

10 STEPS TO EFFECTIVE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

By Lee Harrison

- 1) **Write on a topic you're passionate about:** The words flow more easily!
 - a) Establish your connection to the topic and/or the community the paper serves. If you know something about the topic and can speak from experience, all the better, i.e., a local teacher writing about education policy, for instance.
 - b) Get the facts right, but use American VALUES to frame the issue: 4 freedoms, reducing income inequality, environmental justice, rebuilding infrastructure, universal health care, etc.
- 2) **Make it interesting by:**
 - a) Making it timely. Respond to a specific news story, editorial, or Op-Ed piece. Agree with it, or disagree with it. This continues the conversation and helps to get it printed.
 - b) Offering your opinion – backed by facts – and American VALUES.
- 3) **Be clear, and concise.** The most effective letters make one point and stick to it. Three paragraphs should do it. (The Eagle will allow 400 words, but IMHO this is way too long to be effective.) If you're new at this, try doing an outline – topic sentences and all!
- 4) **Don't engage in personal attacks.** Most hostile letters won't be published.

Structure: The Three Elements of Your Letter

- 5) **Opening** – Begin by refuting/supporting the claim made in the original story or letter. Be cute. Be outraged. Try to make it compelling. But always, be logical, factual, and stress VALUES.
- 6) **Body** – The next few paragraphs should back up your position/values with facts and/or personal experience. You always learn the gaps in your knowledge when you try to write about a subject, so if necessary do some research.
- 7) **Conclusion** – You can simply sum up your argument, but it's more effective to end with a Call to Action. Something like: a) “Call your Congressman ...”; or b) urge your Congressman or Senator “to vote for/against” a particular piece of legislation.

Details

- 8) Go to your paper's website find the email address for letters to the editor. It's usually in the “contact” or “opinion” section and will look something like: letters@berkshireagle.com; letters@nytimes.com; letter@globe.com.
- 9) Include your name, address, and daytime phone number so the editor can verify you're the author. Note: Letters by locals are more likely to get printed than letters from people outside the area.
- 10) Check your spelling and grammar ... and above all – have fun with it!