

## HOW TO WRITE EFFECTIVE LETTERS-TO-THE-EDITOR...

### AND GET THEM PUBLISHED!

a training by Picture the Homeless

Workshop Objectives: This workshop will discuss:

- The role letters to the editor plays in influencing media coverage and public opinion;
- The importance of understanding and writing to a media outlet's primary audience;
- The need to study a media outlet's opinion page to figure out how to write to get published -- the editor decides what to print;
- Mainstream vs. specialty and independent media outlets (the differences as outlets and how we would use each effectively);
- How to write a concise, effective letter to the editor.

#### I. The Role Letters to the Editor play

- According to 2006 Pew Research poll, most Americans get their political news from mainstream television, newspaper and radio (in that order) (*source: DFA Night School, "Mainstream Media -- Breaking In"*);
- According to a 2006 Pew Research poll, the most widely read sections of the newspaper are the front page, the sports section, the editorial/letters page, the crime reports, and business news (in that order) (*source: DFA Night School, "Mainstream Media -- Breaking In"*);
- Mainstream media editorial/letters sections have established, often engaging, audiences, so letters to the editor is a good place to introduce or influence a public discussion;
- Editorial staff and journalists often turn to letters to the editor for new material or for new angles on existing material (though, increasingly, parts of the blogosphere are competing with letters to the editor);
- Letters to the editor are an effective way to correct factual errors or misunderstanding of an issue published in the news; or to reinforce good content in the media.

#### II. Understand a Media Outlet's Primary Audience

- Each media outlet targets its audience by demographics, socio-economic status, education level, social and ideological preferences, and common interests);
- Who an audience consists of influences what arguments will influence the audience;
- When you compose a letter to the editor, you should, as best as you can, make an argument or case that will influence the audience.

#### III. Write to Get Published

- Letters to the editor are useless if they do not appear in print;
- Print space is limited, so most letters do not get published;
- Writers do not choose what gets published, editors choose;
- It is important to study a media outlet's opinion section to determine what type of letters most frequently get published in that outlet;
- Write the letter in a way most consistent in style and content most often published by a media outlet.

#### IV. Understand Mainstream vs. Specialty and Independent Media Outlets

- Mainstream media outlets exist to make a profit;
- Mainstream media outlets seek to publish content that will promote a larger audience;
- Mainstream media outlets avoid publishing content that will interfere with advertising loyalty;
- Mainstream media enjoy large, established audiences from many walks of life;
- Letters to the editor submitted to mainstream media outlets should typically aim at influencing public discourse or debate;
- Specialty and independent media exist to promote a narrow range of interests, ideas or causes;
- Specialty and independent media seek to publish content that will inform and motivate audiences who share the publishers' interests, ideas or causes;
- Specialty and independent media outlets avoid publishing content inconsistent with the publishers' interest, ideas or causes;
- Letters to the editor submitted to specialty and independent media typically aim at generating sympathy and support among likely allies.

#### V. How to Write an Effective, Concise Letter to the Editor

##### A. Structure/format of a Letter to the Editor

- a. Name, address and daytime phone number – editors may call
- b. Identify article or editorial you're responding to, if relevant
- c. Focus on **ONLY ONE** issue
- d. Flow from most to least important points
- e. Make it local
- f. Be factual and highlight aspects of the issue that haven't been previously addressed
- g. **NO MORE** than 250 words – shorter is better
- h. Be punchy, ironic, even wicked, but never insult or make personal attacks

##### B. Lead Paragraph

- a. Cut to the chase. Make your most important point right away
- b. Your first sentence should grab the readers attention

##### C. Body

- a. 1 or 2 short paragraphs
- b. Make your case using your 1 or 2 strongest points

##### D. Only make claims you are able to demonstrate with facts (though you don't have to outline the facts in the letter)

##### E. Closing

- a. Wrap up your arguments with a final punch
- b. Call for action if necessary

##### F. Writing Tips

- a. Keep it simple
  - i. Short sentences, simple construction
  - ii. 1 page or less
- b. No S.A.T. words
- c. Avoid wasteful words and unnecessary phrases
- d. Use colorful adjectives, but too many adjectives, too close together become weak
- e. Write active sentences

