



# **WRITING WRONGS**

HOW TO SHIFT PUBLIC OPINION  
ON THE **DEATH PENALTY**  
WITH LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

By Nancy Oliveira



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## Introduction

I was not always against the death penalty. Like earthquakes, I accepted the death penalty as part of life in California. Growing up in Modesto, and then attending college at UCLA, I never heard my parents, teachers or friends talk about the death penalty, nor had I ever explored the issue on my own. I was focused on getting through school, holding down a part-time job, getting married, and then busying myself with my children's needs and schooling. When on that rare occasion that I heard something about the death penalty, I truly accepted it as a given, just part of a civilized society. I thought that if someone was on death row, they probably deserved to be there.

In 2002, my life changed and so did my perspective on the death penalty when I went to live in Rome, Italy. While there I volunteered in a soup kitchen run by a Catholic organization. One day, as I was serving up pasta to the homeless, I was approached by one of the Italian volunteers. He asked if I could help read some letters they had received from death row prisoners in Texas and Georgia.

I was stunned. I wondered what their organization was doing with letters from American death row prisoners. I learned that they had been corresponding with men and women on death row for 10 years, solely for the purpose of befriending them. And not only did they write letters, they also included small amounts of money so that the condemned prisoners could buy stamps, paper and pencils. I learned that prisoners on death row are given nothing, and unlike regular prisoners they are not allowed to work in order to earn spending money.

I was shocked. For 30 years I lived 15 minutes from San Quentin, which houses the largest death row in America, yet I knew virtually nothing about the reality of the death penalty.

I was very embarrassed that these hardworking Italians, who in

## About the Author



Nancy Oliveira served on the Board of Directors of the national non-profit organization Death Penalty Focus for two and half years (2005-2008). She has had op-eds about the death penalty published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and in several prominent Catholic newspapers in California. In addition, she has had more than twenty-five letters to the editor published in newspapers from across the country, including the *New York Times*, *Chicago Herald Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, and the *San Jose Mercury News*. Nancy speaks to diverse audiences across the state of California on the death penalty and gives workshops on letter-writing. She is the former President of Lowell High School PTSA and San Francisco Second District PTA. She is a graduate of UCLA.

## About the Editor

Stefanie Faucher is Program Director of the non-profit organization Death Penalty Focus.

## About Death Penalty Focus

Founded in 1988, with more than 25,000 supporters, Death Penalty Focus is one of the largest nonprofit advocacy organizations in the nation dedicated to the abolition of capital punishment through public education; grassroots and political organizing; original research; media outreach; local, state and nationwide coalition building; and the education of religious, legislative and civic leaders about the death penalty and its alternatives.

For more information on how to get involved, contact:

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try looking at what benefits society as a whole.

The first two goals would be keeping our communities safe and imposing justice. Life without the possibility of parole, which is permanent incarceration, solves both of these goals.

What does the state killing of less than 1 percent of all murderers do for us? It causes us to spend large sums of money on capital murder trials, which are different than non-capital murder trials, endure decades of appeals, and with the high amount of wrongful convictions that exist in any justice system, it puts innocent people at risk of being executed.

As to being a deterrent, studies have shown that it is not. If for no other reason, the punishment comes too long after the crime. All murder victims' families want justice, not just the 1 percent of cases that qualify for the death penalty, and so do I. Permanent incarceration gives us that without putting anyone at risk of a wrongful execution.

addition to their regular jobs, volunteered thousands of hours to help the poor around the world, knew so much about our death penalty, and yet I knew nothing.

In fact, these Italians even raised large amounts of money to help with the appeals of those they believed to be innocent based on their own research.

I began to learn more shocking facts about our death penalty system. I learned 139 countries no longer practice capital punishment; that the United States stands with the likes of China, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia as the world's top executioners; and that 95 percent of the world's executions take place in these countries.

The most appalling fact I learned was that more than 100 innocent people had been released from death row after it was discovered that they had been wrongfully convicted. How had this happened in my very own country? And why hadn't I heard more about it? When I returned to the United States I began reading everything I could get my hands on about this issue. And the more I read, the more I realized that something was seriously wrong. Why were we wasting so much money and so many resources on a death system that was so inherently flawed and posed a real danger of executing innocent people when other alternatives, such as life without parole, exist?

It was from these hard-working Italians that I learned the truth about the American death penalty system. I had no idea of the exorbitant cost— far more expensive than life in prison— or its arbitrariness, its error rate and its racial bias. I became deeply involved with the death penalty issue and realized at some point that I had knowledge that many Americans didn't and that it was critical that I spread that information.

