

Tips on Writing Letters to the Editor that Get Published

1. Determine the Maximum Number of Words Allowed

It doesn't matter how good your letter is, it won't get published if it doesn't meet the technical requirements of the publication. The word limit for letters is usually printed on the letters page—for the Vancouver Sun, it's 200 words. If it's not printed there, call the publication to ask, or estimate the limit based on the longest letters they have published.

2. Choose a Topical Issue or Make It Topical

The letters most likely to get published are those that are in direct response to a story that appeared in the publication. If the issue hasn't been covered in the publication recently, your letter has to make clear why the readers should care about it. In the case of community papers, this involves explaining why the local community should be concerned.

3. Comment on Only One Aspect of an Issue

It's difficult to cover much ground in 200, or fewer, words. So, rather than try to address a number of matters, it's more effective to focus on one aspect of the issue. For example, if the issue is the underfunding of public universities, your letter might focus on how larger class sizes are negatively impacting the educational experience.

4. Comment on What You Know and Use Personal Stories

Unless you have broad knowledge of the issue, it's best to stick to those aspects of the issue you know best, or have personally experienced. For example, if you want to comment on how larger classes are degrading the learning experience, you might say: "10 years ago I was able to meet with every student in my class a few times a semester to talk about their progress. Now that my class sizes have doubled, there are not enough hours in a day to meet with each student, let alone meet with them multiple times in a semester."

5. Keep the Language Simple

The grade level required to read a typical North American newspaper ranges from Grade 9 to Grade 12. Many top-selling novelists write at the Grade 7 reading level. This means writing sentences with a maximum length of 15 to 20 words with up to 150 syllables per 100 words.

6. Submit Your Letter to the Right Place in the Correct Format

If you are mailing or faxing your letter, make sure you have the correct address or fax number. If you are emailing your letter, make sure you have the correct email address and you are sending the letter in the correct format. All publications can deal with plain text in an email message. Many publications won't open attached Word documents. Be sure to include your address and daytime contact information so that they can confirm you are the author of the letter.

A Sample Letter

Here is a 149-word sample letter. For the purposes of counting words, don't include the salutation or your identifying information.

To the Editor of the Burnaby Bugle,

It may come as a surprise to the people of Burnaby that the educational quality of their award-winning university is rapidly declining.

When I first started teaching at SFU 10 years ago, I knew all of my students by name. I also had the time to provide them with detailed comments on all their assignments.

These days, my classes are so large that I can barely see the students in the back of the room. I've also reduced the number of term papers I assign because I don't have the time to mark them.

This isn't because I'm a bad teacher, it's because the provincial government doesn't give us enough money to do our jobs properly. To make matters worse, we will be losing more teachers in the spring in order to deal with an unexpected government cut to our budgets.

Our students deserve better and Burnaby deserves better.

Dr. Jane Moore
Department of Political Economy
Simon Fraser University
Daytime Phone - 778-782-9999

Appendix A – Letter Submission Information for Community Papers Around SFU Campuses

Burnaby News Leader

Maximum Word Length – No Set Limit

Letter Submission - editor@burnabynewsleader.com

Burnaby Now

Maximum Word Length – No Set Limit

Letter Submission - editorial@burnabynow.com

Coquitlam Now

Maximum Word Length – 200 words

Letter Submission - editorial@thenownews.com

Royal City Record (New Westminster)

Maximum Word Length – No Set Limit

Letter Submission - editorial@royalcityrecord.com

Surrey Leader

Maximum Word Length – 280 words

Letter Submission - newsroom@surreyleader.com

Surrey Now

Maximum Word Length – 200 words

Letter Submission - edit@thenownewspaper.com

TriCity News (Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Port Moody)

Maximum Word Length – 300 words

Letter Submission - newsroom@tricitynews.com