

Talk Framework

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New York Times & Herald-Tribune Letters Information

What Constitutes an Effective Letter

How the Letter Editor Checks Facts and Handles Misinformation

How to Write Letters to the Editor

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The New York Times

Editors' Note: The Letters Editor and the Reader: Our Compact.

By Thomas Feyer - May 23, 2004

The Herald-Tribune

Letter handling procedures and basic information about the paper?

Herald-Tribune Letters Policy

In the letters, we strive to publish a mix of opinions and ideas.

We edit and fact-check each letter.

Writers may express their opinions, but may not spread misinformation.

Letters about local issues and those in response to a Herald-Tribune story are preferred.

We also give priority to letters that are timely, accurate and well written.

What constitutes an effective Letter to the Editor?

A good letter:

Is focused on one topic.

Is concise and engaging.

Is fact-supported.

Is at or below a paper's word count.

Three Sample Effective Letters Follow

Disproportionate attention paid to one case

I wonder how much attention would have been paid to Gabby Petito and Brian Laundrie if the couple were Black or Hispanic ('Gabby Petito case reveals stark disparities in coverage of missing people,' Sept. 24).

Elizabeth Deane, Sarasota 35 Words 9/29/21

DeSantis could hand parents' awesome power

Gov. Ron DeSantis signed an executive order recently that gives parents the final say-so over whether their children wear masks to ward off COVID-19 during the upcoming school year. "I want to empower parents to make the best decisions they can for the well-being of their children," he said. Other executive orders the governor is considering:

Driving on either side of the road: Parents should be empowered to determine on which side of the road they want their children to drive.

Going topless at the beach or pool: Parents should be empowered to determine whether or not they should cover up.

Open carry in the classrooms: Parents should be empowered to decide if their children go to school armed.

Age restriction on drinking: Parents should be empowered to decide at what age their children should consume beer or whiskey.

Norman R. Wirtz, Nokomis - 139 Words

I don't want to hear a blip about COVID

In response to Biden's call this week to "get out of the way" regarding mask and vaccine mandates, DeSantis replied: "I don't want to hear a blip about COVID from you."

While DeSantis can, subject to legal challenges, block schools and private businesses from imposing mandates on vaccinations and masks.

What DeSantis cannot do is force Sarasota's very large and economically essential senior population to continue to attend our critically important cultural and performing arts organizations, let alone our restaurants and other businesses.

While I love and regularly attend our wonderful theaters, as the Delta virus attacks, I'm a senior who is not going to frequent any local theater that does not have a mask mandate. I will not sit next to an unmasked and unvaccinated patron who is denying me my right to be safe and protected in a public space. I believe there are thousands of Sarasota seniors who will make the same decision.

Hopefully Governor DeSantis will reverse his policy before he destroys Sarasota's amazing cultural and performing arts community.

**The Letters Editor carefully fact checks
and edits submitted letters**

*Illustration of the Letters Editor Fact Checking and Editing a letter to make it better.
The letters headline and first paragraph follow:*

Banning vaccine passports is absurd

U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan, R-Longboat Key, emailed his constituents this week, writing: “I wanted to let you know I just co-sponsored legislation to ban the federal government from issuing vaccine passports.”

The Letters Editor began her review of my letter by checking whether Buchanan had co-sponsored the legislation. She shortly emailed me that he was not on the list of co-sponsors. I sent her a copy of Buchanan’s email that established that he had made the false statement and she left it in the letter.

I carefully observed the Herald-Tribune’s 200-word count, so my submitted last paragraph was very brief. It simply stated that to achieve herd immunity an estimated 70% would have to be vaccinated. The Letters Editor rewrote and expanded the paragraph supporting the herd immunity issue with a fact-based statement from the Mayo Clinic saying 75% was required to achieve herd immunity. The revised paragraph follows:

If many Americans refuse to get vaccinated, this will prevent the country from reaching the percentage of the population necessary to create herd immunity...To reach herd immunity, an estimated 75%, or more than 200 million people, will have to be vaccinated, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Please wear a mask and get vaccinated!

