



The Anatomy of a Letter

To help get you started, here are some example letters. Learn from the strengths and weaknesses of each letter. Soon, you'll be a letter-writing pro.

Perhaps Jane Doe's assertion that Zionism equals fanaticism in her editorial, "It's not Jew, it's me", was a well-meaning attempt to inspire debate. However, her broad and frankly, a little insulting, insinuation was ill considered and misleading. I believe that a Jewish homeland should exist. Ms. Doe, does this mean that I am a fanatic? Likewise, is one a fanatic for believing that there should be a French state, a Chinese State or a Palestinian state? Indeed, one can certainly use any cause to justify fanaticism. Palestinian terrorists do it all the time when they justify blowing up of a school bus full of kids or a university cafeteria. However, to call all Zionists fanatical is to stifle and belittle the legitimate convictions of many students on this campus.

Again, Ms. Doe's belief that a binational state would solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is well meaning but a bit naïve. Would the denial of self-determination for both Jews and Palestinians really solve a territorial conflict? Perhaps she should take a vacation to the Balkans, Rwanda or even Iraq and see what happens when external forces impose artificial borders on real nationalities. We all want peace, and a viable two-state solution is our best hope. Israel has made the overtures but it's a shame that while Palestinians need a Gandhi, all they've gotten was Arafat and Hamas.

Ms. Doe, I'd like to invite you to come and share your viewpoints at an IllinIPAC meeting. Rather than assuming that you would be branded an anti-Semite, you should come and see the diverse opinions represented by the Zionist community. I might disagree with you, but from the first Zionist Congress to Israel's modern democracy; Zionism has a rich history of critical discourse. I invite you to more civilly join the conversation.

This is a relatively solid letter that maintains a civil and polite tone while being critical of Ms. Doe. Note the direct reference to the situation the author is addressing and to the person who he is criticizing. The author of this letter also makes sure to criticize Ms. Doe's ideas and not Ms. Doe herself. Especially strong is the invitation for Ms. Doe to come to a pro-Israel meeting in the last paragraph. This brings the letter back down to the personal. Remember, instead of viciously attacking Ms. Doe for being "insulting" the author invites her to a meeting and calls for dialogue and reconciliation.

However, this letter is weak in the fact department. The only way the author refutes Ms. Doe's statements are with rhetorical questions and broad statements. Specific facts always strengthen a letter, and this letter can use more of them.

An interesting advocacy issue prevents itself in Ms. Doe's desire for a bi-national state. On the one hand, talk of a bi-national state is code for the destruction of the State of Israel. Israel was founded as a Jewish State; a state that provides a home for a people who have for most of history lived on the fringes of society. This does not mean that Israel is discriminatory or not a democracy. By law, Israel grants full civil rights to its minorities. However, this is sometimes a difficult issue to tiptoe around. You open

yourself up to arguments that any state designated for a specific people is racist. You can refute this – China is a state for Chinese people, France is a state for French people, Palestine will be a state for Palestinian people and Israel is a state for Jewish people. To an extent, the author preempts this in the first paragraph. However it is a tricky dance. People will latch onto this one argument at the expense of everything else you’ve written. It is safer to take a pragmatic approach. Bring up real world examples where bi-national states have not worked. Particularly savvy and astute readers may mention Belgium as an example of a bi-national state that worked. It however took a lot of bloodshed to create the peaceful, bilingual state that exists today.

Writing a letter is sometimes like playing chess. Each side has the same tired playbook of sloganeering and stock talking points. Like in chess, the trick is to transcend the predictability of the game, while still playing by the rules. Preempt and anticipate arguments against what you say, using stock answers when you have to. But rise above the rabble, and produce something novel, sensible and judicious. This letter isn’t bad, but you can surely do much better.

Last Friday in the Daily Illini, Ms. Doe was quoted as saying that Israel has “erected a 25 foot wall” and that as a result, “she believes [emphasis added] the numbers of bombings has increased”. Ms. Doe is free to indulge her personal beliefs in private; however, journalism must deal with the facts. The 480 mile long security barrier is in fact 97% chain link fence. Only 3% is a concrete barrier, designed to protect cars from Palestinian snipers, the only section that can even begin to be called a wall.

The security barrier was erected in 2002 after more than 1,000 Israelis had been killed or severely injured in over 20,000 terror attacks which the Palestinian Authority did little to stop. By 2003 there was already a 50% reduction in the number of terror fatalities. Today, fewer Israelis have died as a result of Palestinian terror in 2006 than any year since the start of intensive Palestinian terror in 2000. Furthermore, 99.7% of West Bank Palestinians are located on the Palestinian side of the fence. The Israeli Supreme Court has even issued rulings, forcing the Israeli government to change the route in the few places where the path of the fence caused Palestinians especially undue hardship.

Conflating the separation barrier with apartheid is another favorite tactic used by anti-Israel organizations. Simply, without terrorism, there would be no fence. Furthermore, within Israel proper, Arabs participate fully in the national dialogue, serve in the parliament and even on the supreme court. Is this racial separation? It is actually the Palestinians who desire a Judenrein West Bank and Gaza, which Israel on several occasions has committed itself to obliging, culminating in the 2005 disengagement from Gaza. People should be ashamed of themselves for co-opting the memory of the despicable apartheid system for their cheap propaganda tricks.

