

Writing a letter to the editor

Tips for advocates from the Treatment Advocacy Center (www.psychlaws.org)

The letter to the editor is one of the most commanding tools of advocacy. With one, your passion can reach tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands readers.

THE PURPOSE OF A LETTER TO THE EDITOR IS NOT ALWAYS PUBLICATION

What appears in newspapers is the chief grist of public opinion. As politicians keenly track the attitudes of voters, the media strongly influences legislative decisions and government administrators.

The letters section is one of the most read. These letters are short policy statements and are respectfully treated as such, normally appearing on the page with or near the paper's own editorials.

And the threshold of success is not only in being published – it comes when you submit your letter. Unpublished letters to the editor can affect which others make it to newsprint. Typically, an editor will want to publish a selection of letters that fairly represents those that were received. The more letters that agree with your point, the more likely your point – even if it isn't your actual letter – will make it to newsprint.

Newspapers, not surprisingly, like to sell newspapers. Editors will often use the number of letters received on an item to gauge the public's interest in it. And the more interest perceived, the more similar coverage in the future.

Plus, letter writers can impact even the position of the paper itself. The Washington Post recently, strongly, and insistently supported the reform of Maryland's treatment law. How did the paper support this position? "Letters published on this page in recent weeks have testified to the cruelty the current law can inflict." The next seven sentences of the editorial were descriptions of and quotes from letters received by the Post.

Whenever you see an item that touches on the treatment of those most severely ill because of mental illness – please write to the paper. Letters to the editor are short and to the point by nature, but with one you can make your voice heard to the paper, to the public, to those who run the mental health system, and to those who can change it.

HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE LETTER

Each paper has specific rules, so remember to check before you submit. In general, follow these basic guidelines.

Make it relevant. Newspapers usually only publish letters that respond to recent articles, op-eds, or editorials. Some papers do and others do not print responses to other published letters. Search the paper daily for incidents that could have been prevented by rational treatment laws. Articles about

the general mental health system can also be used as a lead-in. If you wish to introduce a new topic to the paper, a letter is not appropriate. Instead, submit an op-ed (opinion editorial) piece to the editorial review board. Op-eds are normally around 750 words, but are notoriously harder to place.

Make it timely. The sooner the better: the first letters received on a topic are read first and are more likely to be selected. Cite the article or opinion piece to which you are responding, including the date.

Address the editors. Write as if you're talking to the editor of the newspaper – not to readers, not to elected officials, not to the world at large.

Stay on point. One topic per letter is best. And do not feel that you have to cover all aspects of that in a few short sentences. Rather, concentrate on a few powerful points that show the need for reform. Bring in personal experiences when appropriate and if you are comfortable doing so.

Keep it short. There is a rough limit of 250 words for letters. Longer letters are less likely to be published and, if selected, will almost definitely be edited. Don't let the letters editor remove or dilute your most important points.

Avoid personal attacks. Jumping on the ideas expressed by others can make for a lively letter; attacking the individuals themselves is uncivil behavior.

HOW TO SUBMIT A LETTER

Proofread and spell check. Typos can undermine your credibility. It is always a good idea to have a friend read it over to double-check that everything looks good.

Use your real name. Newspapers do not accept anonymous letters. If your letter concerns your personal experiences, however, some papers will print it under a pseudonym.

Include contact information. Provide a phone number for confirmation and a regular mailing address, even if you are submitting by email. Newspapers need this information for internal use to confirm that you are the person who submitted the letter. They will usually print the name of your town, but not your street address or phone number.

Submit it multiple ways. Submit your letter by fax, e-mail, or regular mail – you can find submission instructions in the paper or on its web site. Sending it two, or even all, of those ways maximizes the chance of getting your letter published. But do not submit the same letter over and over – that will just irritate the editors.

Use the paper's online submission form. If you have internet access and your paper offers an online submission form, this is the best way to send it in.

Be email savvy. If you submit by email, paste your letter into the text of the email. Do not send attachments. Many papers will not even open an email with an attachment.