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# Libertarian Letters to the Editor

*Spreading the Light of Liberty One Newspaper at a Time*

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One of the most effective ways we have of promoting libertarian ideas is through the local newspapers – particularly the letters to the editor. This is one of the most-read sections of the newspaper, it doesn't require much writing – and it is free! Libertarians like the idea of anything that is free.

Writing letters-to-the-editor, and getting them printed, can be the first step toward a getting a regular libertarian presence in the newspaper. After you've completed a few, and when the spirit moves you, consider writing a longer piece, an op ed.

## How to begin

- Find out what the local newspapers guidelines are (word count, format etc) and stick to them.
- Do not use boilerplate or form letters.
- Keep within the word limit, better, 5-10 words less than the newspaper's limit. Count your words manually if you must.
- Local, weekly newspapers are often looking for "fresh" views and articles. These letters may have to be done the old fashioned way – typed, printed out and faxed or mailed.
- Get to know your local newspaper staff – particularly the person in charge of LTEs and editorials.

## Technical points

- Many newspapers with a web site have a form for submitted letters. Use it. Or e-mail your letter, it is best to send it as the body of the letter, not as an attachment.
- If don't send your letter electronic, type it (do not send handwritten letters). Double or triple space the letter and use only one side of the paper. Try to keep it to one page if you are going to fax it (which means you might have to single space.)
- Always include your name, address, day-time phone number and signature. The papers will not publish this information, but they may use it to verify that you wrote the letter.
- If you have to mail or fax, if possible consider hand delivering the letter. This also gives you a chance to meet the editor.

## How to write

- One of the most important things we must keep in mind when writing or promoting libertarian ideas is to **be positive**. Don't get personal. Don't attack. That's what the Republicans and Democrats do, because they have no good ideas.
- Focus on the ways America could be so much better with a very small government – don't dwell on all the wrongs that exist today.
- Sell liberty by appealing to people's self-interest, rather than preaching to them and expecting them to suddenly adopt libertarian ideas of right and wrong.
- Identify with the social goals that may be part of the issue you're addressing -- a cleaner environment, more help for the poor, a less divisive society -- and try to show how those goals can never be achieved by government, but will be well served in a free society.
- No matter what the issue, keep returning to the central point: how much better off the individual will be in a free society.

## What to write about?

Unlike single-issue or special-interest groups, libertarians can select from an enormous range of subjects. Replying to editorials, agree or disagree, is very effective. Every day the news offers us all too many topics on which to comment.

- The best use of the letter to the editor is to discuss a **local** issue.
- Pick an issue of particular importance to **you** – don't be afraid to let some passion show through.
- If you are responding to an article, **be timely**; try to respond within two or three days of the article's publication...

## Stylistic considerations

- State the argument you're rebutting or responding to, as briefly as possible, in the letter's introduction. Don't do a lengthy rehash; it's a waste of valuable space and boring to boot.
- Stick to a single subject. Deal with **one** issue per letter.
- Don't be shrill or abusive. Editors tend to discard letters containing personal attacks. Even though you're dying to call Jesse Jackson a preachy parasite, stifle the urge.
- Your letter should be logically organized. First a brief recitation of the argument you are opposing, followed by a statement of your own position. Then present your evidence. Close with a short restatement of your position or a pithy comment (“Jimmy Breslin says possession of firearms should be limited to law enforcement officers. I say when only the police have guns, the police state is just around the corner.”).
- Use facts, figures and expert testimony whenever possible. This raises your letters above the “sez you, sez me” category. For instance: “Anthony Lewis calls for taxing the rich as a way to balance the budget. Is he aware of the fact that if we confiscated the entire income of the top wage earners in this country (those with income above \$200,000), this would run the federal government for exactly 8 days?”
- Readers respect the opinions of people with special knowledge or expertise. Use expert testimony to bolster your case (“George Will claims we need to draft to defend America. But General Edward C. Meyer, Army Chief of Staff, recently stated . . .”).
- **Proofread** your letter carefully for errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar. Newspapers will usually edit to correct these mistakes, but your piece is more likely to be published if it is “clean” to begin with. Read your letter to a friend, for objective input.
- Consider not sending the letter the same day it is written. Write, proofread and edit the piece. Then put it aside until the next day. Rereading your letter in a fresh light often helps you to spot errors in reasoning, stilted language and the like. On the other hand, don't let the letter sit too long and lose its timeliness.
- Try to view the letter from the **reader's perspective**. Will the arguments make sense to someone without a special background on this issue? Did you use technical terms not familiar to the average reader?
- Most important – **write!** Do not try to do a perfect letter. Just give it a good effort and send it off. Letter writing is the one thing that any one of us can do on our own without the need to work through a group. No committees are necessary. Just do it!
- Don't be discouraged if your letter isn't published. The editor may have received more responses on that issue than he feels he can handle.

*Portions of this paper are taken from “How to Write Letters to the Editor” by Richard Rider on GrowTheLP.org*