F. Lowell Curtis, Longboat Key – 251 Words - 51 Words added by the Letters Editor April 17, 2021

“You are entitled to your opinion. But you are not entitled to your own facts.” Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Probably the biggest challenge for a newspaper letters editor is how to address false facts versus permissible ignorant opinions.

How the Letters Editor addresses false information.

The essential need to be vaccinated for Covid-19 has been challenged by an amazing host of false statements that have politicalized a medical science issue. One false statement circulating is that if you had Covid you do not need to get vaccinated.

The Herald-Tribune published a 200-word letter on September 18, 2021 that defends that position, by Andrea Hume, MD, “a physician-trained medical outcomes analyst who has advised health plans” ...

In her letter she supports her position with the following false statements:

“...In an Israeli study, 7% of vaccinees with prior COVID infection required emergency care or hospitalization after receiving a single dose of the Pfizer vaccine...

...Those with prior COVID or a positive antibody test should be excluded by policymakers from any vaccination requirements.”

The Letters Editor posted the following note to the conclusion of her letter:

Editor’s note: The Israeli study has not been peer reviewed or endorsed by the scientific community. The CDC recommends that those who have recovered from COVID be vaccinated to prevent reinfection.

*This is an excellent example of an **Opinion Letter** – that does not spread factual misinformation and is in compliance with the Herald-Tribune's policies. Read this letter carefully and you will realize that the writer is forcefully expressing his opinion, that you will not like, but he does not represent those opinions as facts!*

Most Americans support DeSantis, Abbott

'Abbott, DeSantis in race to the right': The front-page headline and long article Nov. 7 bordered on the absurd. The policies of Govs. Ron DeSantis and Greg Abbott are presented in a negative light, as usual, by the Herald-Tribune.

I believe most Americans would agree with both men and the positions they have espoused.

Take COVID mandates: Americans are sick of them. Mandates closed businesses, causing many bankruptcies, closed many schools for more than a year and, in general, disrupted millions of lives for too long. Now President Joe Biden wants more.

Also, I believe most Americans would not argue with governors trying to protect our borders, while Biden lets hundreds of thousands enter illegally.

Parents in Virginia spoke emphatically about not wanting their children taught that their race makes them either an oppressor or the oppressed. Thankfully Florida and Texas have banned the teaching of critical race theory.

On transgender issues, I believe most thoughtful people would want these folks treated with dignity and respect, but boys should not compete against girls in high school sports. That is patently unfair.

Yes, DeSantis and Abbott are in a 'race to the right.' Maybe because the 'right' is the right place to be.

Richard Abruzzi, Lakewood Ranch – Words 202

How – and when - to write a letter to the editor!

Most important guideline:

Keep your letter short and focused on one subject.

Critical Race Theory

There has been a lot of talk about teaching "critical race theory," which has become a conversation about how we deal with the history of America. It's been said that if we allow students to explore the true story of our history in all of its beauty and all of its ugliness, we will put a heavy burden of guilt on our children. But understanding the real story of our country will actually produce Americans who strive to fulfill the promise of democracy. Those who try to suppress critical thinking will themselves bear the guilt of producing a generation of citizens who live in a fairy tale world.

Jo Bloom, Sarasota - Words 107 July 2021

The New York Times

We think we are superior to our forebears because we don't sacrifice human beings to pagan deities. But every few weeks, someone slays eight people, 10 people, or 30 people because our leaders tremble before a present-day idol: the National Rifle Association.

Other nations don't have continual mass killings, only the United States.

Mark Weston, Sarasota – Words 62 - March 24, 2021

Timing Is Essential

The faster you respond to an article or letter or event, the greater are the chances of having your letter published.

Make your most important point upfront.

Outrage over Siesta Key vote

The vote by the Sarasota County commissioners supporting hotels on Siesta Key is the latest indicator that they are not concerned about what the residents want – they are concerned about favoring business.

Do any of the commissioners live on Siesta Key and deal with the current in-season traffic issues? Or do they think this not their problem? I was naive to think that our input could make a difference.