##### G. Get an Editor

- a. Standard practice for almost everyone who writes for a living
- b. Spell and grammar checkers don't catch everything
- c. Very hard to self-edit. Writers can become too attached to words

EFFECTIVE LETTER-TO-THE-EDITOR WRITING IN ACTION...  
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Chance of t-storms, 91/74 Monday, July 19, 2010

# DAILY NEWS

24 Monday, July 19, 2010

## VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

### Too much information

Bronx: The debate over the NYPD's stop-and-frisk data at City Hall, in Albany and in the Daily News was healthy and necessary. The status quo fails to protect and serve all city residents equally. As homeless New Yorkers know especially well, "homeless-looking" blacks and Latinos can't walk down the street without fear of having their Fourth Amendment rights violated. Our Constitution bars law enforcement from arbitrary and discriminatory practices.

*Jean Rice, Picture the Homeless*

**SAMPLE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**  
**SOURCE: NEW YORK PUBLIC INTEREST RESEARCH GROUP**

**Support the Bottle Bill**

*Newsday*

To the Editor:

The editorial "No way to fund EPF" [Feb. 4] says that the expanded bottle bill would be ineffective for raising revenue for New York State. But the advantages of the bill are obvious.

It will encourage recycling, and put the five-cent deposit to work for the public, rather than back to privately owned beverage corporations.

The State Legislature has approved a budget-reduction measure that cuts funding in critical areas such as health care, education and the environment. It is unacceptable to allow beverage companies to keep pocketing unclaimed deposits while the rest of us are paying dearly to close the budget gap.

Aaron Levine  
Cedarhurst, February 8, 2009

**Pay-Cap Populism**

*The Nation*

To the Editor:

Caps on salary are a bad idea. What needs to be done is to raise the tax rates to 70 percent above a million. But you say: "Higher taxes! We can't have that!" That was the rate when Reagan took over.

When you employ salary caps you are taxing work. What about the income that the truly wealthy get--capital gains, tax free bonds and dividends? Should we put a cap on these incomes as well?

We need higher tax rates on all income. Capping salaries sounds good but doesn't touch the already wealthy and their "unearned income." Salary caps are a convenient red herring employed by the politicians to avoid the real issue, that we need higher tax rates on the top end.

The only way to shrink the wealth gap is to tax wealth more heavily, and that means higher taxes on all income, earned and unearned, for everyone in the top 1 percent.

Michael McKinlay

**Passengers have rights**

*Houston Chronicle*

To the Editor:

In his article "Populist outrage over AIG poses danger for Obama," Page B9, Friday, Clarence Page compares those who question President Obama's recent economic policies to children in the back seat yelping "Are we there yet?" I don't know of anyone who thinks that the economic situation will be resolved quickly or is impatient that we are still experiencing the effects of greed, deception and political ineptitude by both Republicans and Democrats. On the contrary, the frustration arises from the concern that we are acting hastily and in ways that may cause unintended harm in the future. The president's detractors might be more aptly compared to passengers on a public bus who believe that the driver is taking an unsafe route to the wrong destination. Not only is it their right to speak up, but their duty to do so. It is interesting to note that Page's article seems to be more concerned with the potential damage to Obama's political image than with the state of our nation and the future welfare of its citizens.

Michael Shofner  
Houston, March 31, 2009

**Wasteful' Volcano Watch?**

*New York Times*

To the Editor:

Re "Alaska: Erupting Volcano Spews Ash" (National Briefing, March 24), about the eruption of Mount Redoubt and the damage that ash from volcanoes can cause:

On Feb. 24, in the televised Republican response to President Obama's address to Congress asking that the stimulus package be passed, Gov. Bobby Jindal of Louisiana ridiculed the proposal. He said that the "legislation is larded with wasteful spending," including "\$140 million for something called volcano monitoring."

Indeed.  
Daniel L. Greenberg.

New York, March 24, 2009