

Letters to the Editor: Writing Tips From The Experts

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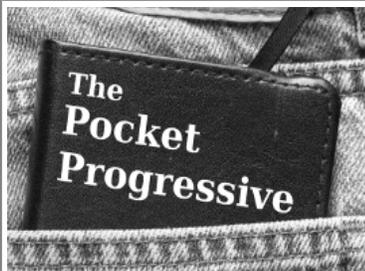
Ever wonder why there are often few or no letters to the editor in small city newspapers? It's because no one sent any in! Getting a letter published in a *major* daily is difficult (though not impossible) but getting in a local paper often takes no more effort than sending it in!

Either case calls for clear and effective writing. Some people are unusually skilled at writing letters, but anyone can do it. First we'll explore ways you can tighten up your writing skills and then we'll look at what editorial boards look for in a letter to the editor.

Simple Writing Tricks

If you frame properly you will have an effective message, however you also need to get your point across fast and effectively. If it's boring or difficult to follow, people won't read it!

- State your message up front. If you take too long to get to it, people lose interest.
- Include progressive values, stated or implied.
- Think about what you want to say and then say it out loud to someone. What you say will be shorter and more conversational than what you'd write -use that. Pay attention to any questions your listener asks.
- The words "you" and "me" should not scare you -use them! A (short) story of a real person draws people in. Remember, you are speaking to a *person* about things that affect *people*.
- Use active verbs. Instead of "to run" use "run" or "running".
- Experiment with your sentence and paragraph order -simply moving a sentence to the beginning or end of a paragraph, or to another paragraph entirely, can work unexpected wonders. An entire letter can suddenly crystallize after moving a single paragraph.
- Writing needs to ferment -leave it overnight and you'll instinctively *feel* grammatical rough spots and excess wordage the next morning.
- Prune mercilessly. As the advertising folks say: "Advertising is the art of giving things up".
- Proofread. Give it to someone else to read, make corrections and *proofread again*.
- Online forms don't often allow italics or bold. Ask the paper how to E-mail your letter.



Letters to the Editor: Writing Tips From The Experts

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How to write a letter to the Editor

These wonderful suggestions are from **Jeremy Powers**, a former writer for the Minneapolis Star Tribune, longtime DFL activist and all around nice guy. They're a window into how an editor decides to run a letter.

- Letters to the editor go on the opinion page. Make them well- reasoned opinions.
- Stand strong; be direct. Don't use weasel words, apologize for your views or discount them.
- Editors love a reaction to a story they've recently run. To them this is dialogue.
- One topic per letter. Be specific; don't ramble.
- Don't name call. You can criticize and even insult, but do so with declarative sentences not snarky words.
- Appeal to a large audience of readers and assume everyone is on your side. Take the moral high road.
- Have someone review your letter. But don't let that person talk you out of making your point or sending it. And don't write a letter by committee. Editors want to know these are your words. Another set of eyes, though, can keep you focused.
- Only send it to one media outlet and let them know they are getting exclusive use of the letter. The editors of the paper don't want to wake up the next day and find the exact same letter to the editor in their competitor.
- Right size the letter to the media outlet. Don't ask the Star Tribune to publish a letter about library branch hours in one small suburb. That should go in the Focus or Sun Sailors. But your local weekly probably won't run a letter about a statewide bonding bill with nothing local in it.
- The ideal letter to the editor puts in words something the reporter was thinking when he/she wrote a story but knew they couldn't put it in the story without crossing the line of news and opinion.

NOTE: The Pocket Progressive is in development and I'd love to hear constructive criticism and new ideas. Contact me at unclegeo@myaurora.org.