

Working with the media: writing a letter to the editor

▶ Why write a letter to the editor?

Most newspapers and magazines have a 'letters page' that gives readers the opportunity to express their views and opinions. The letters page is often the most frequently read page of a publication and provides you with a good opportunity to promote your cause to a wide audience at no cost (taking out an advert in a newspaper, for example, can cost thousands of pounds!).

Importantly, letters in your local paper will be read very carefully by your MP who will use them as a barometer for what constituents are thinking about different issues. Letters also stimulate interest among journalists. If they see that there are readers who are interested in international development, they will be more likely to write articles about the kind of topics that we really care about.

▶ Choosing your publication

In addition to newspapers, plenty of publications have letters pages – specialist magazines e.g. The Economist, New Statesman etc., lifestyle magazines e.g. GQ, Vogue, Country Life etc., newsletters, student papers, parish mags. Many websites and blogs also have areas for readers to post comments. Think about the audience you are trying to target and which publications they are likely to read. It is very important to get to know your target publication before you start writing.

- What sorts of letters get published in it? What issues are they interested in?
- Check for guidelines on how to submit a letter as these vary from publication to publication. You are usually required to supply your full name and address plus a contact number.
- Which day does it come out? If it's a daily paper, you don't stand much chance of publication if you're writing in response to an article that appeared two weeks previously.
- Choose your timing carefully, most publications work on a cycle. Try not to submit your letter too close to the day it comes out as the stressed journalist who gets it is unlikely to pay it attention.

▶ Finding and creating hooks

A "hook" will help to get your letter published but it's not the end of the world if you don't find one. Look through your chosen paper or magazine and see how many news stories or letters you can make into a hook. Play with the idea. The trick is to think laterally and be creative. Think about basic issues the readers have in common with people in the developing world – children, health, education, etc. Here are a few ideas to get you thinking:

Education: "While I am, of course, delighted at the £3 million extra awarded for Poole schools and their facilities (Daily Echo, 10 April), I can't help but contrast it with another report I read today about the 57 million children in the world who have no access to education at all."

Health: "I sympathise with your reader who waited two days to see his GP. For many people with TB in India, there is no GP and no drugs."

A hook is not essential. If you can't find one, don't despair - use another excuse:

A personal anecdote: "Over the last few months my baby daughter has been vaccinated against virtually all the childhood illnesses that plagued my own childhood."

A calendar date: "Tomorrow - World AIDS Day - gives us the opportunity to reflect on the impact this disease is having around the world."

▶ **Successful letters**

Keep it short and simple, no more than 300 words. Avoid development jargon and keep the language simple. Be opinionated but don't rant. Don't be afraid to be contentious; let your feelings be heard, newspapers like that.

"I just can't let Mr Prince's letter (Jan 5) go without comment. His opinion that UK development aid is wasted and has no impact is completely misinformed."

Name drop! Politicians will keep a careful eye on when and where their name is mentioned in the media. If you include the name of your MP or another key decision-maker such as the Prime Minister, you can guarantee that they, or at least someone from their office, will take notice.

▶ **Aim for a start, a middle and an end**

- **Start** - tell the reader what you're talking about. Put the hook in if you have one. "Great article, Nick Herbert MP! I was delighted to read your very personal account of your time in Uganda."
- **Middle** - some facts about the issue. "People in this country may not realise that there are still more than 57million children around the world who are out of school."
- **End** - what can the reader do? A call to action - or just to think about the issue: "I ask readers to write to Prime Minister David Cameron, and ask for his support in calling for more money for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria."

▶ **Completing and sending**

Having written your letter, don't get stuck in thinking "this isn't good enough". Send it anyway. Any letter is better than no letter at all - and it may just encourage the Editor to publish someone else's on the same subject. If you need help drafting your letter, don't be afraid to ask other members of your RESULTS group or a member of RESULTS staff.

▶ **Monitoring**

Follow up to see if your letter has been published. If you don't normally buy the paper yourself, ask a friend, neighbour or colleague who takes it to look out for your letter. When it is published, share it with the RESULTS office and with other members of your group. You can have an even greater impact by sending a copy of your letter to your local MP or whoever it is that you want to take action.