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HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR: Twelve Principles for Christians

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My first letter to the editor was published when I was about 10 years old. For reasons unknown to me now, I was eager for people to know about UFOs—despite the fact that I knew nothing about them, except what I saw on television.

Despite this inauspicious beginning, I have written dozens of letters to various editors fairly steadily since I became a Christian in 1976. I have written on numerous topics, but most of my letters have an apologetic or ethical force. Constantly trying to set the world straight can be wearisome; nonetheless, about 70 percent of my letters have been published, mostly in non-Christian newspapers and magazines where I focus my efforts for the sake of apologetics and evangelism. These include the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Seattle Times*, the *Rocky Mountain News*, and *U. S. News and World Report*. Two of my letters were read on National Public Radio in 2003. These letters provide opportunities to comment publicly on matters of great importance, and I continue to write them even when I am busy with writing articles, reviews, and books. One need not be a professional writer or an academic in order to write a convincing and worthwhile letter to the editor. In fact, this is an outstanding way for any Christian with a good idea or argument to present it in print to thousands or hundreds of thousands of people (see Matt. 5:14–16).

During my nearly 30 years of writing and reading such letters, several principles have become evident to me. If Christians would heed these principles in expressing their views, it would redound to the glory of God and give wisdom to public debate (Col. 3:17). We may not be able to take over the editorial pages of our local newspapers or of a national magazine with these miniature essays, but we can interject significant truths and solid arguments through them—if we are serious and know what we are doing.

1. Remember that your ultimate aim should be to communicate truth for God's glory (Matt. 6:33; 1 Cor. 10:31). The editorial page is a tremendous forum to plant seeds for the Kingdom. You can stimulate debate, present perspectives seldom seen in the publication, straighten out misconceptions of Christianity, criticize unbiblical thinking and actions, and make contact with like-minded people with whom your views resonate. This, of course, rules out writing letters in order to show off, to get even, or to exhibit any vice warned against in Scripture (see Gal. 5:16–21). (More on this in point 5.)

2. Choose a subject that you understand, feel strongly about, and concerning which you can express yourself clearly. If these three factors are absent, the letter will probably fail to command attention. It is best, therefore, to find a subject that engages your passion and your reason. I recently had a letter published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (a weekly paper read mostly by those associated with academia) in which I apologetically critiqued an article that defended philosophical materialism. I pointed out that the author contradicted himself and that his views were philosophically suspect. I was angered by his viewpoint (since it denies our God-given humanness) and I had the apologetic tools with which to respond.

3. Make only one central point. A letter to the editor is not an article that carefully develops and elaborates on multiple themes. You should try to make one or two key ideas stick in people's minds. Like a good sermon, it should be a bullet, not buckshot. This can be well done in many ways, but poorly done in even more ways. So on to my next point.

4. Write clearly, directly, and logically. Poor writing or bad reasoning is no testimony to the God of truth, reason, and beauty, however noble your intentions. Don't expect the publication's editor to clean up your mess for you. He or she may find it amusing to display your sloppy prose. Besides, a poorly written letter is less likely to be published in the first place. If you need help with basic writing skills, read and refer to the classic work *The Elements of Style* (Longman, 2000), by Strunk and White. Whatever your level of writing prowess, have a good writer proofread and edit your letter. (Then take that person out to lunch if the letter gets published.) One should always write in a careful and logically consistent manner. Avoid over-generalizations, unfounded conclusions, false dichotomies, fuzzy concepts, flimsy opinions, and factual inaccuracies. Reading a good book on logic, such as *Come Let Us Reason* (Baker Academic, 1990), by Geisler and Brooks, is advisable. The Spirit-led intellect is a thing of beauty and of holy power. Such thinking deserves to be in print and to be read.

