

Three L's for writing effective letters to the editor

SPARC BC

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THE PLAYWRIGHT Arthur Miller, speaking to the role news media plays in enhancing public citizenship once said that, "a good newspaper, I suppose, is a nation talking to itself."

Nowhere is this truer, than on the half-page adjacent to the editorial cartoon in your morning newspaper. It is here that most papers choose to display their letters to the editor.

Though often dismissed, more than any other section of the paper, the letters section works to reflect the views and attitudes of the readers and allows space for community dialogue. And letters are usually the second most read section – after the front page. This provides an ideal space to exercise your rights and responsibilities as a citizen by using a letter to the editor to correct misinformation, augment published stories with experiences from the larger community, and engage in public dialogue on pressing issues.

However, the process of choosing which letters to print is by nature competitive and is often far from perfect. For this reason, it is important that letters to the editor be written with a few simple guidelines in mind to ensure they have the best chance of being printed.

Three L's For Effective Letters

LANGUAGE The average newspaper is written between a seventh and tenth grade reading level. This makes it important to write your letter clearly, in short sentences, using plain simple language without jargon.

LINE Given their relative brevity, letters to the editor should attempt to tackle no more than one issue at a time. Shoe-horning numerous issues into one letter will work to dilute its impact rather than strengthen it.

LENGTH Some people don't realize that letters are often edited for length. Try to ensure that your letter matches the length requirements of the paper you are replying to, and you will maximize the possibility that your words are printed rather than someone else's.

With these simple tips in mind, you should be encouraged to utilize your local or national newspaper to add your voice to the dialogue on social planning issues. A nation talking to itself is seldom a bad thing.