

Reading Newspapers: Reader Contributions ^[1]

A learner's guide to reading letters to the editor and other reader contributions in historical newspapers.

Although most of the content in newspapers is written by journalists, columnists, and editors, newspapers frequently publish contributions from their readers.

One of the most common forms of reader contribution is letters to the editor -- correspondence from readers responding to articles in the newspaper. These responses may offer reader opinions about the content of news stories -- for example, someone who read an article about a government program may write in to share his or her own opinion of that program. They may offer reader opinions on the newspaper's coverage of the news and its editorial decisions -- for example, they may critique the editor's choice of comic strips to run in the daily newspaper or allege that there was bias in the coverage of a recent news story. Sometimes, letters to the editor are responses to previous letters written by other readers!

Newspapers sometimes include other contributions from readers as well. Newspapers may hold contests or offer regular features in which readers submit writing, photography, recipes, or other content for publication. Readers sometimes submit poetry or fiction writing for publication in local newspapers. Many newspapers run columns in which readers ask for advice and receive responses from an advice columnist or from other readers.

Web editions of newspapers are opening up new opportunities for reader participation in newspaper publishing. Online editions frequently offer readers the option of commenting on news stories and opinion pieces or to engage in question and answer sessions with newspaper staff members using online forums, blogs, and wikis. Readers may submit photos of breaking news, such as images of storm damage, and have the photographs appear on the newspaper's website. Readers may even be able to customize the way the newspaper appears on their own computer so that the sections of the newspaper and the topics that most interest them are highlighted in their own personal online edition.

Key questions

When you encounter reader contributions, you may want to ask yourself:

What is the nature of the contribution?

Is the reader contributing an opinion through a letter to the editor or is the reader contributing something else (a poem? a photograph? a recipe?)? What views has the reader expressed in the contribution?

Do we know anything about the reader who made the contribution?

Sometimes the newspaper will print details about the contributor such as his or her location, age, or occupation, if relevant. For example, you might think about a letter to the editor on health care reform written by the president of a major health insurance company differently than you would think about a letter on the same topic from a cancer patient. Similarly, if the newspaper is printing reader-submitted photographs, it may be helpful to know which photos were taken by professional photographers and which were taken by school children. When you learn about the people who have made contributions, you may notice some trends -- for example, people in one town served by the newspaper may be more likely to support a particular issue than people in another nearby community. Further research might help you figure out possible reasons for those differences.

Why did the reader contribute this material to the newspaper?

Was this contribution reader-initiated? In other words, did the reader spontaneously decide to send something to the newspaper and, if so, why might the reader have done so? Sometimes readers feel passionately about issues that influence them directly and may choose to write a letter-to-the-editor as a way of expressing their views to a broader public. Sometimes a reader may decide to write to the newspaper to "set the record straight" about an issue when they feel that the newspaper's earlier coverage may not have fairly reflected all sides of an issue. Readers might also send contributions to a newspaper in response to a contest, an editor's request for reader submissions, or as part of an advice column that regularly asks for reader questions and responses.

Why did the newspaper print this item?

Newspaper editors may receive many letters on any given topic, but have the space to print only a few of them. Other reader contributions, too, are almost always chosen from among many. So why did the newspaper choose to print the particular reader contributions that they selected? Do you think the contributions were chosen at random or on a first-come-first-served basis? Were the editors trying to present contributions that represented a range of views or offering both positive and negative feedback on a recent story? Might some people's letters be printed because of their occupation

or standing in the community -- for example, might a county commissioner's letter be more likely to get published than an average citizen writing about the same local political issue? Or might the newspaper, in an effort to present both sides of an issue, be more likely to print the letter of someone who was mentioned in an earlier news story who was writing to complain that his or her views were misrepresented?

What role do reader submissions play in the newspaper?

Newspapers may have many reasons for including reader submissions. Reader contributions may diversify the points of view found in the newspaper, allow people in the community respond to local, national and world events in a local way, help readers feel more connected to the newspaper, or allow newspaper editors to gauge readers' interests and views so that they can direct the newspaper's attention toward the kind of coverage that is likely to attract and retain readers. You may notice that a newspaper's editors respond directly to the concerns raised by a letter to the editor or launch a more in-depth series of articles on an issue that generated a lot of reader submissions. You may also notice that reader contributions seem very common in some parts of the paper -- such as the Op-Ed page or the Lifestyle section -- but appear very seldom in other sections. Thinking about why newspaper editors include these sorts of reader contributions and why they may have positioned them as they did can help you get a sense of the role that reader contributions played in a specific newspaper at a specific moment in time.

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