I discovered one outlet for sharing this information: writing letters to the editor. I began writing letters to my local newspapers

stating little known facts that I wanted readers to understand and think about. To my surprise, my letters were published. I learned that if large numbers of people sent in their letters, even more letters would be published, more articles would be written, and eventually more information would be disseminated about capital punishment and its effect on our society.

Letters to the editor take minimal work but have a big impact. I strongly encourage you to add your voice to the growing movement as a way to expose the truth about the capital punishment system in America. Help dynamite the myth that the death penalty is necessary and effective.

My success as a letter-writer has inspired me to write this booklet. I've included tips that I've learned in the two years that I have been writing, examples of my letters, and some basic facts about capital punishment. I hope this booklet will encourage and aid anyone who might be thinking of writing a letter to the editor.

Nancy Oliveira

P.S. I hope to see you in print!

## Other Topics

### **San Francisco Chronicle**

#### **April 21, 2008: State-sanctioned killing**



Editor: Here we go again...all this time and money spent on how the state can best kill people...the description of the how the drugs cause unconsciousness, halt breathing, stop the heart...it is like reading details of a murder case...I hope the irony is not lost on people.

Shouldn't we the state be held to a higher standard?

### **Los Angeles Times**

#### **May 22, 2009: A system that punishes us all**

The curious case of death row inmate Michael Ray Burgener is a perfect example of what is wrong with the death penalty: It gives killers too much power over our lives. They get us to spend exorbitant amounts of money trying to execute them, and we let them make killers out of us. Give them life without parole and put the money that supports the expensive capital punishment system back into our communities. And as for making killers out of us, I prefer not to let someone have that power over me.

#### **November 28, 2008: Death penalty review welcome**

Re "Court rejects new rules for death penalty," Nov. 22

Editor: A state appeals court has done California an important service by paving the way for public review of the proposed lethal injection reforms for executions. It will give voters an opportunity to learn more about our death penalty system and to consider whether, in its current dysfunctional state, it is worth its exorbitant cost.

### **Chicago Daily Herald**

#### **September 24, 2008: What does death penalty accomplish?**

What should one consider when trying to decide to lift the moratorium on the death penalty (Daily Herald editorial, Sept. 22)? I would suggest that rather than looking at individual cases,

## Innocence

### San Jose Mercury News

#### **May 18, 2007: DNA evidence gives us pause**

Editor: In light of the high number of DNA exonerations illuminating the fact that our justice system is not accurate, it is time to rethink our death penalty in California, not refine our death delivery.

#### **December 18, 2008: Due process and the death penalty**

Editor: Georgia lawmakers' attempt to allow the death penalty without a unanimous jury decision misses the point of due process. Our current laws exist not only to punish the guilty but also to protect the innocent.

### Los Angeles Times

#### **December 21, 2007**

Editor: New Jersey has made one giant leap for humanity: ending state killing. It will never run the risk of executing an innocent person, which as we know has happened in the past and continues to happen as our flawed justice system in America arbitrarily deals out the death card. The remaining death penalty states should follow suit.



## Chapter One

### Why Your Letter to the Editor Is Important

- Support for the death penalty is a mile wide and an inch deep. Once people learn just a few facts about capital punishment, they usually begin to question whether it is effective or even appropriate.
- The Letters to the Editor section of the newspaper is a cheap and easy way to reach large numbers of people. Hundreds of thousands of people read the newspaper everyday. Whereas someone might not pick up a book on the death penalty or read a long article in a magazine, they might just read a short letter to the editor as they come across it during their daily routine. In fact, letters to the editor are the most widely read section of the newspaper, making it an excellent way to share information with the public.
- By writing letters to the editor you also indicate to a newspaper how much interest there is in a subject. Newspapers are inclined to run more stories on subjects that receive attention from readers.
- Newspapers print letters according to volume received. Therefore, your letter often helps someone else's letter get published. The more letters a newspaper receives on a subject, or on one side of a debate, the more likely they are to print them.
- Your letters give useful talking points to people who share your perspective on a subject.
- Writing letters to the editor enables all of us to have a voice and help bring about the changes we want. What's more, we can do it in a few short minutes from the comfort of our own home.

