

MEDIA TIPS

Adapted for New York Yearly Meeting Friends from the American Friends Service Committee's "Communications Guide" and other resources provided by AFSC's New York Metropolitan Regional Office.

Many editors, reporters, and talk show hosts provide opportunities for private citizens to express their views. An accumulation of individual voices can influence public opinion. These guidelines may help Friends find ways to have their voices heard.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The "Letters to the Editor" page of a newspaper is read more than any other except the front page. A statement presented there can reach a wide audience. Magazines and radio programs often have a Letters section as well.

- ◇ **Consider local and regional news outlets in addition to major publications.** Weekly community newspapers, denominational newspapers, and specialty papers often have large circulations and are more likely to print your letter.
- ◇ **Keep your letter short, focusing on a single issue.** For most papers, magazines and radio programs, 100 words or less is ideal. Many editors will simply discard your letter if it is too long.
- ◇ **Try to write in a lively, interesting style.** Creativity and humor will increase your chances of being published. Use specifics rather than abstractions.
- ◇ **Tie your letter to a recently published item in the paper, giving the title and date.** Editors like to present a continuing dialogue in the letters column.
- ◇ **Express your opinion clearly and respectfully.** Inflammatory letters will probably not persuade people to consider your views and are less likely to be printed.
- ◇ **ALWAYS include your name, address, and daytime phone number.** Also sign your letter (unless emailing). Most papers will call to verify that you are the author. Editors will not publish anonymous contributions.
- ◇ **Wait a month or two (more with some publications) before sending another letter to a paper or magazine that has just run one of your letters.**
- ◇ **Be sure to send letters with a local focus to local news outlets.**

◇ **If sending your letter via email, include your message in the body, not as an attachment.** Also, use just one address in the "TO:" field. Don't send to editors via cc or bcc.

◇ **Where appropriate, mention a politician's name in your letter.** The politician will notice.

Please note: Newspapers and magazines regularly print guidelines in their Letters to the Editor section. Follow their guidelines carefully as well as those given above.

CALLING IN TO RADIO TALK SHOWS

Talk radio is a popular format that can provide opportunities to discuss your program, event or issue. Most cities have one or more talk radio stations. Many other stations have talk radio programs. A recent *Times Mirror* study found that more than 40 percent of Americans listen frequently to talk radio.

Think carefully before deciding to become a caller on a radio talk show. If the host is someone who loves to make mincemeat of people with views like yours, do you really want to be a target? Monitor various shows and decide where you might be most effective. Advance preparation pays off.

◇ **Develop key talking points.** Write them down in bulleted format so you will be able to read them easily even if you become nervous.

◇ **Spend time crafting your points; use short, concise phrases.** Although you may feel that sound bites are superficial, they are often what people remember best. Radio hosts do not appreciate long, rambling sentences. And, if you allow yourself to ramble, you may wind up saying something you didn't really mean to say.

◇ **Know in advance which points are your top priority.** When time is limited, focus on just one or two key issues.

◇ **Be prepared to wait** for someone to answer your call and ask what you plan to say. Turn your radio down while you are on the air so it will not interfere with the broadcast.

◇ **Avoid starting out with oppositional language.** Consider instead finding a point of common ground to initiate a dialogue with the host. For example, if your host suggests that bombing in Afghanistan may be necessary to insure the safety of Americans, state that you, too, are concerned about safety, and explain how further violence may make the world a more dangerous place.

RADIO AND TV INTERVIEWS

Friends who have developed expertise in an area of interest to the media may wish to be invited as a guest on an interview program. You can ask the public affairs director of a radio station for a list of interview shows and names of the producers. On radio the producer is the person who lines up guests for a public affairs program. With TV the public affairs director usually does this job. Most local talk shows are interested in issues or news events in your community. Some are simply interested in intriguing people and projects. They are always looking for knowledgeable, effective communicators. Again, think locally and investigate the possibilities.

Be familiar with local Sunday morning programs on TV, which are often community or feature oriented. Most of these programs are planned by the public affairs director at the station. Get in touch with this person to suggest programs or feature ideas, especially when you have an idea that connects with high profile local or national news stories. Keep in mind the visual and dramatic possibilities of a suggestion as well as the "talking heads" approach.

You will need to clearly state how your issue or program relates to current events and to the interests of the show's listeners or viewers. Be prepared to send the producer or public affairs director supporting materials. Don't be discouraged if you are not chosen immediately. Keep following the program and reminding the producer of your availability. If you are asked to be a guest on an interview show, keep these suggestions in mind:

- ◇ **Listen to or watch the show ahead of time** if you have not already done so. Familiarize yourself with the host's style, the kinds of questions that are asked, and the kinds of callers who normally respond.
- ◇ **Plan what you want to say keeping in mind that people remember short, concise phrases.** Bear in mind the main points you want to make, regardless of the questions you are asked. Practice answering questions, handling hostile callers, and getting your message across. Take some notes along to the interview.
- ◇ **Keep your message simple and address your audience directly.** Speak slowly and avoid long pauses. Visualize talking to one person who is listening to you.
- ◇ **Try to find some common ground when the host or callers disagree with you.** Be assertive, but not aggressive. Never lose your temper! Use a host's or caller's disagreements with you to restate your main points.
- ◇ **Be sure that your passion and enthusiasm for your issue come through.** Be inviting, not harsh, convincing, not threatening. Your tone and delivery are almost as important as what you say.
- ◇ **Don't underestimate your audience.** Most people will respect you more and admire your openness if you admit when you don't have all the answers. You are most likely to persuade people if you can demonstrate the common sense of your approach.

◇ **Avoid jargon, acronyms, and statistics.** On radio remember that people cannot see you and may know nothing about your program. If statistics are used, they should be easy to understand and should underscore your basic perspective.

◇ **Evaluate your effort.** Take a blank cassette with you to the studio and ask the engineer to make a copy of the show. An alternative is to have someone record the show for you. As hard as it may be, listen to the show with some friends. Talking about how you could have improved your answers will better prepare you for the next interview.

OP-EDS & ARTICLES

Op-eds in newspapers or "guest editorials" on radio or TV are a chance to present a slightly longer and more in-depth perspective on an issue of current concern, usually one already addressed editorially by the paper or station. If you are interested in writing an op-ed, contact the editors of the paper or station and ask if they would be open to your contribution and what are the requirements. Some papers have a community section where it is sometimes easier to have an article published. On the regular op-ed page, you have a better chance of being accepted if you can present yourself as someone who has expertise or personal involvement with the subject. You also have a better likelihood of a good reception if the editors know and respect you.

Similarly, if you wish to write a news article for publication, the editors will more likely be interested if they know your qualifications. Some local papers, however, are willing to accept well-written submissions from readers without special qualifications. Friends should also consider the possibilities of the religion page.

Most often, 600 to 800 words is an acceptable length for an op-ed. Back up your opinion with facts and specific examples. If you are addressing a national issue, making local connections in the story increases your chances for publication. Follow local media so you become familiar with the kinds of op-eds and guest editorials presented in their space.

EVENTS

If you would like to publicize an upcoming event, take advantage of services available through local media, including newspaper, radio, and TV community calendars. These are very brief announcements that state the who, what, where, when and possibly the "why" of events open to the public. Community calendars are usually coordinated by different people and handled in a different way than general news. Information must be submitted well in advance of the event. Some stations will accept a taped announcement. Find out the requirements of your local media.