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A Guide to Writing Letters to the Editor: Expressing Your Opinion to the Public Effectively

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2000

A Guide to Writing Letters to the Editor: Expressing Your Opinion to the Public Effectively

One way to express your opinion publicly is through a letter to the editor in your local newspaper. While every letter may not be published, editors pay attention to well-written letters. This is especially true when there are many letters written on the same topic. In turn, elected officials are also influenced by letters newspapers have chosen for publication.

This guide will help you prepare an effective letter to the editor that expresses your opinion on an issue. It includes two letters about a controversial issue and specific guidelines on how to prepare a successful letter yourself.

After you read the guide, prepare a letter yourself. Let a friend read it for clarity. Be sure to sign the letter and list your address – newspapers will not publish anonymous letters.

Your letter can be positive, negative or informative in tone. It can also be emotional or objective. But it should be simple and short – rarely more than 300 words. And, of course, it should reflect your true opinions.

Here is an example of a letter supporting a proposed program

Dear Editor,

The big jump in the cost of heating a house has me concerned. I just got my utility bill in the mail, and I was shocked. Even though the weather has been mild, this bill was as high as any I have seen. I'm worried that some of my friends won't be able to pay their bills when it gets really cold. If I'm not lucky, I may not be able to pay my bill. I want to praise our elected officials for having the courage to try to do something about this problem when other cities and the state government won't because they're afraid of politics. The life-line utility program is a good idea whose time has come. It's getting cold now. We can't afford to wait for every legal opinion in the state. I believe the city should act before it's too late.

Sincerely,
John Doe
Anytown

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Here is an example of a letter opposing the same program

Dear Editor,

The City Commission is considering increasing everyone's gas utility bills to create a subsidy program for the poor. I am able to pay my own way on a small, fixed income. I haven't used my furnace yet this winter, preferring to wear three woolen sweaters. I am saving so that I can pay the proposed 38 percent increase in gas bills when it REALLY get cold.

I called City Hall to protest and was told, ever so gently, that I was one of those who would be helped by the subsidy. Absolutely not! No self-respecting oldster would accept a dole extorted from other struggling citizens. The churches have prime responsibility in this area. Churches are close to the source and are in a position to locate those actually suffering in the cold.

I am outraged by the proposal to the City Commission.

A.B. Tony
Anytown

Letter Preparation Guide

This guide is designed to help you write a letter to the editor on some issue that concerns you.

- **Tell why you are writing the letter.** State the problem or issue that concerns you. Example: "The big jump in the cost of heating a house has me concerned. I just got my utility bill in the mail, and I was shocked. Even though the weather has been mild, this bill was as high as any I have seen."
- **Tell why this is important.** Tell how the problem or issue affects you or others, or tell what will happen if something isn't done. Example: "I'm worried that some of my friends won't be able to pay their bills when it gets really cold. If I'm not lucky, I may not be able to pay my bill."
- **Praise or criticize what someone has said or done about the issue.** Make a positive or critical statement about a public action related to the issue. Example: "I want to praise our elected officials for having the courage to try to do something about this problem."
- **Tell why this is good or bad.** Explain your view about why the particular action or comment is good or bad. Example: "Other cities and the state government won't face the problem because they're afraid of the politics."
- **State your opinion about what should be done.** Explain what you think would work. Example: "This life-line utility program is a good idea whose time has come."
- **Make a general recommendation.** Say what should be done, by whom and when. Example: "I believe our elected officials should do something."
- **Sign the letter.** Sign your full name and write the name of the town where you live.
- **Send the letter my snail mail or by e-mail.**

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