## Chapter Two

### How to Write a Letter That Has a Good Chance of Being Published

- Use email if possible. Most newspapers accept emails, faxes or snail mail, but emails are preferred.
- Respond to a specific article or editorial in the paper. Be timely. Write within a day or two of an article's publication.
- Include the title of the article and date of publication in the subject-line of the email.
- Include your name, address and phone number. Newspapers may call to confirm your identity; however, they will not print your contact information
- Only send your letter to one newspaper at a time. Most newspapers insist on exclusivity.
- Use metaphors whenever possible (see page 15).
- Focus on making one point in your letter. If you try to do too much, your message will be lost. Be brief and succinct.
- Look for a theme in the article and then play off it. As I am reading, I always have an immediate reaction to something written in the article. I guarantee you will, also. That is what I write about. Period. There is a temptation to throw in everything you know about the death penalty, but resist!
- Be wise and thoughtful. Anger can turn off readers.
- If you are citing facts, make sure they are accurate.
- Read the Letters to the Editor section of your target publication for at least a week or two before you send a letter

### May 22, 2009: Death Penalty Robs Us of Services Re "Can California afford to keep the death penalty?" (Forum, May 17)

Elisabeth Semel's commentary on the cost of the death penalty in California is a wake-up call for all of us. She reminds us that for the huge sums of money we spend to execute a few people, 13 in 30 years, we give up a lot of important services that would benefit many, such as education, day care, senior centers, and police and fire department services. Remember, fewer than 1 percent of all murderers get the death penalty.

Even if one is for capital punishment, one has to ask if it is wise to continue to fund the one we have that is broken, dysfunctional, rarely carried out and would cost hundreds of millions of dollars more to fix, according to the California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice.

## Chapter Seven

### Published Letters by Topic

#### Cost

##### San Francisco Chronicle

###### April 21, 2007: Execution chamber scam

Editor, -- Our death penalty is too barbaric, too costly, too carelessly applied and too often wrong ("New execution chamber infuriates lawmakers," April 14). What the heck is our governor doing throwing taxpayers' money at this "badly broken system of state-sponsored killing?"



##### San Jose Mercury News

###### April 27, 2009: Join 21st century on capital punishment

Editor: Lawmakers in Nevada are discussing plans to replace Nevada State Prison's old death chamber (described by a former warden as "almost medieval") with a new one. Perhaps they should instead discuss replacing their "medieval" death penalty punishment with a 21st century one of life without parole. It is a less costly and more effective punishment. It also eliminates the possibility of executing an innocent person.

##### Sacramento Bee

###### February 13, 2009: Save a quick \$117 million

Re "Governor files suit against controller" (Capitol & California, Feb. 10): Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is furloughing more employees to save more money, and his spokesman says that any amount the state government can save is less of a burden on the taxpayers of California. I would like to remind our cost-conscious governor that if we dismantle our dysfunctional death penalty system, we would save \$117 million a year, according to the report of the California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice.

to get a sense of what types of letters the newspaper selects. Are they short? Are they passionate, funny or factual? Are they from experts or locals? This selection will vary from paper to paper.

- Write, write and write!



## Chapter Three

### Do Not Despair If Your Letter Is Not Published

When you write a letter, three things happen:

1. You educate the editor who reads your letter about the death penalty.
2. You demonstrate interest in the paper's published article on capital punishment.
3. Your letter may help get someone else's letter published. (Newspapers tend to run letters based on the number of letters they receive on a particular subject, as mentioned.)

Some newspapers will only print your letters every two, three or six months. Therefore, if you've just had a letter published, don't worry if you're not published again for a while.

If your letters are not being published, review the Letters section in the newspaper to identify any patterns or commonalities between letters they *are* printing.

Ask yourself these three questions:

1. Is my letter as brief as possible (less than 200 words and, better yet, less than 100)?
2. Is my point clear?
3. Is my letter timely and relevant to an article just printed?

If you are not published right away, don't give up! Just keep writing!!!

