

Writer's Manual

Father John A. Hardon, S.J. Media Apostolate

Good, the more communicated, more abundant grows.

- John Milton

Words have tremendous power. So does technology. The two combined can be formidable, and we live in an age when an ordinary person can submit an impactful three-paragraph opinion piece by e-mail to a major newspaper and have it read the next morning by millions of human beings.

This manual offers ideas for effective writing on issues of interest to Catholics. Since the Church represents all that is good and true, writers now have a great opportunity: they can share its goodness readily with a click of the “send” key.

Read on, and write!

Let your Catholic voice be heard!

How? By writing effective letters to media outlets – letters that get published and therefore reach the eyes of many readers. *YOU* can bring Catholic viewpoints to the public forum and help shape public opinion. *YOU* can help fight harmful television content by writing letters to TV producers that get attention. *YOU* can help turn the power of media to the good.

Consider the following, lifted from the *Vatican II Decree on the Media of Social Communications*, also known as *Inter Mirifica*:

The Church recognizes that these media [the press, movies, radio, television and the like], if properly utilized, can be of great service to mankind, since they greatly contribute to men's entertainment and instruction as well as to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God...

Since public opinion exercises the greatest power and authority today in every sphere of life, both private and public, every member of society must fulfill the demands of justice and charity in this area. As a result, all must strive, through these media as well, to form and spread sound public opinion.

Following are specific ways in which you can craft effective letters and increase the chance of their publication!

Tips on Writing Effective "Letters to the Editor" in response to news coverage on the Catholic Church

- Use the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as your inspiration. Use it also as a source of solid information so you're accurate when representing Church teaching. When writing for a secular outlet, however, actually quoting the *Catechism* probably won't be effective. Paraphrase the ideas instead.
- Write to convert, not confront. In other words, write charitably. Avoid a "slap-back" approach. You can write strongly and still be charitable. A good phrase to use is "It would appear that." Example: "It would appear that XYZ newspaper misrepresented the Catholic viewpoint in its January 2 story on euthanasia..."
- Freshness is important in the news business. Submit letters **promptly**, more or less depending on the medium. For daily newspapers, e-mail or fax your response the same day or early the next to increase its chance of publication. It's a good idea to visit the outlet's website to learn their submission guidelines (some national papers, for example, require exclusivity).
- Brief is usually best.
- Generally, make chief points first. Letters are typically edited from the bottom up (another reason why brevity is preferable – your letter is more likely to be left intact).
- It's helpful to write in response to a specific item in that outlet, and refer to it. Pertinence to that outlet's readership heightens your chance of publication.
- Remember to write letters commending positive coverage on occasion – not just letters criticizing the negative.
- Avoid criticizing the outlet itself for something it published or broadcast. Doing so might make you feel good, but may not be the most effective way to make your point. It also may prejudice the publication against you for future submissions. A better way to express your feelings: call the circulation department, cancel your subscription if you have one, and tell them why.
- In general, keep in mind the basic elements of persuasion: to **teach**, to **delight**, and to **move** people.

When writing letters in response to offensive content on television or radio: Write not only to the station manager but to the **program sponsor**. For the latter, direct your letter to the president of the company, not to customer relations or PR. (Find an Internet-savvy friend to help you find the company address and president's name.)

Such letters get attention. A single letter is believed to represent the opinions of many in the viewing audience who didn't bother to write.

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