

How to Write a Letter to the Editor or to a PTA

A letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine is an effective way of reaching a lot of people with your message. You may want to write in response to an article on dissection (or some other aspect of science education) that already appeared, or you may write to raise the issue. Either way, there's power in the pen (and the keypad!) and you should use it.

Keep your letter short. Most newspapers and magazines won't publish letters longer than 250 words without cutting, and it's better if you do the cutting than if they do. A 100-150 word letter is ideal. This packet contains sample letters.

Keep your letter focused. If you're writing about dissection, stick to just that issue. Here are some important points you can make.

- More than 6 million vertebrate animals are killed for dissection in US high schools each year. Commonly used species include frogs, cats, fetal pigs, dogfish sharks, turtles, fish and pigeons.
- Animals often suffer inhumane treatment during capture, transport, housing and killing for dissection.
- Most animals killed for dissection are taken from the wild, disrupting animal populations and the natural habitats they live in.
- Published studies show that dissection alternatives are as good as or better for learning than are dissection and other invasive animal-based classroom exercises.
- Educational curricula should foster environmental stewardship and compassion for life; dissection encourages neither – animal life is devalued and treated as expendable.
- Dissection alienates many compassionate students from the life sciences. As a result, many bright, caring students choose careers in other fields.

Be timely. If you are responding to something that already appeared in the paper, do it within two or three days of its appearance. If the paper accepts letter by fax (most do, some don't), that will expedite their receipt of it. Most publications accept letters via e-mail.

Type your letter with the date and the address to where you're sending it at the top. Make sure your own address is included, as well as your phone number(s), so that editors can contact you to verify that you wrote the letter.

Open your letter with a catchy sentence so that readers will want to read on. Get the issue (classroom dissection or live animal experimentation) in early. If you can relate a personal experience, it will make the piece more interesting and effective.

Avoid being only negative in your letter. By all means, mention the problems with dissection, but also point out the benefits of using alternatives.

Don't hesitate to send letters to small papers. As a student, your own school paper is an obvious choice. Local papers are much more likely to print your letter than are big city papers with huge circulations.

You may get the opportunity to write an opinion editorial. "Op-Eds" are longer, usually 400-500 words, and they allow you to cover an issue more thoroughly. Present the problem, and then present the solution. Once again, personal experience will add poignancy. Feel free to use any of the information in this packet, which also includes a sample op-ed.

Finally, before you send off your letter, have someone proofread it for accuracy, clarity and errors!

Viewpoints

Animal dissection is unnecessary, inhumane as an educational practice

Approximately 7 million vertebrate animals are killed each year for dissection in U.S. biology classrooms. To illustrate the magnitude of this many animals, consider that if you lined them all up end to end, they would stretch more than twice the length of California.

And for what purpose? What gains are made when students cut open and explore the insides of frogs and cats and fetal pigs and dogfish sharks? The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) believes whatever benefits might arise from dissections are far outweighed by the associated costs. Allow me to explain.

Teachers who continue to use animals in dissection or other invasive classroom exercises apparently are unaware of or unmoved by the fact that more than a dozen studies have been published showing students using humane alternatives to learn anatomy and physiology as well as or better than students who use animals.

First, there is the animal suffering involved. Investigations into the dissection trade have documented, among other abuses, cats being drowned 10 at time in burlap sacks or prodded roughly into crowded gas chambers, rats embalmed with formaldehyde while still living, dozens of live frogs piled into sacks for days or weeks without food and sickly turtles kept in filthy, overcrowded holding tanks. These sorts of conditions appear to be quite commonplace, and though they are inexcusable and sometimes illegal, they are perhaps not surprising in a business where the "merchandise" is going to end up dead anyway.

Then there are human social concerns. A principal goal of live science education is to teach

respect for life. Dissection is an intrinsically violent exercise; it involves killing,

preserving and cutting apart, then discarding an animal. However well-intentioned an instructor's desire to teach respect for animals, the typical dissection exercise will tend to undermine it by devaluing the lives of other creatures to the level of expendable objects.

I personally have spoken with hundreds of bright, compassionate students who find dissection ethically repugnant. Their response is sometimes to turn away from careers in such fields as human medicine, veterinary medicine or

nursing, where compassion is most needed. On the other hand, less sensitive students may be hardened by the exercise, the consequences of which are open to speculation.

There is also the quality of education to be considered. Teachers who continue to use animals in dissection or other invasive classroom exercises apparently are unaware of or unmoved by the fact that more than a dozen studies have been published showing students using humane alternatives to learn anatomy and physiology as well as or better than students who use animals. HSUS will provide an annotated list of these students to anyone who requests it.