## Top 20 Most Read Newspapers

Rank, Name, Circulation, Email for Submissions or Web Form

1. USA Today, 2,113,725, [letters@usatoday.com](mailto:letters@usatoday.com)
2. Wall Street Journal, 2,082,189, [wsj.ltrs@wsj.com](mailto:wsj.ltrs@wsj.com)
3. New York Times, 1,039,031, [letters@nytimes.com](mailto:letters@nytimes.com)
4. Los Angeles Times, 723,181, [letters@latimes.com](mailto:letters@latimes.com)
5. Washington Post, 665,383, [letters@washpost.com](mailto:letters@washpost.com)
6. Daily News (New York), 602,857, [voicers@edit.nydailynews.com](mailto:voicers@edit.nydailynews.com)
7. New York Post, 558,140, [letters@nypost.com](mailto:letters@nypost.com)
8. Chicago Tribune, 501,202, see url below  
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/chi-lettertotheeditor.0.3578487.customform>
9. Houston Chronicle, 425,138, [viewpoints@chron.com](mailto:viewpoints@chron.com)
10. Arizona Republic, 389,701, see url below  
<http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/opinions/sendletter.html>
11. Denver Post, 371,728, <http://blogs.denverpost.com/eletters/>
12. Newsday (New York), 368,194, [letters@newsday.com](mailto:letters@newsday.com)
13. Dallas Morning News, 331,907, see url below  
<http://www.dallasnews.com/cgi-bin/lettertoed.cgi>
14. Star Tribune (Minneapolis), 320,076, see url below  
<http://mpls.startribune.com/dynamic/feedback/form.php?opinion=1>
15. Chicago Sun-Times, 312,141, [letters@suntimes.com](mailto:letters@suntimes.com)
16. San Francisco Chronicle, 312,118, [letters@sfchronicle.com](mailto:letters@sfchronicle.com)
17. Boston Globe, 302,638, [letter@globe.com](mailto:letter@globe.com)
18. Plain Dealer (Cleveland), 291,630, see url below  
<http://www.cleveland.com/plaindealer/lettertoeditor.ssf>
19. Detroit Free Press, 290,730, [letters@freepress.com](mailto:letters@freepress.com)
20. Philadelphia Inquirer, 288,270, [inquirer.letters@phillynews.com](mailto:inquirer.letters@phillynews.com)

## Chapter Six

### Resources

#### Tips for Finding Articles

1. Sign up for daily/weekly Google Alerts. Google Alerts is a free system which emails news articles that contain key words that you specify. <http://www.google.com/alerts>
2. Sign up for Death Penalty Focus's email alerts at [www.deathpenalty.org](http://www.deathpenalty.org)
3. Scan your local newspapers on a regular basis.

#### Useful Websites on the Death Penalty

Amnesty International USA  
[www.amnestyusa.org/death-penalty/](http://www.amnestyusa.org/death-penalty/)

California Crime Victims for Alternatives to the Death Penalty  
[www.californiacrimevictims.org](http://www.californiacrimevictims.org)

Death Penalty Focus  
[www.deathpenalty.org](http://www.deathpenalty.org)

Death Penalty Information Center  
[www.deathpenaltyinfo.org](http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org)

Murder Victims' Families for Human Rights  
[www.murdervictimsfamilies.org](http://www.murdervictimsfamilies.org)

Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation  
[www.mvfr.org](http://www.mvfr.org)

National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty  
[www.ncadp.org](http://www.ncadp.org)

## Chapter Four

### Six Facts You Should Know About the Death Penalty

#### 1. Capital Punishment is Costly

- Death penalty trials cost two to three times more than non-capital murder trials. Some of the reasons for this are: there are two trials instead of one (one for guilt and one for the penalty), more attorneys are required on both sides, there is a longer jury-selection process, more investigators and expert witness are needed, and more pre-trial motions are filed.
- What else could we do with this money?
  - Improve schools, roads, parks, public works, emergency services, public transportation and law enforcement
  - Provide mental-health services
  - Provide pre-school for all children
  - Focus on solving crimes

#### 2. Wrongful Convictions Are a Persistent Problem

- As of the printing of this booklet, 133 wrongfully convicted persons have been released from death rows around the country. Greg Wilhoit (pictured right) is among them.
- The causes of wrongful convictions include:



- Incompetent defense lawyers
- Faulty eyewitness testimony
- Over-zealous police or prosecutors
- False confessions extracted after torturous hours of interrogation

- False information provided by jailhouse snitches
- Junk science

### 3. The Death Penalty is Applied in an Unjust Manner

- A recent California study showed that people who murder white people are three to four times more likely to get the death penalty than those who murder African-Americans or Latinos.
- Studies have shown that the following factors unjustly affect those who are sentenced to death:
  - Local politics
  - Race and social standing of the victim
  - Race and social standing of the defendant
  - Quality of legal counsel
  - The jurisdiction where a crime was committed.



### 4. The Death Penalty is Not a Deterrent

- People often kill when under great emotional stress or under the influence of drugs and alcohol, and do not consider the consequences of their actions.
- Scientific studies have consistently failed to demonstrate that executions deter people from committing crime any more than long prison sentences do.
- States without the death penalty have much lower murder rates. The South accounts for 80% of U.S. executions, yet it has the highest regional murder rate.

