

How to write a ‘letter to the editor’

Introduction

The ‘letters to the editor’ page is one of the most widely-read pages in a newspaper, and papers in the NT appear to struggle to find enough letters of reasonable quality to fill their page. Writing a letter to the editor is a useful way of gaining free publicity for the aims and policy positions of your organisation. NTCOSS has enjoyed considerable success with getting letters to the editor published using the following techniques:

- **Be very clear about the point of your letter.**

Write the purpose of your letter in one simple sentence before you draft the letter: ‘I want to support the introduction of a floor price on alcohol’, or ‘I want the government to abandon the 130k speed limit.’

As you draft your letter make sure you stay clearly on this track. If your letter rambles on, or contains irrelevant material, it is less likely to get published.

- **Read the ‘letters to the editor’ policy**

Look for a paragraph in small type somewhere on the letters page which will advise of the paper’s preferred word length for letters, and may provide other limitations. Make sure your letter conforms to these requirements

- **Cater to the style of the particular newspaper you are targeting**

Explore the ‘culture’ of the letters page in the newspaper you are targeting. Editors like their pages to have a consistent style, so look to see what they are publishing and adopt a similar style.

Tabloid newspapers (e.g. *NT News*, *Centralian Advocate*) like to run short (150 words) and punchy letters written in simple language and expressing a strong view.

Broadsheet newspapers like *The Australian* or the *Sydney Morning Herald* tend to run longer letters (300 words or more) written in more sophisticated language and expressing positions which can sometimes be quite complex.

If your target newspaper publishes letters which include informal terms like ‘battler’, ‘unique Territory lifestyle’, or ‘do-gooder’ then adopt this style in your letter writing.

- **Use an article or letter that has appeared in the same paper as a ‘hook’ for your letter**

Newspapers are self-referential and like to think that they set the agenda. They are often happy to publish letters which refer to something that appeared earlier in their paper. If you are using this technique cite the earlier article. You can also write in to commend an editorial which the paper has published, thus further prolonging the story.

- **Don’t be personal or abusive.**

Stick to the issue under discussion. Resist the temptation to make personal criticisms of those who hold alternative views. Your letter will look more thoughtful and considered.

- **Before you submit your letter, read it out aloud to someone else**

If you can’t read a letter aloud so that it sounds smooth and fluent, then some redrafting is probably needed.

SOME BRIEF TIPS

- As a general rule, keep your sentences short and your language simple.
- Make your letter clear and crisp.
- Letters about current issues have a better chance of being published.
- Use a snappy phrase or ‘sound bite’ to help your letter to stand out from the others.
- Use active language
- Don’t be openly abusive - don’t engage in personal abuse – “play the ball”
- Avoid ‘bad’ language
- Get the organisations CEO to sign the letter under their title.
- Include a title for your letter if you can think of something catchy. It will usually get changed for publication, but will help attract the editor’s eye initially.
- Read your letter out aloud to someone else before you submit it. (fluency check)

On the following pages are a number of letters which NTCOSS has had published in the
NT News



Northern Territory News

08-Dec-2010

Page: 18

Letters

By: Wendy Morton

Market: Darwin

Circulation: 20553

Type: Capital City Daily

Size: 66.70 sq.cms

Frequency: MTWTF

ACTION TO COMBAT ALCOHOL APPLAUSED

CHIEF Minister Paul Henderson is to be commended for his courage in being prepared to consider the imposition of a floor price on alcohol (*NT News*, December 4).

Experts agree that the sale of very cheap table wines and fortified wines causes enormous damage to the health and wellbeing of many disadvantaged Territorians. It may also contribute significantly to the \$600m that alcohol misuse costs the NT every year.

A floor price will not increase the cost of beer, nor will it prevent bottle shops from offering discount prices on many items. It will simply make the very cheapest

forms of alcohol slightly less accessible to many of those who are at greatest risk.

Experience suggests that, while public education campaigns have their place, it is policies like the imposition of floor prices that have been shown to be most successful in reducing alcohol consumption.

