

GenEQ Action Tools: Letters to the Editor

The letters to the editor section of your campus or local paper is an ideal forum for getting your message to its readers – the general public, decision makers and elected officials alike. More people read the letters to the editor section than almost any other part of the paper – it’s the first page many people turn to. Letters to the editor show that an issue is of concern to the community and are excellent tools for education. Here are a few guidelines for getting your letter to the editor printed.

Why and When to send a letter to the editor?

- Use letters to correct inaccuracies. If an incorrect fact has been printed, letters to the editor are important tools to clarify the facts in the debate. Unanswered charges, even if inaccurate, can become facts in the public minds that can be difficult to challenge if not addressed quickly and directly.
- Make the letter timely. Your letter stands the best chance of getting printed when it responds to something recently printed in that newspaper – a news story, column, editorial, advertisement, or another letter. You can use the reference to that item as a springboard for stating *your* case.
- Use events like Transgender Day of Remembrance, Pride, National Coming Out Day, Women’s History Month, GLBT History Month, etc, as a hook.
- Send letters quickly. You will greatly improve your chances of having your letter printed if it is submitted to the publication within one or two days after the original article is published. Publications like to keep things current, even responses to their own coverage.
- Your letter can support and expand on something already in the news, make a point that was omitted, or disagree with and correct misinformation in whatever form it appeared.
- Achieve an objective. Write on behalf of a campus or local organization – this will give your letter more weight. Or you can write as an individual citizen – this will give the impression of community support/opposition to an issue.

How?

- Include your name, address and daytime phone number. Editors like to call to confirm that the letter was actually written by the person whose name appears on the letter.
- Type the letter – double spaced, no more than two or three paragraphs, or about 100-150 words.
- Your letter should have the most important message in the first paragraph. Limit the number of points you make, and stay on the same subject.
- Be as factual as possible without being boring. Avoid rambling sentences and big words.
- Be positive. Focus more on presenting a logical and well written argument to the publication’s readers than on being accusatory or condescending to the author.
- Localize your letter – explain how the issue will affect your school or personalize the letter by mentioning how you or those in your community will be affected. Personal stories can also be highly effective in adding “real life” supporting evidence for your argument.
- Ask for a specific action – tell readers what you want them to do. This includes your school head, administration or board of trustees; you can be sure they read the letters to the editor. By putting their names in the letter and asking for action, such as a vote, a policy change or an explanation for an action or inaction, you get their attention *fast*.

Don’t be disappointed if your letter does not get printed. Newspapers get many letters every day and can’t print all of them. Most papers won’t print the same writers over and over again. So if you have had a letter published recently, try to get a friend or co-worker to sign the next one. Have a number of activists submit a letter on the same topic at the same time. Editors are more likely to print letters on ‘popular’ issues.

For more information, contact HRC's Youth & Campus Outreach Program campus@hrc.org.

Sample Letters to the Editor

**Des Moines Register
Feb 28, 2005**

It is time Iowans speak up and stop allowing extremists and others who share their bigotry and prejudices to shape the tone and content of the debate over gay rights. The so-called "special rights" that state Senator Steve King and others like to hide behind are an insult to the reality of homosexuality and to the intelligence of the people of Iowa.

"Love the sinner but hate the sin" is just another way to justify one's own bigotry, for it places the need for change on the other person and never on one's self. Iowans need never fear the gay community that is a vital part of our lives. What we must fear and resist is the lack of leadership from those elected to lead.

If there is a threat to our quality of life from a "brain drain" there is also a threat if we allow a "morality drain" from those who cannot or will not stand up and enact moral and just laws for every citizen of Iowa.

- M. Babcock, Newton, Iowa 50208-3821

**San Francisco Chronicle
February 21, 2001**

We take great exception to the not-too-subtle shots by Matier and Ross at Supervisor Mark Leno for his advocacy on behalf of the city's transgender community.

Beginning with the criticism of Leno's introduction of transgender medical care legislation ("A slam dunk for the 'Only in San Francisco' Award," Jan. 15) and continuing with their tongue-in-cheek tone in noting Leno's attendance at two transgender events ("Should be one big party"), Matier and Ross show the sort of insensitivity that regrettably is the norm when transgender issues are discussed.

Not very long ago, equal benefits for lesbian and gay people was considered just a wacky San Francisco idea. Because of the work of advocates on the Board of Supervisors, that is no longer the case.

We forcefully object when the struggle for transgender equality is belittled in your paper.

Paul M. Hogan
Chair, Alice B. Toklas Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
Democratic Club

Jerry Threet
President, Harvey Milk Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Democratic Club

Eddie Dobbins
President, Lesbians and Gays of African Descent for Democratic Action
San Francisco