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Tips on Writing Letters to the Editor

The Humane Society of the United States

Writing a letter to the editor is a great opportunity to share your opinion, educate the public about animal issues, applaud someone for doing the right thing, or criticize inhumane policies. A well written, well timed letter to the editor can shift public opinion and influence policy.

Before you get started, the Public Relations staff at The HSUS offers a few tips:

- Editors prefer to publish timely, concise letters that respond to an article, editorial, or other letter that appeared in the newspaper. They also prefer to run letters about issues of local importance and interest.
- Before writing your letter, review the newspaper's policy on letters to the editor. It is frequently available on the newspaper's web site under the Opinion section.
- Write and submit your letter as quickly as possible, preferably the same day that the article runs.
- Submit letters by e-mail whenever possible. (Look for the e-mail address on the newspaper's web site).
- Your letter must stand on its own—not all readers will have seen the original story.
- Open your letter with a strong statement that comments on an article, editorial, or other letter that appeared in the newspaper. Your opening statement can take issue with a comment from someone interviewed for the story, add to the discussion by pointing out something readers would need to know, disagree with an editorial position, or point out an error or misrepresentation in an article.
- Be careful about accuracy and avoid personal attacks.
- Keep your letter as short as possible by focusing on one, or at most two, major points. Support your position with facts, statistics, citations or other evidence. Aim for no more than 250 words, and be sure to stay under the paper's word limit.
- Close with the thought you'd like readers to remember. Instead of focusing your attention at a reporter, editor, or expert who got it wrong, consider the central point you want people reading the letter to take away.
- Ask someone to review your letter to be sure your writing is clear and you are getting your point across.
- You must include your name, street address and phone number. Editors are on guard about fake identities and will often contact you to verify that you wrote your letter. They will not run anonymous letters. The editorial pages exist to offer a cross section of community opinion. Editors are more likely to publish letters on issues that are important to their readers.

Here are some things to keep in mind when submitting a letter to the editor:

- Don't respond to numerous articles in a short amount of time. Many papers have policies that limit how frequently they will publish the opinion of one individual or organization.
- Keeping your letter short will increase the likelihood that the editor will have time to read your letter and consider it for publication.
- Editors will modify your letter for clarity, and could cut parts of it entirely if it is too long. It's best to send a short, well written letter to avoid the chance that you disagree with the changes the editor makes.