

Suggestions for a Good Editorial:

Get to the point....

The first sentence should state your topic flat out. Strong words grab attention. But beware of sounding belligerent or resentful. It's easy to get carried away in the effort to make a strong case.

Stick to the facts...and make sure they are facts....

Vague statements of principle rarely gain support. Anecdotes persuade, while facts convince. All facts must be true. If you can't be sure, check it out. If you can't check it out, or credit it to an acceptable source ("The Wall Street Journal reported May 23 that..."), don't use it.

Don't overwrite....

Avoid exaggerations and elegant but uncommon speech. Don't amble, ramble or preamble. Stick to the point.

Suggest alternatives and solutions....

Condemning and complaining serve no purpose unless you offer solutions. Propose alternatives, suggest a better way, or open a door to mutually beneficial compromise. Your letter will be more effective.

SAMPLE LETTER TO THE EDITOR

A Bad Report Card

Published: February 27, 2007 in the New York Times

The news from American high schools is not good. The most recent test results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, commonly known as the national report card, finds that American 12th graders are actually performing worse in reading than 12th graders did in 1992, when a comparable exam was given. In addition, 12th-grade performance in reading has been distressingly flat since 2002, even though the states were supposed to be improving the quality of teaching to comply with the No Child Left Behind education act.

The new scores, based on tests given in 2005, show that only about 35 percent of 12th graders are proficient in reading. Simply put, this means that a majority of the country's 12th graders have trouble understanding what they read fully enough to make inferences, draw conclusions and see connections between what they read and their own experiences. The math scores were even worse, with only 23 percent of 12th graders performing at or above the proficient level.

Marginal literacy and minimal math skills might have been adequate for the industrial age. But these scores mean that many of today's high school seniors will be locked out of the information economy, where a college degree is the basic price of admission and the ability to read, write and reason is essential for success.

Congress, which is preparing to reauthorize both the No Child Left Behind Act and the Higher Education Act, needs to take a hard look at these scores and move forcefully to demand far-reaching structural changes.

It should start by getting the board that oversees the National Assessment of Educational Progress testing to create rigorous national standards for crucial subjects. It should also require the states to raise the bar for teacher qualifications and end the odious practice of supplying the neediest students with the least qualified teachers. This process would also include requiring teachers colleges, which get federal aid, to turn out higher quality graduates and to supply many more teachers in vital areas like math and science. If there's any doubt about why these reforms are needed, all Congress has to do is read the latest national report card.