



How to Write Letters to the Editor

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This is a guest post by Oil Drum reader Carl Henn.

I spend a lot of time reading The Oil Drum. It helps me to understand the nature of the energy and economic problems we face. These problems are complex and important, so it is easy to spend an inordinate amount of time trying to understand them. But it has become clear to me that we will have to address our problems without fully understanding the mess we are in. The average Oil Drum reader understands our problems far better than the average citizen. The average Joe may yet not have heard of Peak Oil, let alone the Export Land Model. We need to do more to share our knowledge. We are at the point where the overall understanding of Peak Oil will increase if a few of us read a bit less Oil Drum and write a few more letters to the editor.

I know many folks here have worked hard for years to spread the word. I salute your effort, and write today only to promote a tool that is too little used – letters to the editor.

Letters to the Editor are free and reach thousands of people. We can use them to spread awareness and understanding of our energy problems. I've been writing L2Es for 30 years have had several hundred letters printed. A few tips for getting printed:

Read the coverage of the topics you intend to respond to. You are much more likely to be printed if you respond to their editorial or news coverage rather than submitting a letter that doesn't relate to recent stories.

- Respond quickly, hopefully within a day, not later than a week.
- E-mail it. Snail mail is too slow and needs to be retyped after receipt.
- Put the letter in the body of the e-mail, not in an attachment. Newspapers fear viruses and don't open attachments.
- Don't send longer letters than that paper typically prints. Usually not more than 300 words and in some papers 150 is all they'll take.
- Never use facts or figures you aren't sure of.
- Include your name, address and phone number. Most won't print anonymous letters, and they frequently call or e-mail to confirm authorship and exclusivity.

As an Oil Drum reader you have probably already taken one key step – becoming well informed about your topic. This will be enough to respond to any number of articles and editorials in your local paper or the magazines you subscribe to. You may need to do more research to get up to speed on relevant local issues. Your local or state government is probably trying to build a highway or parking garage near you, which provides many opportunities for explaining peak oil. Or they may still be converting farmland to sprawl development, or cutting transit while still providing free parking. We live in a target rich environment.

The Writing Process

There are many approaches. Use what works for you. I try to read the newspapers at lunch. Most are online these days. Mull over the topics while walking the dog or hanging the laundry. Think about the facts you need, the concepts you wish to present, and metaphors you might use.

1st draft: Get it out into words; don't worry about spelling or organization.

2nd draft: Fix spelling & grammar, read to see if it makes sense.

3rd draft: Let it rest a bit. Go get a snack or read some e-mail to get distracted a bit before coming back. Now read it again. Revise and improve.

Remember your word count. If it's over what they are likely to print, cut it back. Better for you to cut it than for them to not print it. You can drop the softening words like "as I see it", "I would suggest" and "in my opinion". You can frequently drop adjectives and retain the core meaning. If you are well over the count, drop whole sentences. You may need to present just one idea rather than a few. Practice a concise writing style. Be Steinbeck, not Faulkner.

In school you were taught to begin with a topic sentence, give two or three sentences in support and a concluding sentence that summarizes what you just said. That can work as a letter to the editor, but isn't necessary. It moves slowly and eats up a lot of words. Another approach is to use a logic chain. Show people a better way to think about the topic. You can start in one place and end in another.

They may have taught you in school to never start a sentence with "but". Forget that. "But" is a fabulous sentence starter in letters to the editor.

You may use humor, but avoid sarcasm. People might not get it, or you may come off as a know it all or jack ass. Never make fun of someone's name.

Attack ideas or proposals, not motives or people. It's rarely helpful to ascribe evil motives to people.

Be sure to include the title and date of the article or editorial you are responding to in your first sentence. You can work it into the sentence, or put it in parentheses at the end.

Some newspapers just won't print about Peak Oil. It's still good to send them L2Es. Management may change hands, or maybe a letter will finally sink in someday. Or look for other outlets in the same paper. The Washington Post will rarely acknowledge Peak Oil except to deny it's a problem on their opinion page, but I still managed to get it in through the "Dr. Gridlock" column. Don't overlook newspapers that you typically disagree with. The more you disagree, the more opportunities you have for letters to the editor. I've had a boatload printed in the Washington Times with whom I typically disagree.

If you are printed, be sure to read the next few weeks' papers to see if they print a reply. Some papers will print a rebuttal to a reply. Even if they don't, it's good for the editor to know you had a good reply.

Here are a few sample letters. Feel free to steal these words when sending in your own letters. You may find a few words that I took from you... (Thanks)

Washington Times

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/feb/05/even-if-the-globe-isnt-w...>
<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2007/may/13/20070513-100738-4097r/?p...>
<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/dec/23/oil-lamp-getting-darker/>

Washington Examiner

<http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/Letters-from-Readers-8629405.html>
http://www.examiner.com/a-1444895~Letters_June_17_2008.html
<http://dev.www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/Letters-from-Readers-86294...>

Baltimore Sun

http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2007-03-26/news/0703260138_1_rosewood-c...
http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2006-07-19/news/0607190228_1_icc-oil-su...

Atlantic Monthly

<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200610/letters>

Government Executive Magazine

<http://www.govexec.com/features/1005-01/1005-01letters.htm>

Gazette Newspaper

http://www.gazette.net/stories/06172009/montlet173628_32547.shtml
http://www.gazette.net/stories/03252009/montlet174547_32489.shtml
http://www.gazette.net/stories/08132008/montlet173746_32465.shtml
http://www.gazette.net/stories/010208/montlet154220_32398.shtml



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