How to Write a Letter to the Editor that Gets Published and Read

Here are 10 practical tips for writing a letter to the editor that gets published and read:

1. Identify your target publications and programs.
Select five to 10 venues to focus your opinion letter placement efforts on. Don't forget trade publications, and community and weekly newspapers. Depending on your audience, those venues can have greater influence than an opinion letter in the NYT. And it's easier to get letters to the editor published in these smaller publications. Once you have your target list, you're ready to respond when an opportunity surfaces.

2. Research the letters policy for each venue on your target list.
Most publications and programs publicize what they want in a letter to the editor, and how and to whom to send it. Examples include:

   - Asheville (NC) Citizen Times -- conditions for rejection
     http://orig.citizen-times.com/service/faq/letters_policy.shtml

   - Chronicle of Philanthropy -- via snail or email
     http://philanthropy.com/about/letters.htm

   - The New York Times -- maximum of 150 words
     http://www.nytimes.com/top/opinion/editorialsandoped/letters/

   - The Washington Post -- letters must be exclusive to the Post

3. Reference a recent print or broadcast article.
Write your organization's letter as a direct response to recent coverage, building on the focus presented or emphasizing how your organization's perspective wasn't presented (and presenting it clearly).
4. Respond as quickly as you can.
If there's an issue or news story that's getting a lot of attention in the press, draft a letter or at least key message points so your nonprofit is prepared to finalize and submit your letter pronto.

5. Hone your opinion letter writing style, before you're on deadline to submit it.
Read letters in your target venues on a regular basis to learn how to write the most effective letter.

6. Be Concise.
Include a maximum of 200 words. The publication will shorten your letter to fit its format. The more it has to edit, the less control you have of what gets printed. Include two to three paragraphs, each with no more than three sentences.

7. State Your Point Early and Clearly.
Use the inverted pyramid scheme, leading with (and maintaining focus on) your most important point.

8. Include Your Contact Information.
Your contact information is a prerequisite for most publications to print your letter. Include your full name, title, organization name, address, phone number and email at the top of the page and sign the letter at the bottom.

Don't write too often. Once every three months is as often as you should write. Avoid being abusive or strident.

Make a follow-up phone call to the editor in question to make sure your letter has been received. It's best to keep calling until you get through, rather than leaving a voicemail message.

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