



The Do's and Don'ts of Letters to Your Campus Paper

Responding to letters to the editor is an important aspect of being an Israel advocate on campus. As an Israel Intern, on many campuses you will be the first responder – it's your job to defend Israel. The quality of your letter is important. You are not only representing yourself, but the cause and legitimacy of the State of Israel.

Establish yourself as an articulate and reasoned letter writer. Try to keep up a relationship with the paper. Know the deadline for submissions. Call at night to see if your letter got printed. Use your official title to your advantage. A paper is more likely to print your letter if you are an official Israel Intern than print the letter of any ranting lunatic off the street. This is a good thing!

Also, work with other Israel advocates on campus. The JCRC Israel Initiative is a great resource and provides excellent material. Some campuses have Israel advocacy groups. On some campuses, there are Israel *shlichim* that can help. Use everybody as a resource.

Writing letters is sometimes hard and can be time consuming, but don't let it stress you out. Keep these tips in mind to write effectively and professionally:

Do:

- ❑ Research! Research! Research! Research is hard and not always fun, but pays off. Don't fall back on tired talking points and slogans – use numbers, names and dates. Letters are largely about image and credibility, and research enhances both. For instance, instead of saying that the security barrier is mostly fence, tell the reader what percentage of the barrier is fence. The information is out there. Find it! Also, keep it mind that if you name your sources, try to keep the source neutral.
- ❑ Cover your bases. Don't say anything controversial, loaded or distracting. It should go without saying that you should not use any racist or hateful language. Avoid phrases like: “clash of civilizations”, “east vs. west”, “Islam spreads hate” and “Islamofacism”. Also, avoid quoting controversial figures. Instead of the rebuttal writer responding to your oh so fastidiously reasoned arguments, you will instead give him/her a chance to respond to your controversial or loaded word choice.
- ❑ If you are writing a rebuttal, respond to the person by name. This makes your letter specific and gives it an air of professionalism. Remember to be extremely polite and use Mr./Ms. or Dr./professor when appropriate.

- ❑ Respect word limits. Often letters have to be fewer than 300 words. Do not go over the limit! Most newspapers simply won't print letters that are too long, and if they do, they will edit the letter themselves, cutting out what *they* want, not what *you* want. If what you want to say can't be said in 300 words, say something else.
- ❑ Define the scope of your letter. Pick an issue, clearly define it, and then systematically support it with evidence.
- ❑ Be selective. If you can't mention everything you want in 300 words, pick one or two topics and develop them very well.
- ❑ Get your letter proofread. Email it around to pro-Israel advocates on campus or Hillel staff. The more eyes that look at, the better it will be.
- ❑ Write with a cool and collected tone. Passion sounds great in person, but in writing it will sound raving and extreme.
- ❑ Append your official position to the end of the letter. If your paper requires it, make sure you print your year in college and major. You are more likely to be printed if you include your title.

Don't:

- ❑ Don't engage in *ad hominem* attacks. Criticize the idea, not the person. *Ad hominem* attacks diminish your credibility and lower the level of overall discourse on your campus. This includes calling people terrorist sympathizers, anti-Semites (see below) or any other pejorative label. Instead, write that somebody's argument can be construed as such and such, or that so and so mean well, but betrays a naive or misinformed outlook. It doesn't matter if you think somebody really is a terrorist sympathizer. Grit your teeth, assume the best, and be nice!
- ❑ Don't label everything you see as anti-Semitism. This shifts the discourse away from your ideas to the fact that you called somebody an anti-Semite, and most often diminishes your credibility with the reader. If you are responding to genuine anti-Semitism, use the label with extreme care. There is a popular argument that says that applying a double standard and singling out Israel for condemnation (out of every other country) is a very real expression of anti-Semitism. This may be true, but unless you very carefully lay the groundwork for that argument, you are going to get slammed in a rebuttal letter.
- ❑ Be off topic or use alarmist and bombastic language. If you are writing a rebuttal letter, respond to the person's arguments, not something else that you want to talk about. If it can be simply said, say it simply. As for diction, be precise, but don't make it look like you poured over a thesaurus.