

# Write a 'readable' letter

Steve Sorensen © 2004  
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## *By the way...*

I don't often read letters to the editor, but I should.

If I would read more letters, I'd undoubtedly be better informed. I might see an issue from a new perspective, or even change my mind. It's not that I'm uninterested in what others have to say. My problem is that too many letter writers don't entice me to read their letters. I'd like to help.

There was a day when Mister Reader would come home and read the afternoon paper while the Missus made dinner. That was a day when we had far less to read, and more time to read it. That day is gone. We have only morning papers now, and both Mister and Missus want to ingest the morning's news with a bagel and coffee before leaving for work.

So, the first thing for letter writers to realize is that the newspaper is full of information, but most readers don't have time to read it all. So, think of the newspaper as a contest for the reader's attention. Every article, column, and letter is in competition with every other article, column, and letter. The reader is the judge of that competition, constantly making decisions about what to read. If you want your letter to win that contest, I have just one piece of advice. It will give your letter more prominence, and encourage people like me to read it with gladness.

Here's my advice: Short is smart. A half a column, better yet a third of a column, will get read.

You've seen many letters run

to two, sometimes even three full columns. Too bad that the average reader who wants to be informed has too much to read to spend more than a few minutes on any page of the newspaper. He'll look over the letters, and the ones that look like they won't take much time -- they win the competition.

Right about now long-winded letter writers are saying, "I'm not long-winded. I want to be thorough. I want to be persuasive. I want to be convincing."

But remember this: No matter how passionate you are, your letter will never convince anyone who doesn't read it of anything. If your letter is the longest item on the page, few people are likely to read it.

Of course, some will read it. Your family and friends will. The people who agree with you might. But so far, that's only evangelizing the converted. If you want to bring someone to your side of an issue, it's your responsibility to get your letter read. Therefore, write a short letter that makes a single crisp, clear point, makes it fast, makes it easy to understand, and lets the reader reach the end.

How do you write short? Make sure you have a point you can state in one simple sentence. Allow that sentence to guide your writing. If your sentence is compound or complex, break it down into two simple sentences. In newspapers, as in most of

life, simple is good.

One reason that many letters are too long is that it's easier to write long than to write short. Writing short means making sure every word is necessary. Which words aren't pulling their load? Eliminate them. What sentences are repetitive, or don't support your point? Execute them. What paragraphs divert the reader to side issues, or are fatally flawed in other ways? If you can't give them a healing touch, euthanize them. It's perfectly legal and to your advantage.

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## **There is an inverse relationship between length and readership: the longer the letter, the fewer the readers.**

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Make your letter easy to read by keeping your sentences and paragraphs short. If a paragraph is too long, break it into two.

Ask a couple of people you trust to read your letter. But don't ask them if they like it; of course they like it. That's not important. Ask them if it was easy to read. Ask them if they wanted to read past the first paragraph. Ask them if there was any place where they wanted to stop.

If you must make more than one point, consider writing a second letter. If you've done a good job on the first one, you'll almost guarantee your readers will read the second one.

I'm not saying that long letters are always bad, or that letters are bad because they're long. The longest letter on the page might



be the best. But the smart writer knows he can't afford to gamble that his writing is good enough, his angle clever enough, and his content gripping enough to snag the busy reader who is deciding whether or not to read past the first paragraph. He knows there is an inverse relationship between length and readership: the longer the letter, the fewer the readers.

Are there exceptions? Yes. For example, some writers use devices such as narratives or sustained humor to make a point, but they're taking the risk that few people will read them. It's generally best not to consider yourself an exception to anything.

Warren County citizens have plenty of opinions, and no shortage of issues. Employment, education, elections, economic development, the environment - and that's just the letter E! If you want people to read your letter, take my advice. Or not. But remember, I'm just one of thousands who probably won't read your letter unless you do.

*Steve Sorensen lives in Russell with his wife and Greta. He has been a puppet, a pauper, a preacher, a poet, a pawn, and he knows a king. He pounds on the keyboard because he thinks that a word is worth a thousand pictures. He's seen it done, but hasn't yet succeeded in writing that word himself. Maybe next time. Greta, by the way, is a miniature dachshund, just to clear up the pictures that word created.*