

How to Write a Letter to the Editor

Daniel L. Schmutter

Having had over two dozen letters, columns and op-eds printed in various newspapers and magazines, I have had the opportunity to learn the few essential rules that maximize the likelihood that a letter to the editor will run. Follow these simple rules and you greatly increase your chances of publication.

1. Find out the word limit.

The single most important thing in writing a letter to the editor is to make sure it is not too long. Excessive length is the surest way to kill your letter. Accordingly, I always call the publication to find out its word limit. Sometimes the publication will have an explicit limit. Sometimes it will not.

Remember that the word limit is a maximum, not a minimum. For certain papers you should come in way under the limit. For example, The New York Times has a stated limit of 150 words. However, I recommend that you never submit more than about an 80 word letter to the New York Times if you want to maximize your chances of publication. The New York Times receives an enormous number of letters and must decide how to maximize the use of the space on its editorial page. In choosing between a shorter letter and a longer letter, the shorter one is more desirable.

2. Get it in quickly.

In the world of the internet, time limits are significantly shortened. Many publications will want to run responsive letters the very next day after the initial piece runs. Therefore, to maximize your chances of publication, try to send it in by e-mail, and try to do it the same day you read the piece to which you are responding.

3. Use a credential in you have a relevant one.

Newspapers love a credential. If you have a credential relevant to your letter, it can increase the likelihood your letter will run. Include it in your signature line. E.g.:

Bob Smith
Professor of Criminology
State University

4. Choose one and only one point to make.

Because of length limitations, you have space to make one and only one narrow point. The piece to which you are responding may have made a whole series of errors and misstatements. However, you have room for only one point. Unlike the writer of a column, you do not have the luxury of 800 words. You must resist the temptation to make that second point. If you attempt to make more than one point, your letter will suffer, will be less likely to be published and if published will be less effective.

It is better to make one clear well articulated point that runs in the paper than write a comprehensive masterpiece that only you and your friends have an opportunity to read. Therefore choose the one most important point you wish to make and focus exclusively on that.

5. Opening.

The opening sentence should simultaneously identify the piece to which you are responding and also introduce your point.

Examples:

The Times gravely confuses the issue of gun ownership in "More N.F.L. Players Turn to Guns for Sense of Security" (Dec. 26).

"The N.R.A. in Times Square" (Topics of The Times, May 24), objecting to the National Rifle Association's plan to open a theme restaurant in Times Square, declares that "the last thing these kids need is somebody trying to disguise the fact that guns represent a tremendous public health threat."

Your Sept. 5 editorial calls for sweeping new gun laws, including licensing and registration of all gun owners.

Each of these identifies the date and title of the piece (if any) and identifies the narrow aspect of the piece to which the letter will respond.

6. Body.

The body of the letter should consist of no more than a few crisp concise sentences without flowery rhetoric, which takes up precious space. Make the point simply and directly.

Example:

The article includes an insincere attempt to distinguish legal and illegal gun ownership, even implying that responsible gun owners are some sort of shadowy gang. When several players interviewed explained that N.F.L. players, as celebrities, are legitimately concerned for their safety, they are given short shrift, notwithstanding that researchers like the criminologist Gary Kleck have reported that Americans use guns more than two million times each year to protect themselves from violent crime.

7. Keep citations short.

Unlike in longer works, you need not provide full citations if you cite to a source. The example above is satisfactory attribution in a letter such as this. On rare occasions, you may find it necessary to provide a more detailed citation in order to properly make your point, but bear in mind that it will add length to the letter.

8. Closing.

Your closing should be one concise sentence that wraps the whole thing up.

Examples:

The [Virginia Tech gun] prohibition did not stop the gunman, but it did prevent anyone on that campus from stopping his murder spree.

This is like calling cars, which kill more Americans than guns, a tremendous public health threat because of drunk drivers and careless motorists.

The resulting letter should look something like this:

To the Editor:

In "Eight Years After Columbine" (editorial, April 17), you call for more gun control. With 40 states permitting law-abiding citizens to carry handguns for protection, the evidence teaches that prohibiting carrying such weapons leads to tragedy.

Virginia Tech is one of the "gun free" zones in Virginia where gun possession is prohibited -- a place criminals know that they need not fear an armed response. The prohibition did not stop the gunman, but it did prevent anyone on that campus from stopping his murder spree.

Daniel L. Schmutter
April 17, 2007

This letter is approximately 85 words and ran in The New York Times. It consists of exactly four sentences.

The letter ran on April 18, 2007 along with nine other letters. The editorial to which it responds ran the day before. All ten letters were written and submitted the same day the editorial ran. Four of the authors included a credential of some sort with their letter.

If you follow these guidelines you will greatly increase your chances of publication. Short and to the point in the best approach. It won't do anyone any good if it does not run in the paper.

Remember, write early and often. Good luck.