

Get Your Letter Published

Make no mistake. Your primary goal in writing to the Editor is to get your letter into print. However admirable, justifiable, informative, persuasive, essential, timely, motivational, and undeniable your argument on your topic, the world will never move an inch in the direction you want to urge it if you don't get into print. You move the world only if you get published.

Editors don't publish what's right; they publish what's partisan, decisive, and clear. They want a reaction from every reader: enthusiastic support and vehement opposition serve their needs equally well. Balance, equanimity, and vagueness don't benefit them at all.

A good letter divides readers in half: 50% think "Yes, I agree. Tell me more so I can argue this topic better with my idiot neighbors." The other 50% think, "That's crazy. I don't know how to refute this argument, but it is contrary to firmly held beliefs I can't exactly justify."

If you can deliver a letter that splits readers in half by advocating a controversial point of view with enough logic to thwart easy refutation, you'll get your message to the public.

Include What Editors Want

Read enough Letters to the Editor and you'll begin to recognize the components editors must prize. While it is true your letter may be "edited for space" (or for content), the editors will not rewrite, and will certainly not expand, your letter to fulfill their requirements. If you leave out an essential component, you won't get into print.

10 Essential Components: Don't send your letter until it contains:

- **A Citation.** Here you reference the article, editorial, or letter that prompted your letter.
- **An Objection.** Here you indicate what the original source got wrong.
- **A Clarification.** Here you correct the record to demonstrate your credibility.
- **Your Credentials.** Here you identify the constituency that gives you "standing."
- **A Premise.** Here you introduce an important argument of essential concern to readers.
- **Support.** Here you offer the evidence to bolster the reasonableness of your premise.
- **The Truth.** Here you draw the inevitable conclusion of your argument.
- **A Hopeful Proposal.** Here you make it clear that all is not yet lost.
- **The Rhetorical Flourish.** Here you invoke a universal value to underlie your demand.
- **The Call to Action.** Here you compel readers to call, donate, petition, vote, or boycott.

The Ten Components

The Citation

Editors won't publish your press release as a Letter to the Editor. You need to respond to something specific you have seen recently *in your target publication*. Name the article you read or the letter or editorial you're responding to. Say, for example:

- Emily Reuman's letter of September 11 was quite passionate on the subject of fracking.
- Emily Reuman oversimplified fracking in her 9/11/12 article, "What the Frack?"
- Your September 11 editorial on fracking contained several inaccuracies.

An Objection

You won't get published by agreeing with everything you read. That article has already sold as many papers as it can. You need to engage another audience of readers by disagreeing.

- The study she referred to has been thoroughly repudiated by better science.
- She draws an unsupportable conclusion from her evidence that chemicals are used.
- Her purchased opinions are funded by the petrochemical extraction industry.

A Clarification

Your command of just one impressive detail on the topic will establish your credibility as a substantial person who has taken the time to understand the complexities of the subject.

- Federal law requires the state Department of Environmental Protection to comply.
- Not all, but a substantial portion (25%) of the chemicals used are known carcinogens.
- Every(!) municipality near fracking has suffered water supply degradation.

Your Credentials

You don't write letters to the editor randomly; instead, you're a person with a stake in this argument who feels passionately that it will harm your quality of life and your neighbors'.

- As a mother of small children who depend on the local water supply
- My membership in Rowan's Environmental Coalition has made me suspicious
- As an environmental science major, I have studied in depth the water supply

A Premise

You're not just writing to correct an error; that would be handled as "A Correction," which wouldn't benefit you at all. Instead, you have an argument of your own to make.

- As usual, our state government favors immediate benefit to long-term advantage
- Willful ignorance of science is the only explanation for this dangerous behavior
- Powerful oil and gas company lobbies have bought the votes of legislators

Support

Briefly provide the most compelling fact in favor of your argument. Too much detail is death.

- In mid-term elections 28% of campaign contributions came from energy companies
- This is the governor who also told us asbestos couldn't cause cancer
- Every legislator who opposed tougher environmental regulations was re-elected

The Truth

Also known as the Conclusion, this is the categorical statement that you would want to be the headline on the front page, if Letters to the Editor appeared there.

- If it continues, fracking will kill more Americans than automobile exhaust
- Unchecked, fracking will pollute more water than industrial river dumping
- Fracking will create a few billionaires and kill several million children

A Hopeful Proposal

Offer hope that a concerted effort on the part of a large enough group of readers can still forestall the inevitable march of capital to amass great fortunes while raping the planet.

- The governor does not appear invulnerable to reasonable personal appeals
- Many legislators owe their seats to "green" interests. We have their ear
- The recent storm has made even skeptical New Jerseyans alert to global warming

The Rhetorical Flourish

This is your chance to shamelessly play that little violin that might tug at the heartstrings of readers who value the future, their grandchildren, and our lovely blue planet.

- We owe it to ourselves, but mostly to our grandchildren, to arrest this outrage
- For once we have a chance to stop green Earth's rapists from plundering her
- Unless you want your townhouse in Philadelphia to suddenly become beachfront

A Call to Action

Here you presume that your work has been successful and that readers await your clarion call for affirmative action to promote the agenda you so clearly and rightly support.

- The governor will succumb to industry pressure unless we speak out
- Our petition has the support of key legislators who could block this outrage
- Trenton needs to know that we understand this issue and vote

A Sample Letter to the Editor

Can You Identify the Ten Components of a Successful LTE?

To the Editor,

Emily Reuman's self-serving article of September 11, "Fracking to End the Recession," was rife with economic and factual inaccuracies. While there is no doubt that fracking will create a few energy industry millionaires and provide jobs for deserving citizens, it will also foul the water of millions who gain no immediate benefit from drilling for gas beneath their aquifers; and when the jobs are gone, the water will be irretrievably useless forever.

At Rowan University's Environmental Action League (REAL), I've studied the irreversible environmental catastrophes caused by injecting a lethal cocktail of 600 chemicals under pressure into groundwater to release natural gas. We've already poisoned the air in search of cheap fuel; we can't afford to foul the ground as well. Energy companies are notorious for exploiting the cheapest, easiest, most accessible energy sources to maximize profits no matter how it savages our beloved planet. We can't afford to let them do it again by fracking the very land beneath our feet. Already we've seen groundwaters contaminated so fully that our Pennsylvania neighbors cannot drink the water they get from their land. In too many cases, the water they draw from their wells is actually flammable!

The energy industry's interest in natural gas doesn't promote energy independence: it's a money grab plain and simple, with the obvious collusion of our elected officials in their back pockets.

Our only hope to avert catastrophe is to shine a light on the devastation fracking will cause our communities. For what it's worth, we still have power as voters to hold government accountable. If we're silent, they'll surely follow the money. But if we send a clear message that their jobs are at stake, for example by signing the petition to ban fracking in New Jersey, we might still secure a healthy and sustainable future for our children.