

Animal Concern Factsheet 8 - Letter Writing - An Effective Pressure Tool

Letter writing is one of the most important tasks required of anyone in a pressure group.

The main people you will have occasion to write to are politicians, business people and the media. The main reasons for writing are to ask for or give information and/or to request action.

The first thing you have to ensure is that you are writing to the correct person or agency. If you want information on vivisection there would be no point in writing to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries when vivisection is dealt with by the Home Office. Or it would be a waste of time to write to the Home Office about a local circus as circuses are licensed by your local Council.

When writing on an issue concerning Westminster or E.U. government it is best to write to your M.P. or Euro M.P. asking for the information or requesting action. On an issue concerning local government it is a good idea to contact your councillor. If you don't know who these people are your local library will be able to tell you. Your elected representative has a duty to act on your behalf. S/he will contact the correct department, committee or official and attempt to gain the information or action you have requested. Your councillor or M.P. will probably elicit a response more quickly than you can and you have an added incentive in that your councillor or M.P. will also be learning about the issue and may actually become interested in the outcome.

When writing to the business community you will probably be asking for products such as fur, battery-eggs, exotic or intensively farmed meats or animal-tested goods to be discontinued by a store. When writing to the media you will be responding to an item you have read, viewed or listened to, asking that a subject be covered or simply raising an issue you believe more people should know about.

FERAL CATS

Do not underestimate the power of a letter. One letter from Animal Concern to a major Japanese city changed their policy on dealing with feral cats. Two or three letters from individuals and two from Animal Concern persuaded Clarks shoes to withdraw a range of fur lined boots, donate them to Romania and instruct their manufacturer to use synthetic linings in future. A letter to an M.P. can result in questions in Parliament and changes in Government policy. A letter to a TV or radio programme can give producers the idea for an item or perhaps a whole programme. A letter to a newspaper may prompt a feature in that paper or even a phone-in debate on radio (radio researchers check all the letters columns for ideas). Letters to the media are a great way to 'spread the word'. You would have to give out leaflets on the street every Saturday for a year to reach as many people as one letter in the press.

Many people are unsure of how to compose a letter, lose heart if several letters in a row are ignored by the newspapers or even feel intimidated by the 'importance' of a politician or public figure. There is a knack or craft to writing a letter and forget about being awed by someone's standing. Politicians and civil servants are employed by you to work for you.

The first knack to writing a letter is simple. Is the letter worth writing? Newspapers and politicians are inundated with letters. Do not write on trivial or vague issues. If you have decided the issue is important then it's time to remember the three golden rules.

- 1) Make sure you are writing to the correct person or office and that you have the correct address.
- 2) Keep your letter short, polite, to the point and legible
- 3) Include facts and figures if you have them, but don't try to impress by using words or details you are unsure of.

Below are two letters to the press about the same issue. The first to The Scotsman and the second to the Sun. As you can see a totally different and abbreviated style is used for the tabloid press and a longer version for the broadsheets.

Dear Sir,

Your report (12/3/99) that researchers in Cambridge have produced genetically altered pigs with 'human hearts' shows yet again that science is allowed to operate without any proper controls. How much money has been spent and how many animals have suffered during the last eight years? How much more suffering and waste will there be before they move on to the human victims of their research? Time and again in the U.S.A. we have seen people suffer long drawn-out deaths plumed into artificial heart machines or given the hearts of other species of primates in transplant operations.

A great deal of medical opinion now recognises that preventive measures and wider availability of human organs for transplant are far more useful than animal experiments. One would think that the present money-motivated Government would realise that encouraging people to carry donor cards and promoting a healthier life style would give better results and better resource value than encouraging scientists to play at being gods.

There is one other aspect to genetically engineering animals to create human-compatible tissue and organs which gives cause for concern. If the tissue and organs can be altered to make them acceptable for transplant who can guarantee that animal diseases will not also adapt and cross the genetic barrier?

Yours faithfully,

OR

Dear Editor,

English scientists who produced genetically altered pigs with 'human hearts' show that science operates without proper control. Apart from the moral issue of using animals in experiments this type of work could surely put us at risk from new diseases.

If animal tissues and organs can be altered to make them acceptable for transplant into humans who can guarantee that animal diseases will not adapt and cross the genetic barrier?

Yours sincerely,

As you can see letter writing is quite simple. If you are writing to a politician or a business please keep your letters short and to the point. If you are writing to newspapers read their letters page and learn the style of letter they use. Keep your letter within that size and format. At all times keep your letters accurate. Make a mistake or unfounded allegation in a letter and it could set back the cause instead of furthering it. Don't bombard either

politicians or the media with letters. Overdoing it could simply turn them off the issue. Follow the three golden rules on this fact sheet.

If you need further help or information on a specific letter you are writing please contact me, John Robins, at Animal Concern. When writing to the press in response to any of our campaigns you can add the following sentence at the end of your letter. "For further information on this issue contact Animal Concern, Freepost GW6000, Dumbarton G82 5BR". If the editor doesn't want to use it, it is easy to edit out, but if it is used it gets us a free advert!

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