How do I write a letter to the editor?

Letters to the editor are an effective tool of public relations that should not be underestimated. Many people read them with interest because usually things are discussed in a more critical way than in any other articles. However, only about the first ten percent of all written letters may be accepted by the press.

**Current and Important**

Newspapers are a medium for current affairs, and typically publish letters reacting to its coverage, or to recent events. If possible please refer to an article from the newspaper, or a relevant recent event of note to its readership. List the date, the headline, and the page number if referring to a recent article. By reacting to current reports in the press, you take up the issue of human rights violations and stimulate new reports or further debate. You can and should use press briefings, articles or passages from other texts as long as you quote the source.

**Concise, Clear, Factual**

Express yourself clearly, and be accurate. Harsh words are no substitute for conclusive arguments. Generally speaking letters are most likely to be printed if they bring light to a subject from an innovative perspective, and/or provide suggestions for thought, action or change.

**Style**

The editors want as many stories as possible to be printed. The size of your letter should not exceed 250 words. Begin your text with the most important things. In addition to these arguments, any facts, figures, dates and comparisons are welcome to support your case. Only submit typed letters, and ones that have been proofread.

*Adapted from the website of the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR)*

AN EXAMPLE:

Mila Rosenthal, Amnesty International USA’s (AISUA) Director, Business and Human Rights Program, is a Letter to the Editor expert. She has succeeded in placing letters in national publications vital to AIUSA’s advocacy efforts… One of Rosenthal’s most powerful missives was to the editor of the New York Times after reading reporter Cathy Horyn’s tongue-in-cheek article on shopping at Wal-Mart. Rosenthal took the opportunity to build on Horyn’s passing mention that her style bargains may have come at the expense of child laborers. At a time when Wal-Mart’s unfair labor practices were relatively unknown, Rosenthal’s letter raised the broader advocacy point about Wal-Mart’s poor treatment of its workforce worldwide:

Shopping at Wal-Mart
(NYT, September 2, 2002)

To the Editor:

“Unabashed Wal-Mart Shopper Speaks” urges the company to be more concerned about child labor in the countries where its products are made.

In the United States, Wal-Mart has helped drive down wages in the retail sector and has faced numerous lawsuits by employees alleging anti-union policies, sex discrimination and unfair wage practices. As for its production overseas, Wal-Mart’s policy of sourcing from the cheapest, least regulated labor markets has spurred the global growth of sweatshops.

Some other companies, as a result of targeting by activists, have at least sought to investigate working conditions. Wal-Mart has refused even to disclose the locations of the factories it uses, let alone support any independent monitoring or investigation of those factories.

Mila Rosenthal
New York, Aug. 28, 2002

The writer is director, Workers Rights Program, Lawyers Committee for Human Rights.

The letter’s impact has been “positive but only anecdotal,” reports Rosenthal. She recalls that “the letter did draw attention to the Lawyers Committee (her previous employer) and brought another perspective to the Times’ coverage of the workers rights issue.”…

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