

Letters to the editor still matter in digital age

By **John Diaz**
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On most days, my first order of business is to scan through the submissions for letters to the editor. It provides an instant, and often fascinating, glimpse of which stories - among those we've covered and those we haven't - have compelled readers to take the time to write.

I regard letters as a vital element of our opinion pages: a place where readers have a forum to engage in the issues of the day and to offer viewpoints and insights that deserve a wider audience.

It's gratifying that dozens of letters still arrive each day even in this era when Twitter, Facebook, blogs, Instagram and other social media offer everyone a public megaphone.

Our letters editor has a tough job selecting six to 10 letters a day from the many we receive. I know. I assumed the duty while he was on vacation the last two weeks. So you can blame me if yours did not make the cut, but know that many worthy submissions were left behind, especially if you wrote about George Zimmerman's acquittal in the Trayvon Martin killing.

No subject since December's Sandy Hook school massacre has generated as much mail about our coverage - or as much interaction among readers - as the Zimmerman-Martin case. The conversation it engendered about race, guns and the equity of the criminal justice system extended for nearly two weeks in our letters to the editor. The letters kept coming, even as the concentration of coverage began to slow.

There are two points about the letters we ran that showed why this is such an important feature.

One was the caliber of the discussion. Compare the thoughtfulness of our letter writers

with the mockery and crassness that often characterizes the anonymous online comments at most news sites.

In the aftermath of the Zimmerman verdict, I was impressed by the honesty and courage of the letters dialogue on the ever-fraught issue of race.

Another value of the letters is the opportunity for personal perspectives that force readers with very different life experiences to consider another viewpoint.

The recent letters from Vernon Burton and Ed Hernandez offered readers the view of men of color who, as with President Obama, saw reverberations of their own youth in the Trayvon Martin profiling.

And letter writers often lend their professional expertise to issues that are in the news, from the bad bolts on the new eastern span of the Bay Bridge to the classroom-level perspective on policies that increasingly rely on standardized tests to evaluate teachers and schools.

Among the many examples of tips that have arrived through letters submissions was Thursday's letter from Jerry Cadagan of Sonora, who praised our editorial on Yosemite but alerted us that Rep. Tom McClintock's antienvironmental moves in that area were even more extensive than we described. Cadagan pointed to a McClintock bill (HR934) that would remove Wild and Scenic River protection from a stretch of the Merced River - expect that to be the subject of an upcoming editorial.

Some conservatives like to complain that the letters feature tends to tilt left. It surely does, not by our design, but as a reflection of the submissions we receive. But we do have a commitment to give priority to letters that dissent from our editorial positions.

As professional journalists who dish out criticism, we cannot complain if someone who disagrees with us calls us out by name. But over the years, I've become increasingly uneasy with letters that get personal with another letter writer. We're now very judicious about including the name of a letter writer in a submission that is critical of his or her viewpoint - and we will not run personal attacks.

Finally, I must offer a word of appreciation and apology to the "frequent fliers" whose submissions appear in the paper most often. You probably recognize the names of M.H. Page, Rachelle Marshall, Julian Grant, Anne Spanier, Alex Landi, Roland Martin - to cite just a few. There's a reason they get published often: They've mastered the form of the succinct, lively letter. On any given day, one or more of their submissions is available to brighten the editorial page.

While we don't have a prescribed limit on submissions from any particular writer, one of our goals is to bring new voices into the public discussion. So submissions from our most prolific contributors routinely get left on the cutting board. They should know they are appreciated, and I apologize that more of their contributions don't make it into print.

Please, keep writing. We appreciate your feedback, insights - and tips.

Got opinions? Tips for getting a letter to the editor published

Keep it short

The maximum length of a letter is 200 words - and even then, the shorter the better. We strive to get as many voices and subjects as we can into our letters packages.

Keep it real

We don't allow pseudonyms or anonymous letters. Period. One of the defining characteristics of our letters feature - as opposed to online comments - is that the authors are identified by name and city. We think it promotes a civil and substantive discussion.

Keep it timely

Don't wait to fire off that letter to the editor if it's related to a news event. Timeliness adds to its value and impact, especially in this world of accelerating news cycles.

Spare the name-calling

A personal attack is no substitute for a compelling point or argument.

Easy on the typography

Some letters arrive looking like a ransom note with CAPITAL letters, **boldface** and *italic letters* and many exclamation points!!! A well-crafted letter doesn't need the attention-grabbing gimmicks.

The 'early bird' factor

OK, here's inside information for you: Letters for the next day's paper are generally selected in the morning. Yes, we do keep an eye on the submissions folder throughout the day - and we will make substitutions - but there is an edge to having your letter there for the initial screening.

Submit your letters to the editor via our online form: sfgate.com/submissions/#1.

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