Letters to the Editor ~ Quick Hits

Surveys show that most people don’t read newspaper editorial pages, op eds or letters to the editor, but that those who do are the community’s most influential people—policymakers, community leaders, business professionals, educators, elected officials and media representatives. A good letter delivers your messages to those people—with the implicit underlining that the newspaper thinks your point is worth making.

In writing a letter to the editor, therefore:

1. Get it in as fast as possible, the day the provocative article or event occurs, if you can.

2. Make a clear point. Avoid balanced pros and cons. Call unequivocally for nuance!

3. Use punchy language, sarcasm, wit, cold fury, icy disdain, vigorous enthusiasm—the editors want well-written items that their readers will enjoy and remember.

4. Keep it short—200 words maximum. Be prepared to trim it further if the editors request it.

5. Letters columns have policies on language, space limits, submissions methods and conventions of format. Notice what gets published and craft your letter accordingly.

6. Always mention the title, author and date of the article that sparked your letter. “Dear editor” is enough of a salutation. “Sincerely” is an adequate signoff.

7. Identify yourself with a one-line description. Include your mailing and email addresses, and telephone/fax numbers.

8. The newspaper may ask to edit your letter past recognition, but it should not be published without your approval of the final text. You do not have to accept any proposed changes, but you won’t be able to go past the length limit.

Joanne Omang, writer and recovering Washington journalist
April 2008