What will be a minor inconvenience for many consumers will also be a life-saving measure for those who struggle most with alcohol. The Northern Territory Council of Social Service (NTCOSS) commends the Henderson Government for its willingness to take serious action to combat alcohol in the Territory.

**Wendy Morton,
Executive Director. NTCOSS**



Northern Territory News

21-Oct-2010

Page: 13

Letters

Market: Darwin

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Size: 67.17 sq.cms

Frequency: MTWTF

POVERTY IN MODERN AUSTRALIA IS A CRIME

THIS week is anti-poverty week, and all around the nation community groups are raising their voices on behalf of Australia's most disadvantaged people.

Poverty isn't about complicated tables of numbers assembled by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Poverty is about a mother who can't afford to buy shoes for her children, a teenager living on the streets, and an old man who has lost all of his possessions to an alcohol addiction.

Australia is one of the richest countries in the world. Our standard of living has increased exponentially in the last 30 years.

Many families have two or even three cars, and enjoy

regular overseas holidays. Our lives are made more comfortable by plasma screen televisions, iPads, and high-speed internet connections. Yet a small but significant proportion of Australians are condemned to the misery of poverty.

NTCOSS believes that we must end the blame game, and provide help to those who most need it.

Australia in 2010 can well afford to provide food, clothing, shelter and basic support for all its citizens.

Early intervention is the key. We need to give people a fair go, so they can become happy and productive members of our community.

**Wendy Morton
Executive director
NT Council of Social Service**



Northern Territory News

03-Jun-2010

Page: 14

Letters

By: Wendy Morton

Region: Darwin

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Frequency: MTWTF

All should share in ban

NTCOSS supports the decision to ban the sale of full strength beer and spirits during football matches at TIO Stadium.

However, the logic behind exempting members and corporate box holders from the restriction is questionable.

Misuse of alcohol in our community does untold damage to white, black, rich, and poor alike — even if the problem is more visible among some of these groups than others. It's important that we all share in the minor inconveniences which are necessary to produce a greater good.

The limitations on alcohol sales should apply equally to all those who go to the footy, regardless of whether they can afford to become members or hire a corporate box.

Congratulations to Police Commissioner John McRoberts for driving this reform.

**Wendy Morton
Executive Director Northern Territory Council
of Social Service (NTCOSS)**

ALCOHOL REFORM A WORTHY CAUSE

NTCOSS (Northern Territory Council of Social Service) congratulates the *NT News* for its community leadership in championing the NT Government's alcohol reforms in Friday's editorial "a good start, more to do".

We believe that measures such as the removal from sale of four and five litre casks will do a great deal to reduce the enormous human misery and financial cost of alcohol misuse across the Territory. Thoughtful restrictions, coupled with additional resources for treatment and public education will produce a safer and healthier Territory for all.

We commend the Henderson Government for having the courage to tackle the problem, and endorse the *NT News* call for an examination of the benefits of reducing opening hours and introducing a "floor price" on the cost of alcohol.

**Wendy Morton,
Executive director
Northern Territory Council
of Social Service**

Page: 12

Letters

By: Wendy Morton,

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FLOOR PRICE WILL NOT AFFECT BEER

IT'S disappointing to note that the Minister for Alcohol Policy, Della Lawrie, has issued a media release suggesting that the introduction of a "floor price" on alcohol would see the cost of beer increase. This is not the case.

A floor price on alcohol would increase the cost only of the cheapest and most damaging alcohol, particularly cask wine. The intention of a floor price is to align the cost of the cheapest alcohol with the price of beer.

Chief Minister Paul Henderson has noted that alcohol is the single biggest social problem in the Northern Territory.

NTCOSS does not advocate prohibition. We are simply suggesting that it's time to "turn down the tap" and reduce the damage alcohol does in our community. This small sacrifice on the part of moderate drinkers will bring great benefit to many of those who are most vulnerable in our community.

**Wendy Morton,
Executive Director
NT Council of Social Service**