This letter starts out strong. The author defines the scope of the letter with a specific quote. The author completely refutes Ms. Doe’s claim with specific facts and evidence. This is very good form – courteous, to the point, and convincing.

However, the author fatally overreached. The third paragraph does not address the issue raised at the beginning of the letter. Instead, the third paragraph attempts to address the claim that Israel is an apartheid state. While not beautifully structured, the author does make a relatively strong case. However, in bringing up this contentious issue, the

author invites rebuttals that don't address the *particularly* strong case he/she made against the initial accusation in the letter.

The author also uses the word "Judenrein", an extremely charged and loaded phrase. This is very distracting and invites criticism that does not address the main points of the letter. As a matter of fact, the actual rebuttal letters against this particular letter dwelled on the author's use of the word "Judenrein", ignoring the strong argument made about the wall.

Ultimately, the author should have replaced the third paragraph with a strong, well written conclusion. By wandering outside the original scope of the letter, the author made a vital tactical mistake.

In response to Jon Doe's recent letter, I found his decision to describe Palestinian aggression as "desperate and futile ... resistance" curious. In addressing this "resistance," was Mr. Doe referring to suicide bombings that result in the death of innocent men, women, and children? Or rather, was Mr. Doe referring to the decision of Hamas, elected to run the Palestinian government, to refuse to recognize Israel, abide by past agreements between Israel and the PA, and renounce violence? In any case, it saddens me that the Palestinian leadership is more interested in encouraging brutal violence and terror on Israel than achieving peace with it.

When I was in Israel, and talking to Arab Israelis who stayed in Israel during the war of 1948 (and are therefore now Israeli citizens), they were happy that they could live in Israel. Granted infinitely more rights than their Arab and Palestinian counterparts, these Israeli Arab men and women can vote in Israel, participate in media that can freely criticize the government, and can openly campaign and serve in the Israeli government. Clearly, there is no "brutal Israeli occupation," but rather a democratic country that encourages all citizens to vote and enjoy the rights they are given.

Moreover, Mr. Doe's claims of "Israeli ethnic cleansing" just don't stand up to reality. Israeli Arabs are active voters, politicians, activists, organizers of political parties, and serve in the Israeli Parliament, on the Supreme Court, in the Foreign Ministry, and some volunteer for the military.

This is a concise and pointed letter that addresses the topic at hand admirably. However, the author makes some over-reaching statements leaving him/her open to strong rebuttal letters.

The first paragraph is strong. The author astutely and ironically questions what "resistance" really means. Some specific figures might have helped, however; they could have also slowed down the pace of the letter.

The second paragraph however is not as strong. Bringing up the civil rights of Israeli Arabs is always a good idea, as long as you protect yourself against qualifiers that the actual civil rights situation of Israeli Arabs isn't always comparable to that of Israeli Jews. The author makes the mistake in using the situation of Israeli Arabs to say that there is "no occupation". Any pro-Palestinian writer will immediately attack the logical fallacy of this argument. Rebuttal letters will talk on and on about the 1967 occupation

of the West Bank and Gaza. One doesn't have to do with the other. The argument simply doesn't make sense.

You always have to be careful to distinguish between Israel proper and the territories. A proper response would have talked about the civil rights situation in Israel proper and the fact that the PA has autonomy and sets its own laws in the territories (keeping in mind that this more true for Gaza than it is for the West Bank)

The author again uses evidence of Israeli Arab's integration into Israeli life as evidence against ethnic cleansing. This doesn't prove or disprove anything, except that Israeli Arabs have rights within Israel.

This letter makes good arguments and is generally well written, but it is important to always make sure that the argument matches the allegation. In this letter, that is not always the case.

What not to do:

Mr. Doe. You are clearly full of bile and hatred – for Jews, for Christians and for the West. You show your utter ignorance in your statement that Israel is a colonialist and apartheid state. Did you attend Kindergarten, or were you too busy studying in a Madrassa? Obviously, you never learned to read English. If you did, you would have read the actually text of the UN resolution and realize the extent of your stupidity.

You called Israelis racist occupiers. Over 1,000 Israelis have died at the hands of Islamic terrorists. You also mention Palestine. What is Palestine? I can't find it on the map. I even looked in historical maps. It seems like Israel used to be a British mandate, and before that, it was controlled by the Turks. Jews have lived in Israel for thousands of years and it is promised to them in the bible. On the other hand, Palestinians are culturally identical to Jordanians. There never has been a Palestinian culture and frankly, there never will be. There are 1 billion Arabs, some 50 Arab countries and only 12 million Jews and one Jewish Country. Mr. Doe, get an education and learn the facts before you write.

Mr. Doe, by calling Israel a racist state, you are racist, and not only racist but anti-Semitic. You are also a terrorist sympathizer. I hope your 70 virgins will be able to stand your ugly face, because I can't. Learn the facts before you write next time.

Am Yisroel Chai!

Everything is wrong with this letter. Everything! The author engages in vicious and arguably racist ad hominem attacks at almost every point in the letter. The author does not mention what he/she is writing about and jumps from topic to topic.

The author's arguments are all standard anti-Palestinian canards that discredit the author and the pro-Israel community in general. A letter like this hurts our cause rather than helps it.