

● SKILLS

WRITING AN EFFECTIVE LETTER TO THE EDITOR

People pay attention to letters to the editor, one of the best read sections in any newspaper. Well-written letters can inform community members. In addition, policy makers keep tabs on the local news, and use letters to the editor to gauge their constituents' concerns. To bring attention to a pesticide issue, don't overlook the letters page of local newspapers.

Tips for Effective Letters

Your goal is to write a letter that people will read. Here are some tips.

1. *Learn what the rules are and follow them precisely.*¹ Check the editorial page or ask the editorial office for specifications. Usually letters are limited to less than 300 words. Sign the letter and provide an address and daytime phone number. Many newspapers appreciate e-mail.

2. *Write appropriate letters for your audience.* Figure out for whom you're writing the letter. Is it the city council? Voters? The general public? Explain your points in a tone directed to the audience.

3. *Stick to one point.* A letter with one clear point will be remembered.² When you cover too much ground, you confuse the reader. If several points need to be raised, ask friends to write separate letters.

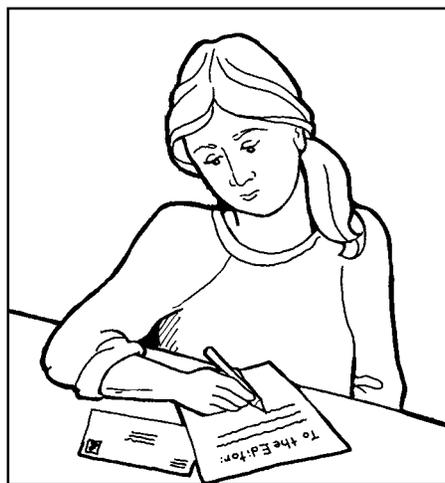
4. *Make your message personal.* Your credentials to express an opinion are your own experiences. Explain how the issue affects you. For example, explain why your children need a nontoxic school.

5. *Write simply and concisely.* Your letter will be read by many people who don't have technical knowledge. The best letters use short, active sentences of 10 to 15 words, and paragraphs that have few sentences. Avoid jargon. Instead of saying that you're concerned about the ter-

atogenicity of an herbicide, for example, write about it causing birth defects.

6. *Gain credibility by using facts.* It helps that your concerns are based in fact. Mention that others with authority (like scientists or a government agency) are the source of your information.

7. *Be timely.* Link your letter to something happening in the community. For



Kate Pryka

example, if it's been raining, you might mention pesticides in the river due to runoff caused by heavy rains. Or, refer to a recent newspaper article that missed a key point, and then make that point.

8. *Be interesting.* Start by grabbing the reader's attention. Close with a sentence that leaves them thinking.² Have friends read over your letter to see if it has the qualities you want to convey.

What to Avoid

1. *Gushing letters or overstatements undermine your cause.* Your job is to bring people over to your point of view. If your letter is too strident or makes unbelievable claims, you will not win people over.³

2. *The point is to have an opinion.* A letter to the editor is not a public service

announcement or a news story. Remember that a letter's purpose is to convey your opinions and concerns.

3. *Form letters anger editors,* so multiple people shouldn't send in the same letter. If several people are writing, ask them to make different points.

4. *Avoid restating the information you are trying to counter.* A letter to the editor can be used to correct misinformation, but don't give added credibility to damaging claims by stating them again.²

5. *Hostility and alienation don't attract others.* State your case positively.⁴

6. *Don't write too often, as people may skip over your letter.* Some newspapers limit you to one letter a month. Get friends to write letters with key points so that you don't wear out your readers.²

Exceptions to the Rule

Newspapers from large cities and those with national circulation are highly selective about which letters to the editor are printed. For example, *The New York Times* prints only six percent of the letters it receives, and the letters are all from people who have expertise in the topic.⁵ On occasion, NCAP staff have worked with an expert to submit a letter to a large national newspaper. It is worth the effort, but in general letters to the editor make sense for local audiences.

Conclusion

Because of the numbers of people who read the letters page in the newspaper, letters to the editor can change how pesticides are perceived and used. Letters are a tool that anyone can use. Please let NCAP know about your experiences, and send us copies of letters that are printed. Happy writing. — *Norma Grier*

References

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Norma Grier is NCAP's executive director.