

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform

committed to preventing tragedy that arises from illicit drug use.

Guide to successful letter writing

This brochure suggests some good techniques for writing letters to the editor to support the drug law reform cause.

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!**

Not All Letters are Published

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.

The first thing to remember is that not all letters received can be published in a typical editorial section. They are likely to publish either because they:

- Are the best single expressions of what many people said.
- Make some point exceedingly well.
- Are signed by some prominent person.

Most people who write letters to the editor would probably like the satisfaction of seeing their letter published. However, it is also apparent that the media can be influenced by letters they do not publish. A simple letter to someone in the media may find its way into a future story even

though it was not published in the letters column.

Keep it Short

Short, concise letters are always more likely to be published than long, meandering ones; try to keep them under 250 words. The longer letters are also more likely to be edited. It is better that you do your own editing.

Ever notice how you read letters to the editor in the paper? Most people read the shorter letters first and then perhaps later read the longer ones. Thus your shorter letter has a better chance of being read.

What To Write

Single-issue or special-interest groups, such as Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform have but one agenda but within that heading can select from a range of subject sub groups. Replying to editorials by agreeing or disagreeing is very effective.

Be Timely

Try to respond within one or two days of the article's publication. Pick an issue of particular importance to you. Don't be afraid to let some passion show through.

Style

Here are some stylistic considerations:

1. 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.
2. Stick to a single subject. Deal with one issue per letter. Limit the scope of your subject, do not try to respond to all the issues - select the key ones and concentrate on them.
3. Don't be shrill or abusive. Editors tend to discard letters containing personal attacks. Even though you're dying to call P Robiton a parasite, stifle the urge.
4. Your letter should be logically organised. First a brief recitation of the argument, followed by a statement of your position. Then present your evidence. Close with a short restatement of your position or a pithy comment ("Prohibition has not worked - how many more people must suffer before the law is changed").

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5. Use facts, figures and expert testimony whenever possible. This raises your letters above the "says you, says me"; category. (For instance: "Does Det Sgt Percy know that there are about 5,000 dealers, how can gaols accommodate the numbers if all are to be gaoled for 10 years each");
6. Readers respect the opinions of people with special knowledge or expertise. Use expert testimony to bolster your case ("Dr Alex Wodak expresses the view that we are now witnessing the beginning of the end of prohibition").
7. Proof read 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.
8. Write, proof read and edit the piece. Then put it aside for a period. 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 it's timeliness.
9. Try to view the letter from the reader's perspective. Will the arguments make sense to someone without a special background on this issue. Ask yourself

did you use technical terms not familiar to the average reader?

10. Should your letter be typed? In this day and age, generally yes..
11. Direct your letters to "Letters to the Editor" or as instructed in the newspaper or journal.
12. Always include your name, address, day-time phone number and signature. Usually only your name and suburb/town is published. But they may use other information to verify that you wrote the letter. Almost all newspapers accept letters by email.
13. Most important do not try to do a perfect letter. Just give it a good effort and send it off.

If you aren't already a member of FFDLR and would like to join the group or receive more information please phone or write to the address below.

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Writing Letters to the Editor



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