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## How to be an Activist

Henry Spira  
*Animal Rights International*

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# HOW TO BE AN ACTIVIST

Henry Spira

*As part of Satya's on-going commitment to activism, we are pleased to offer a periodic column giving tips on more effective ways to bring about compassion. This month, Henry Spira offers advice on getting your letters in print.*

## **The Word Processor is Mightier than the Sword!**

Ideas are powerful. Most of us have opinions and when we feel strongly will spend much time talking about them. But talking is not enough. Doing is what makes activists effective.

Writing letters to the editor is a simple and effective way of taking action. Letters to the editor are powerful tools. The letters section is one of the most widely read parts of a newspaper or magazine. Your letter can reach thousands and even millions of readers. And beyond the cost of a stamp, it won't cost you a penny for typesetting, paper or distribution.

If you need to write 20 letters until one gets printed, it's well worth the effort. And even when your letters are not printed, they alert the editors to readers' interest in an issue. Occasionally a letter can touch a nerve or spark a dialogue which continues for days, weeks and sometimes even months.

It has been our experience that certain steps can maximize your chances of getting that letter printed.

Before putting pen to paper or finger to keyboard, know exactly what you want to say.

- Whenever possible, bring new information or a fresh perspective to the subject.
- Ideally, you'll address an item which just appeared in a publication. Respond immediately.
- Don't spend undue time trying to craft the perfect masterpiece. By the time you succeed, editorial interest in the issue may be long gone.
- Let your words ring reasonable, rational, and well thought-out.
- It's okay to be critical, but don't come across as nasty or hysterical. A reasonable tone is usually persuasive, insults are usually not.
- If at all possible, stick to just one issue. It keeps things uncomplicated.
- A well chosen headline can help keep you and your readers sharply focused.
- Familiarity with the letters page will suggest what kind of letters the editors tend to select for publication. Write with this in mind.
- Write as if you're talking to another person and want to hold their interest.
- Keep your language simple. Try to make it flow naturally with short words, short sentences and short paragraphs.
- Avoid trite phrases and clichés.

If your writing skills are a work-in-progress, consider starting small. It may be a lot easier to get your feet wet with a community paper rather than starting at the top with major national publications.

Once your letter gets published, make copies and circulate them for additional impact. Take advantage of the ripple effect. Encourage your friends and colleagues to do the same. And if your letter doesn't get published, don't give up. Keep trying. A well written letter with something to say will inevitably wind up where it deserves to be. In print!

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