Abundant resources are available for learning anatomy, physiol-

GUEST OPINION

Jonathan Balcombe

ogy, genetics, toxicology and other animal-related fields that do not

require animals to suffer and/or die. These include films, computer simulations, models, books or a trip to the local veterinary clinic. To anyone who simply cannot bear the thought of dispensing with hands-on contact with a preserved animal, human cadavers offer the full-scale experience without the associated ethical problems (people are not killed for the purpose of dissection, and the patient voluntarily donates his/her body).

Even the economics of dissection do not argue for its use. HSUS recently did a comparison and found that, for all five species looked at (shark, frog, rat, pig, cat), the cost of purchasing a broad range of alternative materials was lower than that of purchasing animals to dissect. For 270 students (two students per animal) during a three-year period, money saved ranged from \$344 (bullfrogs) to \$4,342 (cats). If you want to save more money, just borrow the alternative. HSUS, for instance, operates an Alternatives Loan Program that currently has more than 40 items available on a temporary, free-of-charge basis.

Finally, there is environmental protection. Many of the animals harmed or killed for classroom use are caught in the wild. Populations of frogs and sharks, for instance, have been seriously declining in recent years. While the specific impact of their capture for classroom use is not known, it certainly is not ecologically beneficial. Moreover, the world needs people who value environmental stewardship and compassion for life; dissection fosters neither.

Perhaps there are a few fields, such as veterinary medicine, for

which cutting open and examining the insides of dead animals is indispensable. But how ironic that healthy animals would be killed for students whose professional goal is to save lives and ease suffering. Even veterinary schools don't need to kill animals deliberately to train their students.

Conducting spay/neuter surgeries on animals from the animal shelters and procuring deceased cats and dogs from their owners who sign a consent form are among the ethical ways growing numbers of veterinary schools are procuring animals for their training programs. And as for the use of animals in medical school, consider that 27 of the nation's medical programs don't use animals in their curricula, and at all but one of the remaining schools, the animal labs are optional.

Using animals to practice surgery has been illegal in England for more than 100 years.

With all the suffering in the world, should we really be adding to it in our education programs? Is dissection necessary when other learning methods have been shown repeatedly to effectively replace it? Is there any justification for animal dissection when it has so many counts — animal killing, animal suffering, violation of students' sensibilities, mediocre educational merit and environmental disruption — against it?

We think not.

Jonathan Balcombe is the associate director for Animal Research Issues of the Humane Society of the United States. He will lecture in the Kirkwood Room of the Union tonight at 7. The lecture is sponsored by the UI Animal Coalition and Citizens for Animal Rights and Environment.

Letters to the Editor

Responses to photo of cat used for scientific purpose at WPHS

B6 • *The Chronicle of Higher Education* • June 30, 1993

Letters to the Editor

Questioning the value of dissecting animals

TO THE EDITOR:

It is unfortunate that the cover photograph of the May 26 issue of *The Chronicle*, referring to the article on Advanced Placement programs ("More States Encourage Advanced-Placement Courses for College Credit; Saving Money Is One Goal"), shows a young student dissecting an animal. As growing numbers of students and teachers question the use of dead animals for life-science studies, and as myriad sophisticated humane alternatives have become available, dissection is increasingly viewed as an archaic, stultifying way of teaching biology. Depiction of students collecting data on organisms in a natural setting, or, say, conducting a computer simulation of predator/prey population interactions, would have been much more fitting.

JONATHAN BALCOMBE
Assistant Director for Education
Laboratory Animal Programs
Humane Society of the United States
Washington

To the editor:

Your front page photo (May 12) of West Plains High School students posing with the domestic cat and her six kittens they had dissected in their anatomy class was sent to us by a concerned reader. It is a poignant reminder that the dissection tradition dies hard in the biology classroom, despite its humane, sociological and educational failings.

Some 100,000 cats are dissected yearly in American schools. Many come from random sources. Investigation into the supply of cats for dissection has documented highly stressful conditions of captivity and transport, and death by drowning or being bled out. One major cat supplier was ordered by the USDA in 1993 to cease his operations for 10 years due to Animal Welfare Act violations. We wonder what stress this pregnant cat may have endured prior to her untimely death.

Animal dissection may excite some students, but it turns many more bright students away from careers in science. As a learning exercise, it is weak. There is no hypothesis testing or scientific problem-solving, which the National Academy of Sciences strongly recommends students be doing. Several published studies have found that students learned anatomy better using computers, models and other materials (available for free loan from us) than by dissecting embalmed animals. Little wonder, then, that animal dissection is rarely found in the high school curricula of such nations as Sweden and Norway, where scientific literacy ranked highest in the most recent (1999) International Math and Science Study.

What students do learn from dissection is that life is cheap and expendable. Your photo is a poignant reminder of that, too.

Sincerely,
Jonathan Balcombe, Ph.D.
Associate Director for
Education
Animal Research Issues
Washington, D.C.