How to Write a Letter to the Editor

Letters to the editor are one of the easiest ways to get an important message out to the community. They are generally brief, to the point, and in response to a previously written article or other public event, in this case, National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month. One reason they are so effective is that after the front page and the comics, many people read the editorial section. Letters to the editor have credibility because often they come from the general public. As a local physician in the community writing about an important public health issue, you have this credibility.

One of the #1 Rules for a Successful Letter to the Editor: Keep it Brief

Limit your writing to two or three paragraphs. Each paragraph only needs to be a couple of sentences. Usually the first paragraph introduces the issue and sums up the objective, the second gives background/support, and the third summarizes (it’s important to point people to a source for more information or to engage them in action whenever practical).

Even though the letter to the editor should be brief, don’t be surprised if the newspaper edits your letter to make it shorter for spacing issues. Since your letter may be edited, you should get to the point early.

If you can’t make your point within these constraints, consider writing a full-blown opinion column, often called an OP-ED because it appears on the page opposite the newspaper’s own editorials. An OP-ED column should consist of no more than 15 paragraphs and 10 paragraphs is a better length.

The examples included in this toolkit are bylined articles from your ACG colleagues. They worked with their local newspapers to write an article for the Health section. This is another strategy to consider, but its success will depend on the paper, its size and readership, and reaching a receptive Health editor. Please let ACG Communications know if you need help finding contact information for your local health editor.

Other Tips:

- **Share the Good News.** With so much good news about the lifesaving potential for colon cancer screening, make sure your letter includes the *positives* too.

- **Preparing Your Letter.** Address your letter “Dear Editor” and put it on letterhead from your practice or academic institution. Submit your letter online or fax to the editorial page. **You must include a daytime phone number.** The paper will likely want to call you if they decide to run your letter.

- **Don’t Be Shy About Follow-up.** If you haven’t seen your letter published within a few days of sending it, call or email the editorial office to inquire about the status. You may get answers that will help you the next time you write. Remember that no newspaper is obligated to print your letter, but newspaper editors consider themselves obligated to present all sides of the issues fairly and accurately.