

Published: Friday, December 23, 2011

## **A quick guide to writing letters to the editor**

Dave Obee, Times Colonist

As you sit by the hearth over the holiday season, sipping egg nog or chatting with relatives, don't forget to ponder the issues of the day.

And then, don't hesitate to fire off a letter to the editor. Resolve to get involved, to make a difference in our community.

And yes, if you're thinking this is my annual guide to writing letters to the editor, you are right.

Many readers are already submitting their thoughts, commenting on issues and writing about pet peeves, as we used to call them in high school. But the more the merrier.

We would especially like to hear from people who don't normally write letters, for whatever reason. Diverse voices and new opinions are important in public debate.

What you would like to see happen in 2012. Any major changes in direction for the city or province? Any advice for politicians? Anything you dread? There are potential topics, just waiting for you.

The letters page is one of the newspaper's most important elements. It's a forum for readers' opinions. Columns and editorials offer a range of views, but letters give you a chance to get involved in the public discussion of issues that matter.

The letters page is a place where people can debate, respectfully, issues of public importance or comment on life in our community.

We can't run every letter we get; on big news days, we might have 100 or more to choose from, and space for about a dozen.

There are some tips to keep in mind. We prefer letters that advance a discussion. It might help your blood pressure to vent about a topic, but it won't help readers if they see another letter repeating an already familiar point of view.

Short letters work. They are effective. So are short sentences. They are easy to understand.

If you can make a point in 100 words while another writer takes 250 words to say the same

thing, yours is more likely to be published. Besides, readers are more likely to take the time for a short item.

The maximum is 250 words, but shorter is even better.

So, make every word count. Get right to the point. Don't digress or worry about literary flourishes.

We avoid letters that use sarcasm or are tongue in cheek, because too many readers take them at face value.

Deal with issues, not people. No cheap shots, either.

Timeliness is also important, which means email is by far the best way to submit a letter.

To be clear, we do not reject letters because they are contrary to an editorial or advance an unpopular opinion. We want to reflect all points of view. We actually prefer letters that disagree with our editorial stance, because they make an important contribution to the discussion.

When we pick letters for publication, we try to reflect the comments we have received.

If letter writers are five to one in favour of this or against that, the same ratio will likely appear on our pages. (That doesn't mean we fall for letter-writing campaigns - not usually, anyway - which result in cookiecutter form letters arriving by the truckload.)

A few times a week we run longer pieces, known as op-eds - for opposite the editorial page - on a variety of topics. We get op-ed submissions every day, and we need to be even more discerning with them than with letters. In other words, the odds of your point making the paper are better if you write a letter. Again, shorter is better.

Letters are edited when we have concerns about clarity, grammar and the like. We usually look for ways to make letters shorter, and that includes eliminating throat-clearing. Get to the point.

The letters page can be powerful. The letters on the page can help change minds, change bad decisions and make this an even better place to live.

And we'd like you to be involved. Check the top of the page opposite for some of the technical details, such as our addresses and what is required of writers.