### **San Francisco Chronicle December 26, 2006**

Editor -- The revelations of the costs to taxpayers for state-sponsored killings are staggering. Another unconscionable cost is the fight over how to kill more "efficiently" those on death row. It costs less to house them in prison without parole. Let's abolish the "broken" state killing machine and use the funds to help our schools and fire and police forces operate more "efficiently."

window into our capital punishment world. When the former warden of San Quentin State Prison says the costly death penalty system is a waste of taxpayers' money and does not keep us safer, we should all listen.

#### **Denver Post**

#### **May 3, 2009: Re: "Death penalty, R.I.P." April 26 Vincent Carroll column**

Editor: I agree with Vincent Carroll's statement that the death penalty is a "grisly throwback." It originated in the colonies when prisons did not exist. Step by step, courts, defense attorneys and now juries are catching up to the fact that this is a problematic punishment and life without parole is an effective alternative. As to customizing the death penalty to just apply to the worst of the worst—like all government programs it is a bureaucracy, not a fine-tuned machine that can be depended upon to work well.

3. Share personal stories of learning, change and grassroots involvement.

#### **New York Times**

#### **May 7, 2008: To End the Death Penalty**

Re "The Death Penalty Returns" (editorial, May 7): I spend 20 hours a week working as a volunteer to end the death penalty. I write letters to the editor and op-ed articles, and I am the chairwoman of the San Francisco chapter of Death Penalty Focus, a grass-roots anti-death-penalty organization. Here is what I am learning: Most people never give any thought to the death penalty. Once you get them to think about it, they are more often against it. If people want to help end state killing, they should start talking to everyone about it.

4. Offer practical solutions.

#### 5. The Death Penalty Can Contribute To the Pain and Suffering of the Victims' Families

- The complex, constitutionally required appeals process in capital cases forces victims' families to endure years of uncertainty and waiting. The alternative sentence of permanent imprisonment (life without parole) offers severe, swift and certain justice to victims' families.



- The funds currently used on a few costly death penalty trials (less than 1% of all murder cases) could be used to provide all victims' families with counseling, restitution and other vital services.

#### 6. There is an Alternative.

- All 35 states that still have the death penalty offer life without the possibility of parole as the alternative punishment for capital murder.
- Life without parole is permanent imprisonment; it means the offender will die in prison.

## Chapter Five

### Getting the Death Penalty on People's Radar Screens

My goal is to get the public to think critically about the death penalty. Most people do not know anyone on death row nor do they know anyone who knows anyone on death row; the issue doesn't touch them personally and it is not a part of their daily lives. So how can we get the public to think about it?



1. Use examples of how the death penalty affects our everyday lives. The three letters below illustrate this technique:

#### **San Francisco Chronicle**

##### **March 17, 2008: Doesn't add up**

Editor: Can someone please explain to me why our teachers are getting pink slips and San Quentin gets a new death chamber. Our death penalty system costs taxpayers more than \$114 million a year beyond the cost of simply keeping the convicts locked up for life.

#### **Los Angeles Times**

##### **May 16, 2007: Death debate**

Editor: It's amazing how the governor almost managed to sneak a new death chamber into San Quentin. I wonder if they have ever worked so fast and so hard to remodel a school.

#### **San Jose Mercury News**

##### **March 16, 2008: Teachers cost less than death penalty**

Editor: How can our state government send teachers pink slips and do nothing to end the outrageously expensive death penalty system in our state? The use of executions is

far more expensive than simply locking the convicts up for life. We should all be ashamed.

2. Use metaphors and similes that are easy to understand and to relate to. In the two letters below I compare the burden of trying to make the death penalty work to the yoke of an ox.

#### **San Francisco Chronicle**

##### **November 21, 2007: Throw off the yoke**

Editor - Re "Top state court's idea on Death Row appeals," (Nov. 20) : Has it occurred to anyone that every Western democracy has rid themselves of the death penalty because there is no way to make it work fairly, economically and efficiently? Instead of a ballot initiative to amend the California state constitution, as the California Supreme Court has proposed, and infusing more taxpayer money into the exorbitantly expensive death penalty machine, why don't we join the rest of the evolved world and free ourselves of this costly yoke of trying to make it work?

#### **Los Angeles Times**

##### **September 4, 2007: Death penalty's many problems**

Editor: It is amazing how much time, thought and money go into trying to keep the death penalty in the U.S. alive and well. Now U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Arthur L. Alarcon is proposing a state constitutional amendment that would help speed executions. We are the only Western democracy that has the death penalty. It is time to join the rest of the evolved world and end the death penalty and free ourselves from this costly yoke of trying to make it work.

#### **Los Angeles Times**

##### **October 7, 2008**

Editor: Woodford's perspective on executions is a rare