReclaimDemocracy.org.

Writing for ReclaimDemocracy.org

If you wish to propose writing an article for us please email us your query and at least two published samples (links to publication preferred). These may include letters to the editor.

Get Your Message out via Talk Radio Programs

Talk radio is among the best potential venues to shift public opinion and where anyone can learn to be persuasive. A bit of preparation will help you convey your message effectively.

Key Points

- * Be concise and direct. Prepare to make your best case quickly (most callers on most shows get less than one minute), but speak in real sentences, not just sound bites. Skip "how are you doing?" and pleasantly go straight to the topic.
- * Focus on one main message (and make the messages and framing consistent across the members of your group or coalition).
- * Cater to the audience. *Speak their language* and from their perspective unless you deliberately want to provoke them.

* Practice your initial pitch aloud. Repeat until you can do it smoothly and comfortably. Keep a few bullet points (not a script) in front of you if it helps (no one will see you look!).

* Stories/emotion + facts/reason = persuasion. Try to quickly integrate an element of each, especially if your audience is not already on your side. In that situation (especially), a compelling story is more powerful than facts.

* Know your sources. If you are going to assert a fact, be prepared to cite a source that is reliable and credible *to that show's audience*.

* Be prepared for the screener. If host is sympathetic or open, just make your quick pitch. If you don't normally hear views dissenting from the host's, be aware that you may need to bluff to get on the air. In this case, starting with a point of agreement with the host can be critical.

* Familiarize yourself with the program before calling in. If you expect the host to be antagonistic, it's especially important to know a point of agreement you can use as a "launching pad."

* Use a landline where possible. Have a headset handy for the wait, but take it off once the screener cues you. Get into the queue early!

* Direct people to your preferred source for more information and action. Articulate clearly, and repeat it if possible.

* Close with a clear call to action (if applicable) or website, reference, etc.

Also...

* Try humor and modesty when trying to reach those who are not already in agreement.

* A calm, confident voice and positive tone attracts people to your ideas and adds credibility. Practicing your rap makes this easier.

* Remember your real target: the listeners. Don't get caught in trying to "win" an argument. Focus on the message you want listeners to take away or the action you want them to take.

* Really listen to the host after you speak, rather than just preparing a counterpoint. You may hear opportunities to connect.

* Befriend the host. Even hosts with starkly differing views may appreciate a respectful and well-prepared antagonist. Pay them a genuine compliment and let them know you listen.

* Take notes after you're done to improve your performance next time.

* Have fun!



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From the Host's View

ThomHartmann, syndicated talk show host (and best-selling author of *Unequal Protection* and many other books) says:

"Listen to the show from the start, if possible. At the least, listen from the start of the hour so you know the theme and what's been said recently."

"Avoid long pauses." Hosts hate dead air.

"Turn off your radio when it's your turn!"

Visit ThomHartmann.com

RESOURCES

Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* is a timeless collection of great suggestions to help you write concisely and powerfully.

See the "primers" section of our website for other useful tools and issue overviews.

ReclaimDemocracy.org is a non-profit (501c3) educational organization working to inspire citizens to revoke illegitimate corporate power and revive grassroots democracy.

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