5. Avoid ineffective kinds of letters. Excessively emotional letters chronicling one's ire over an issue without giving any real insight through clarification, elaboration, or argumentation are less than edifying—although the use of emotion is not, of itself, illegitimate. Christians are often incensed by the godlessness of American culture and by ill-informed and mean-spirited attacks on Christianity and the church; nevertheless, merely venting frustration in print does no good and only reinforces the non-Christian's view that Christians are always whining about perceived abuses. Overly sarcastic or whining letters win few converts and elicit much contempt. Letters written merely to showcase the knowledge of the writer usually fail to impress the reader with anything more than the arrogance of the writer. Personal attacks against people's character generally should be avoided. Revealing a pertinent moral or intellectual inconsistency in a public figure, however, can be worthwhile if done with tact and civility.

6. Make your letter pertinent to some recent issue that the publication to which you are writing has covered. This will increase your chances of having the letter published, since publications will want to run items related to their esteemed efforts. Letters should be submitted as soon as possible to be timely. You cannot wait a week after something runs in a newspaper and then submit a letter and have any hope for publication. Rapid response is also key for magazines and other forums. Nevertheless, one should not rush to judgment in order merely to be timely (James 1:19).

7. Keep your letter less than 150–200 words, unless the editorial page stipulates otherwise. The *Rocky Mountain News*, for instance, prefers letters of only 100 words. If you exceed the word limit, you risk having your letter immediately rejected or having it edited by an editor who does not have your writing career in mind; therefore, edit yourself strictly. Don't deceive yourself into thinking the publication will bend the rules for you. Unless you are some publicly esteemed luminary—such as the governor, mayor, senator, or a celebrity—they will not flex the word limit for you.

8. When writing for a non-Christian publication, remember that much of your audience is not familiar with Christian terms or concepts. Translate your biblical understanding into common language for the common person. Instead of referring to "sin," for example, you may want to say "moral transgression," "penchant for selfishness," or something of that order. Be creative—the truth is at stake. Our culture is biblically illiterate, so don't presume that your readers will recognize biblical names, places, or terms. Spell everything out clearly and cogently. Biblical and theological concepts should be addressed, but in ways that communicate to the common person. As C. S. Lewis advised, you "must translate every bit of your theology into the vernacular." The "power to translate is the test of having really understood one's own meaning."

9. Use persuasion, not just proclamation. Some occasions warrant a direct presentation of the gospel message in a letter. Christian witness, however, involves more than *proclamation*, as essential as that is; it also involves *persuasion* at any number of levels. Many of my letters have been pre-evangelistic or apologetic in tone. I try to persuade the non-Christian to take seriously some aspect of a Christian truth-claim. This may concern the uniqueness of human beings (against the naturalistic/reductionistic view that we are merely evolved animals), the implausibility of the materialist view of the mind (that there is no soul), the fact that all religions cannot be true, or the differences between Transcendental Meditation and

Christianity. God's truth should be defended when it is maligned or ignored by the world—or when it is maligned or ignored by Christians, for that matter.

10. Ridicule and rhetorical sharpness are dangerous, but sometimes effective, tools of writing; use them cautiously. Scripture itself is not above using ridicule, when necessary. Think of what the Old Testament prophets proclaimed, as when Amos referred to the rich and showy women of his day as “cows” (Amos 4:1). I used some ridicule in a letter to the *Seattle Times* concerning the much-hyped 1987 New Age event called the Harmonic Convergence. I may have been too sharp, but I still sought to make a few key points to *refute* the nonsense, not just to *denounce* it.

11. Be realistic about your chances of publication. One hopes that a relevant, well-written, and logical letter has a better chance of finding its way into print than lesser creations. There are no guarantees, however, that your darling dispatch will be read by anyone but you, your proofreader, the editor that rejects it, and the select friends and family on whom you foist it after it has been rejected. Your chances of getting a letter published in *Time*, *Newsweek*, or the *New York Times* (I'm still trying) are, of course, far less than your chances of getting published in a local daily paper, simply because of the volume of letters involved. I usually don't aim for the huge subscription magazines and newspapers for just this reason. Some letters have to get through, however—in fact, I have had two letters published in *U. S. News and World Report*, a major national weekly magazine.

12. Remember to pray. Pray that you would write a letter that would make a contribution to God's kingdom, and that it would be printed and would be well received by those who need to hear and to heed the truth.

May God bless your epistolary endeavors!

— Douglas Groothuis