



-By George Greene and Jeremy Powers.

Getting in a local paper is easy; a letter meant for a *major daily*, however, must jump through some hoops. In either case you need to get your point across fast and effectively and in ways that appeal to the editor and their readers.

### *What editors look for*

- Letters to the editor go on the opinion page. Make them well-reasoned opinions.
- Stand strong; be direct. Don't use weasel words, apologize for your views or discount them.
- Editors love a reaction to a story they've recently run. To them this is dialogue.
- One topic per letter. Be specific; don't ramble.
- Don't name call. You can criticize and even insult, but do so with declarative sentences not snarky words.
- Appeal to a large audience of readers and assume everyone is on your side. Take the moral high road.
- Have someone review your letter. But don't let that person talk you out of making your point or sending it. And don't write a letter by committee. Editors want to know these are your

words. Another set of eyes, though, can keep you focused.

- Only send it to one media outlet and let them know they are getting exclusive use of the letter. The editors of the paper don't want to wake up the next day and find the exact same letter to the editor in their competitor's paper.
- Right size the letter to the media outlet. Don't ask the metro newspaper to publish a letter about library branch hours in one small suburb. That should go in the community papers. Likewise your local weekly probably won't run a letter about a statewide bonding bill with nothing local in it.
- The ideal letter to the editor puts in words something the reporter was thinking when he/she wrote a story but knew they couldn't put it in the story without crossing the line of news and opinion.

### *Framing*

A message is anything that comes out of your mouth. There are good messages and there are ineffective and potentially damaging ones. An effective message is *framed* in a way that evokes core liberal values.

One reason conservatives are better at communication than we are is that they know the science behind how people think. We love to fling facts and reason; we debunk and point out hypocrisy. Cognitive science has almost a hundred years of evidence to show that those methods don't work well. And while we are trying to prove our opponents wrong,

we never seem to get around to our message. Conservative strategists know all this and bait us constantly because they know we'll take the bait.

- **Stop** and analyze. What are conservatives saying? What is your position?
- **Drop** facts and debunking. Stay out of conservative frames and don't use their words.
- **Roll** with a well framed your message rooted in core progressive values.
- [Consider attending one of our framing workshops](#) for much more on framing.

## Standing

Letters are great, but if you are a person with *standing*, you may be granted an opportunity to write a longer rebuttal or opinion piece. Standing simply means that through your job, your area of experience or your connection to a newsworthy event an editor may believe you can speak with authority and credibility. If the issue is ethics in government, for example, a former Judge has standing. If the issue is the environment, your position as chair of an environmental group gives you standing. A teacher has standing on local education issues. If you do not have standing, recruit someone who does.

## Compelling writing

Even if you do all of the above, your letter will not be effective if you bore people.

- Don't just tell people what you think, tell them why you care! (See framing above.)
- State your point up front. If you take too long to get to it, people lose interest.

- Tell a story about real people. Stories are inherently interesting. The story should illustrate the point you are making.
- Use a metaphor to help people understand a new or complex issue. Ex: "The Internet is like a superhighway".
- Talk to the reader. The words "you" and "me" shouldn't scare you.
- Use active verbs. Rather than "to run", use "running" or "run".
- Experiment with your sentence, word and paragraph order. It's a wonder to move a word, sentence or paragraph and watch a whole piece crystallize.
- Be willing to excise great chunks of our lovingly birthed prose. Once you get used to it, the results in readability and effectiveness make up for the disappointment. As the advertising folks say: "Advertising is the art of giving things up".
- Proofread. Then have someone else read it, make corrections and proofread again.
- Writing needs to *ferment* -leave it overnight and reread it before you send it. You may find something you would have rather said —or *not* said. You'll also instinctively *feel* grammatical rough spots and excess wordage.