



National Center for Science Education

Defending the Teaching of Evolution in the Public Schools

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10 Tips for Writing Letters to the Editor

by *Mary Lou Mendum*

Although most of the battle against creationism has focused on the political and legal battles over textbooks and curriculum development, it is important to remember that public opinion plays a major role in determining the material actually taught in biology classrooms. One inexpensive and effective way to educate the public on the nature of science in general, and evolution in particular, is through the editorial pages. Letters to the editor are widely read, and fundamentalists have long used letter campaigns to push their agenda. By promptly detailing the scientific errors in creationist letters, NCSE members have the opportunity to expose creationism as the pseudoscience that it is. Here are 10 guidelines to consider when writing rebuttals to creationist letters:

- 1. Criticize facts, not opinions.** Honest statements of belief in creationism as an article of faith are not open to argument, and they serve the useful purpose of revealing its religious basis. Instead, concentrate on exposing misquotes and factual errors. Name-calling is not advisable, but accusations of sloppy scholarship and ignorance, accompanied by proper documentation, can be devastating.
- 2. Do your homework.** If you are criticizing creationists for poor scholarship, you cannot afford to make the same mistake yourself. However, you can greatly increase the impact of your letter if you can back up your statements with references to the scientific literature, including complete quotations from the original source used by anti-evolutionists to "prove" their case.
- 3. Do not cover more than one or two points in each letter.** Your goal should be to challenge the credibility of the local creationists, not to give an introductory biology seminar. A lengthy point-by-point discussion of transitional fossils is less effective than a short letter detailing one misquote and one major scientific error. If you try to cover too many topics, the editor is likely to delete half of them.
- 4. Keep it short and succinct.** Letters of one page are much more likely to be published than those of two or more pages. The more concise your letter, the more likely it will appear exactly as you wrote it. Make sure that every word is essential to the overall point of your letter. This is particularly important if you are writing to conservative papers, as they have a tendency to delete all those annoying little facts that make evolution sound more scientific than creationism.
- 5. Humor is helpful.** A funny, entertaining letter is much more memorable to both editor and readers than an angry or sarcastic one.
- 6. Slant your letter towards the newspaper's style.** Do not attack the creationists' right to advocate their beliefs when you write to a liberal paper - you might even want to include a statement that you support their freedoms of speech and religion, when they are exercised outside of the science classroom. Appeals to scientific authority are very effective in letters to conservative papers, while liberal papers prefer more specific references.
- 7. If you have credentials, mention them.** Few creationists writing letters to local newspapers have any scientific training. If you have earned a degree or done research in a relevant scientific field, you are automatically more credible than a person who has not. If you are affiliated with a university, use your departmental address. Most newspapers will print such information under your name, and that is far more impressive to readers than the usual home town.
- 8. Two letter hacks are more effective than one.** Letters editors like to keep lively debates going, but they will seldom print two letters from any one person during an exchange, and if 2 people submit good letters on the same topic at the same time, chances are that only one of them will be published. If you coordinate your efforts with one or more other people, you can be sure that any creationist attacks on your letters will be responded to promptly and effectively.
- 9. Do not limit your writing to the scientific issues.** The anti-evolutionary agenda goes far beyond creationism, and an effective defense of science requires that the constitutional basis for rejecting the teaching of creationism-the First Amendment-remains intact. Upholding strict church-state separation is as important as debunking creationist pseudoscience.
- 10. Be persistent.** It may take 5 or 6 tries before a newspaper publishes one of your letters, especially if it has a large circulation. Do not be discouraged; eventually the letters editor will tire of printing yet more letters on the latest election scandals, and start looking for a little variety.

It is very unlikely that even the best letter-writing campaign will convince hard-core fundamentalists to abandon creationism. However, by writing in to correct their factual errors and dishonest scholarship, it is possible to discourage them from using the letters pages to promote bad science.

[Adapted from NCSE Reports 1996; 16(4): 19-20.]

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