For example, take the Benderson Stickney Point development project: As I recall 87 of 95 residents spoke out against the project, yet it still passed. I now believe that approvals are predetermined and that the hearings are just required legal formalities – and the latest Siesta Key vote is more proof.

It's a disgrace.

If possible, refer to an article or letter that has appeared in the paper, and do so early in your letter.

Recall leaders for Siesta Key hotel vote

Chris Anderson's proposal to incorporate Siesta Key to save it from overdevelopment got me thinking ("With hotel looming, incorporating Siesta Key is the only way to save it," Oct. 30).

Why not pursue a recall of the three county commissioners who voted in favor of a 170-room hotel that is completely out of sync with the zoning ordinance ('Disputed Siesta Key hotel project moves ahead after Sarasota County Commission removes hotel room cap,' Oct. 27)?

Either option – incorporation or recall – is a heavy lift to accomplish, but a recall might be simpler. No new government entity would be needed, just three new commissioners who would be accountable to their constituents.

Nora Duffy, Sarasota - Word 117 Nov. 3, 2021

Personalize your letter.

Without COVID rules, Van Wezel out

My wife and I bought tickets to a performance next month at the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall. We bought them in good faith, with the understanding that the COVID-19 safety protocols agreed to by the Sarasota coalition of arts venues would be honored.

If the Van Wezel now wishes to change the deal and renege on its contract with us, we will definitely ask for our money back. A deal is a deal.

Stephen W. Johnson, Sarasota — Words 80 October 25, 2021

Stick to the facts.

Retain voting by single-member district

In 2018, a majority of voters approved a measure regarding election of our Sarasota County commissioners. By that vote, the county decided in favor of each district choosing its own representative...

For some reason, the Charter Review Board has decided to discuss the outcome of that referendum...Its meeting May 19 drew heavy citizen involvement, with most speaking in favor of respecting the will of the voters.

It is easy to see why:

- 60% of voters of *all* parties voted in favor of single-member districts.
- It is a common-sense approach that allows for representation by those who know well the needs of their districts.
- Single-member districts cut down significantly on campaign expenses.

...We are hopeful that at its Oct. 20 meeting, the Charter Review Board will decide to respect the will of the 2018 voters...

Social Justice Committee, Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota – October 8, 2021

Issue a call to action

Support Manatee schools' referendum

Imagine:

Having \$500 a month removed from your paycheck. Having the equivalent of one full year of schooling stripped from your child's education. Budding high school scientists no longer having access to... instruction in STEM programs.

All of this will happen if the one-mill referendum renewal for Manatee County's schools does not pass on Nov. 2. Teachers' pay will be docked more than \$5,000 a year. The extra 30 minutes during each school day... will be gone. Advanced STEM instruction will be on the chopping block.

All these initiatives and more are the result of the approximately \$40 million a year in extra operational funds that is generated with referendum revenue...

As chair of Protect Our Public Schools Manasota...I urge Manatee County residents to vote "Yes" on the one-mill referendum.

Carol Lerner, Sarasota - Words 149 - October. 29, 2021

Be respectful, not nasty, in tone

GOP's actions turn off Sarasota voter

The GOP is the only political party represented on the Charter Review Board, which wants to overturn the will of the voters regarding single-member districts, approved by the majority in a citizens' initiative.

Republicans are also the only political party represented on the Sarasota County Commission; the commissioners also want to overturn the will of the voters on single-member districts.

Redistricting under consideration may bring major gerrymandering. Republicans hold the majority in the Florida Legislature, which has passed voter suppression laws.

That tells me what I need to know about the Republican Party.

Write concisely and clearly

Beautiful Memorial

Over 400,000 Americans have died of covid-19 as of January 19th. President-elect Biden held a beautiful memorial to remember those we've lost. I watched on MSNBC and was moved to think about our shared loss. Fox News did not cover this memorial. Don't all Americans mourn? If we can't share these kinds of moments, how do we heal?

Josephine Bloom, Sarasota - Word 60 - Jan. 19, 2021

Final thought about writing letters to the editor:

There is value even if your letter doesn't appear.