

Editors' Note; The Letters Editor and the Reader: Our Compact, Updated

By Thomas Feyer May 23, 2004

Last September, as letters editor of The Times, I used some of this space for an essay called "To the Reader," introducing myself and outlining the mission and the mechanics of the letters page.

It seemed to strike a chord, and scores of readers wrote back. Many were pleased to learn that the anonymous editor had a name. Some were grateful for the advice; others were amused, acerbic, occasionally even dyspeptic. I had my 15 minutes of fame: a flurry of dissection on the Internet; an interview on TV that lasted, well, about 15 minutes. We printed two letters in response -- pro and con, naturally.

But readers, new and old, send in questions (and even complaints!) about the letters page almost every day, and so a refresher course may help. This is an attempt to answer some frequently asked questions.

I've submitted many letters, but none have been published. How can I improve my chances?

Thanks largely to the ease and ubiquity of e-mail, letters submissions (and a lot besides) come in relentlessly, round the clock, from around the country and around the world, at a rate of roughly a thousand a day. My small staff and I try to read them all, but we can publish only about 15 letters a day.

While the odds are long, some letter writers seem to know how to shorten them. Here are some tips: Write quickly, concisely and engagingly. We're in an age of fast-moving news and virtually instant reaction; letters about an especially timely topic often appear within a day or two (and almost always within a week).

At times, some big stories generate hundreds of letters a day -- Sept. 11 (at one point we were getting hundreds an hour), the war in Iraq, politics, to name a few. When you write about a particularly contentious issue, bear in mind that many others do so as well. We can try to capture a sense of what's on readers' minds, but we can't be comprehensive.

Your suggested length for letters is about 150 words. Why so short? (Or, as one writer put it after I cited the brevity of the Gettysburg Address, "Why does Lincoln get 250 and the rest of us a measly 150?")

Ideally, the letters page should be a forum for a variety of voices, and that means letting a lot of readers have a turn. With our limited space, we have room for letters that make

their case with a point or two, but not for full-length articles. (For those, try our neighbors at the Op-Ed page.)

Once in a while, a particularly eloquent, newsworthy or pointed letter is allotted Lincolnesque space in print, but that is the exception.

You've said that the letters page "does not have a political coloration of its own." Yet liberal opinion seems to dominate, and conservatives seem to have a lesser voice. Why?

In selecting letters, I try to present a fair sampling of reader opinion, as well as a balance of views, pro and con. Writers to The Times -- by no means all, certainly, but a clear majority -- tend to be liberal, often vociferously so. Among our letter writers, critics of the Bush administration, especially over the war in Iraq, outnumber its defenders by a substantial margin.

On same-sex marriage, to cite another example, proponents far outnumber opponents among our letter writers. But there is more of a divide on other national issues, like abortion, affirmative action and immigration.

We welcome opinions from all sides: the majority, the dissenters, the contrarians. While I naturally have to use my judgment, it's not my opinion that determines the complexion of the page, it's yours.

Do you edit letters?

We reserve the right to edit for space, clarity, civility and accuracy, and we send you the edited version before publication. If your letter is selected, we will try to reach you and ask a few questions: Did you write the letter? (We're not amused by impostors.) Is it exclusive to The Times? (It should be.) Do you have a connection to the subject you're writing about? (Readers should be able to judge your credibility and motivation.)

What is your responsibility for ensuring that facts cited in letters are accurate?

Letter writers, to use a well-worn phrase, are entitled to their own opinions, but not to their own facts. There is, of course, a broad gray area in which hard fact and heartfelt opinion commingle. But we do try to verify the facts, either checking them ourselves or asking writers for sources of information. Sometimes we goof, and then we publish corrections.

Why are there so many letters from people with credentials or titles after their names?

These come in many flavors: an official's response to criticism; a statement of policy, printed for the record or for its news value; a view that we feel adds an interesting perspective or expertise to the debate.

As with any letter, writers speak only for themselves or their organizations; publication should not be taken as an endorsement of that view by The Times. The aim is to stimulate discussion, not end it.

A personal note, for those who've asked: I've been an editor at The Times for 23 years and counting, nearly 5 as letters editor, and a New Yorker since early childhood. I was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1953 and came to America with my parents -- survivors of Nazism and refugees from Communism -- in 1957. Five years later, we swore an oath as naturalized American citizens.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, my core belief as letters editor is that healthy, informed debate is the lifeblood of a strong democracy. Other than that, I'm an avid Times reader, just like you. If what's in this newspaper interests you, it interests me. THOMAS FEYER

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