



Appendix A-5 Media Relations

A-5 a. "Letters to the Editor," by David Klinger

A-5 b. Letters to the Editor, Op-Ed Piece
From IMPACT Notebook, pages 5-10, 11, 12



Letters-to-the-Editor

Make your response soon, short, simple, and sharp

By David Klinger

The newspaper article said the Fish and Wildlife Service was going to list a beetle that no one had ever seen. They said that biologists were going to confiscate neighbors' land as a sanctuary for the insect. And they said law enforcement agents were going to enforce the beetle protection zone through the use of black helicopters.

So you drafted a four-page rebuttal, with biological justifications for the listing and spent a month having it reviewed, surnamed by supervisors, typed, and sent by regular mail to the newspaper.

Congratulations! You did your job!

But your comments will probably will never see the light of day.

"Letters-to-the-editor" are one of the most effective ways in which a public agency can set the record straight on controversial subjects and activities.

They are often the only avenue by which factual errors can be corrected, misconceptions rebutted, and unfair characterizations challenged. They are free, fast, and fundamental for any of us who care about public perceptions on resource issues.

But they only work when you follow a few basic rules-of-thumb to ensure that what you write will see print or be aired by your local radio or television station. These tips can be summarized in four words: **soon, short, simple, and sharp.**

• **Soon** — To stand any chance of use, your letter must respond immediately after the offending story appears or is aired. Obtain

whatever reviews and surnames you must, but for newspapers your letter should arrive no more than one or two days after the original piece. For

radio or television, your response should occur within the same "news cycle" — the same day or the next morning. Use instantaneous communications by fax, Internet, or overnight mail to convey a sense of urgency and improve the chances your letter will get used.

• **Short** — Resist the temptation to write all you know about a particular subject. Your job is to get several key points into print. Pick out the two or three most offending points in an article and confine your response to those, letting minor inaccuracies go. An appropriate length for a "Letter-to-the-editor" is about 300 words.

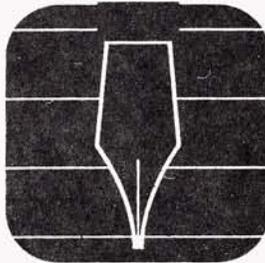
• **Simple** — Keep your response to the issues at hand, and do so in terms that are easy for the public to understand. Avoid scientific and technical jargon, as well as acronyms, bureaucratic "buzzwords," and other language that the average reader would not comprehend. Use terms that your neighbor or a family member would understand.

• **Sharp** — Not offensive, but focused. Letters should be direct, must tackle factual inaccuracies head-on, and yet need to address errors of interpretation in a tactful way. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, especially newspaper editorialists, television commentators, and citizens with legitimate views on Service actions and government policies. Respect differing opinions, while you zero-in on the misconceptions, incomplete information, and half-truths that may underlie those views.

There are other avenues by which inaccurate information in the news media can be corrected or challenged. "Letters-to-the-editor" are only one tool in your communications toolbox. Like a trusty wrench, one size does not fit all, but it remains one of the easiest to use if matched to the situation. ■

David Klinger is senior writer-editor at the National Conservation Training Center.

"Use terms that your neighbor or a family member would understand."



Letters to the Editor

The Letters to the Editor section is one of the most popular sections of newspapers.

It can be used to present a point of view on a single issue, to respond to opposing points of view, or to respond to news articles.

When writing a letter, it is important to keep it simple and brief. If your letter is too long, it may be edited and your key points may be lost.

Communicate no more than one issue in any one letter.

The letter must be timely. Don't wait a week or two to respond and respond as quickly as possible. Erroneous information must be corrected as soon as possible.

The most effective and most frequently used letters are those that can convincingly correct an error or demonstrate where an article was inaccurate and/or incomplete.

Keep your emotions in check — your response is a reflection upon your agency and, in effect, a policy statement.

Differences Between a Letter to the Editor and an Op-Ed Piece

Op-eds are generally fairly short (500-800 words) but usually quite a bit longer than the average letter to the editor. A few papers may run longer op-eds (some up to 1500 words or more).

Check with the editorial staff of the paper you wish to publish in to determine their preferred lengths for letters to the editor and op-ed pieces.

Sometimes a letter to the editor is an op-ed in miniature.

Letter to the Editor Strategies

Monitor trends; choose an interesting, innovative angle

Tailor to the target audience

Be contrary

Be timely

Provide added value

Propose a point of view

Recycle your letter