



Getting your letter published

One way of getting publicity is to write a letter to a regional or national newspaper. Generally, it's much easier to get a letter published in a regional than in a national newspaper and the chances are that a big regional daily will have more readers than the Guardian!

Think of your target audience

The key issue is to think clearly about who you are trying to reach. You may want to target a largely receptive audience (eg. when you want to attract people to an event you are organising), or you may want to persuade people who may be unsympathetic to your point of view. You will often want to target your own profession, through the BMJ, the Lancet, the Nursing Standard or whatever.

National newspapers

Most national newspapers will only consider publishing a letter which has been sent 'exclusively' to them. This is because they don't want to find that the same letter has been published in three national newspapers the next day. The letters page often has more readers than other parts of the newspaper and the letters are carefully selected for clarity, strength of argument and even wit. Some letters are printed mainly because they have a number of very prestigious signatories, but this doesn't guarantee publication.

Here are the email addresses of the letters editors on some national newspapers:

letters@guardian.co.uk

letters@thetimes.co.uk

letters@independent.co.uk

letters@observer.co.uk

Daily, Sunday and telegraph.co:

dtletters@telegraph.co.uk

Medical press

The BMJ: sdavis@bmjgroup.com

The Lancet : zoe.mullan@lancet.com

Nursing Standard: letters@rcnpublishing.co.uk

Timing

In national newspapers, decisions about which letters to publish will usually have been made by mid afternoon on the previous day.

Local newspapers

When writing to local or regional newspapers about a national or global issue, try to make it relevant to the readership. eg. The cost of Trident could be compared to the cost of building X number of local hospitals. When talking about vast sums of money, always try to consider them in terms of what they could buy. eg. the bonus of a fatcat banker could fund X healthworkers in an African country. To find out the email address of the letters editor, just call your local paper and ask for it. Make sure you email that person directly as emails to other people may go astray. Check from time to time that the email address is still correct.

Take a stand

Remember that your letter is competing with all the other letters the editor receives. Controversy sells newspapers, and editors like the letters page to be lively and discursive. It's always a good idea to 'peg' your letter to a topical issue or to an article that has appeared in the paper. If you are targeting a local newspaper, you should talk about how a national issue is affecting people in your area. But the main thing is to express a point of view - strongly and clearly. Decide what point or points you want to make - avoid a shopping list. Make your point as strongly and directly as possible. Avoid ranting. 'Outrage' is not usually enough to get you published. You need to make a valid point.

Style – keep it simple

Check out the target newspaper before you compose your letter. Look at the length of the average letter, and see what style the letters are written in. No matter which paper or magazine you choose, keep your language as simple as possible, avoid jargon, acronyms and don't make assumptions about what the reader already knows. Use metaphors, humour and wit if appropriate. (Max Hastings recently wrote in the Guardian that recommissioning Trident was like Britain trying to have a big willy). Show your letter to a friend for a second opinion before you send it off.

Letters via email

Nowadays most letters for publication are sent via email. Find out the email address of the Letters Editor (don't send your letter to a general email address). Type your letter into the body of the email. Attachments are not a good idea. Give your letter a simple heading so that the Letters Editor knows what the topic is. ie. Children's health in Gaza. Put this heading, or a shortened version of it, in the email window. Begin your email by addressing the Letters Editor, remember to include your contact details (including an address and phone number), then begin your letter.

eg.

Dear Letters Editor,

I would like to offer the following letter for publication in the Times. I have not offered it to any other newspaper. I would be grateful if you could let me know as soon as possible if you intend to publish it.

Yours sincerely

Dr Stephen Walsh

[then type the letter, followed by a full list of signatories]

When a letters editor wants to publish your letter, he/she will usually contact you by phone (which is why you need to put your mobile number on the email). They need to check out that you are who you say you are.

Follow up

Once your letter has been published, check the letters page for responses. If people write in expressing different opinions, this is an excellent opportunity for other members of your group to write in again, to keep the debate going. A lively discussion on the letters page can lead to articles being written in the newspaper. If there is a healthy response to your letter (or to one you disagree with) you can contact the features editor and suggest a feature or debate about the issue. Point out that the readers are clearly very concerned about this issue.

Don't give up!

If at first you don't succeed, don't give up. Eventually you'll get your letter published.

Alison Whyte, March 2009