

Tips on Writing Effective Letters to the Editor



ReclaimDemocracy.org

222 South Black Ave.
Bozeman, MT 59715
(406) 582-1224

info@ReclaimDemocracy.org

Recommended Resources

* We *strongly* urge all writers to pick up Strunk and White's The Elements of Style from your local independently-owned book store. This brief booklet is full of great suggestions to help you write concisely and powerfully.

* See our online version of this article for links to contact information for letters to the editor at several nationally-distributed newspapers and magazines. Note: letters to major news weeklies tend to be extremely short (100 words or so).

* Don't consider your effort a failure if your letter is not used in larger publications where even the best letters face long odds. Each letter, however, is read and plays some role in molding the thinking and content selection of the editors.

Note: We love to get copies of letters written by our supporters, and we're happy to offer editing help. Send drafts to info@ReclaimDemocracy.org

© 2006 ReclaimDemocracy.org

The letters section of newspapers and magazines presents great opportunities for getting your message to a wide audience. The letters page in local and regional papers is widely 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 -- try to incorporate an element of each.

Use ReclaimDemocracy.org as a resource or vehicle for action on relevant issues. This helps generate more interest in our work and lets people know others in their area feel the way they do and are acting! One caveat: please never reference us if you are advocating for or against a politician or political party -- we are thoroughly non-partisan and want to make sure that is never doubted. If you have any question, please contact us.

To maximize your chances of getting published:

Do:

* Respond directly to an article or commentary published within the previous few days and follow the citation format used in the target publication. For example: Re: "Talking Race," (local news, March 13), your reporter neglected to...

* Keep it concise and focused on one important point (don't try to address two 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). To maximize your chance of being published, edit your letter to remove all non-essential words.

* Use verified facts. Take the time to check original sources (rather than repeating a "fact" cited in another media outlet, for example).

* Create immediacy by indicating how readers will be affected by the issue you address when possible; try to balance criticism with a positive -- ask for action from your readers 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 resource for more information or to engage (like ReclaimDemocracy.org) whenever practical.

* Be a student of persuasive writing. Pay attention to letters and comments by others. Note effective and ineffective approaches, style, length, etc.

* When writing to your local newspaper, follow up with a polite phone inquiry about its status if it doesn't appear for a week (not recommended for large regional or national publications).

Avoid:

* overstating/exaggerating your point

* pejoratives (insulting your opponents)

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

* hand-written letters. Most newspapers prefer submissions by email, in email text. Never send an attachment

* saying "I'm writing to...", "I think..." Omit needless words and use active language (see sidebar)

On Magazines

The range of acceptable lengths for letters to the editor in magazines varies widely, so be sure to look for guidelines and observe the range and style used in each publication.

Consider who the typical reader of the publication is, and keep them in mind when writing. Magazine readership tends to include more like-minded people, rather than the broader cross-sections of society that most newspapers do.

Writing for ReclaimDemocracy.org

If you wish to propose writing an article or op-ed for us or to apply for a writing internship (this can be done remotely), please include three published writing samples (links to web page, in email text, or pdf file if inquiring by e-mail) with your query note. Writing samples may include letters to the editor.