

## The Beacon Welcomes Your Civil, Reasoned Letters

### Beacon Board of Directors

The Beacon's policy on letters ([AndoverBeacon.com/index.php/submit-a-letter/](http://AndoverBeacon.com/index.php/submit-a-letter/)) begins "The mission of *The Andover Beacon* is to serve and strengthen the Andover community. To that end, we welcome civil, reasoned letters ..."

This policy has been in place for all 15 years of the Beacon's existence, and the Board of Directors takes it very seriously.

This year, more than any time in the past, we've received letters that did not meet our standards of civility and reason. In every case, we've worked with the writers (who, for the record, have come from both sides of the political spectrum) to edit the letters in mutually-agreeable ways so that they were consistent with our policy and we could publish them.

Because this editing is a very time-consuming process for all concerned, we'd like to explain in this article what you can do to ensure that your letter complies with our policy.

But first, on a related matter, ...

### First Amendment Rights

The First Amendment only prohibits governments (and people acting on a government's behalf) from limiting speech. Non-governmental entities (like the Beacon) are free to decide for themselves what they do or don't publish. In fact, the First Amendment protects from government interference the Beacon's right to make that decision.

With that in mind, the Beacon's Board of Directors decided, before the first issue was even published, that our mission to serve and strengthen the community would be significantly degraded if we published letters that weren't civil and reasoned. We believe that policy has served the community well, allowing for lively, productive discourse without the distractions and distortions of emotional rhetoric.

But, understandably in this current climate of pervasive emotional rhetoric, not everyone is clear about exactly what we mean by "civil and reasoned." The rest of this article will offer some specific guidelines that should help.

### Things to Avoid

It's much easier to describe what isn't civil and reasoned—things that we will ask you to change before we will publish your letter—than it is to describe all the ways to write a civil, reasoned letter. So here are the most important things you should avoid:

**Stating opinions as facts.** It's a big problem when you state something that you believe as though it were a fact; doing so can confuse the reader about what

is fact and what is opinion. Be sure to preface your opinions with words like "I believe ..." or "I think ..."

For example: "The House passed the bill" is a fact. "It will harm women and children" is an opinion; phrase it as such and give the reader your reasons for holding that opinion.

**Disrespectful rhetoric.** There are myriad rhetorical devices that have been used for centuries to degrade and undercut something or someone the writer disagrees with: name-calling, sarcasm, irony, insincere compliments, etc. Don't stoop to any of those things.

It's also neither civil nor reasoned to paint a dark picture of a person or policy or idea that you disagree with, using words and images that are negative and emotionally loaded. Don't turn your disagreement into some kind of theatrical production.

It's fine to disagree with a person or policy or idea. But just say that you disagree, and list the reasons why.

**Ad hominem attacks.** Don't direct your comments at a person's character, appearance, intelligence, etc. when it's their ideas you disagree with.

**Exaggeration.** This is an especially troublesome problem because it's so commonplace to make a point by exaggerating. Don't say "always" when the objective facts only support "sometimes." Don't say "all" or "every" when the truth is "some." Don't state as a fact "huge" when there's no objective measure of the thing you're describing. Basically, stick to the facts as best you can determine them.

**Dog whistles.** There are certain words and phrases in common use in politics that are used intentionally to elicit a strong, predictable emotional response. Those "dog whistles," when used as such, have no place in reasoned discourse.

**Facts you can't know.** Absent explicit statements on their part, we can never know another person's motivation. So don't state as a fact that their motivation is this or that. We also can't ever predict with absolute certainty the future course of events, so don't state as a fact that this or that will happen.

### Show Respect

Obviously, we could go on and on in this vein, but hopefully you have already gotten the point, which can pretty much be summed up like this:

Show respect for the difference between objective fact and opinion, and for the people, policies, or ideas that you disagree with.

If you do that, your letter will probably serve the community well. 

# Letters

## Hit and Run! Thank You!

They say New Englanders tend to keep to themselves and mind nobody's business but their own – but always keep a watchful eye out for those in need. This is true.

Andover is a small town of some 2,700 people. Our politics differ. Our incomes differ. Our education and life experiences differ. But you will find no better people who offer instant support

Your opinion matters! Please send a letter to the *Beacon* expressing your thoughts on any local matters. Our readers want and need to hear your voice!

and kindness when our neighbors are in need. This is also true.

Recently I was involved in a hit-and-run – I was hit by an underground swarm of very angry wasps – and I ran! How comical it must have been to see my "dance" as I flailed around, ripping off my shirt, yanking off my hat, throwing down my gloves and glasses, and clawing at my skin.

Pretty quickly time slowed down as the pain and swelling increased. I remember some of what happened and have since learned about the rest through the retelling of other people. My life was like a perfect set of dominoes that day – everyone involved was right where they needed to be when I needed them.

So friends and strangers alike, this is for you:

To Joe, who ran home and came back with Benadryl AND a bottle of water – a gesture so kind I continue

to be amazed ...; to Chuck, due to his own experience, was able to offer sage advice, a ride to the hospital (which I declined because I didn't think I needed one) and a recipe for an antidote to heal; to Officer Jake, whose calm and gentle way helped relax me as he made a poultice in his kitchen; to Mary, for rescuing my ever present sidekick – Little Pete; for Ken, here is where my memory starts to get a bit squirrely... I am told, somehow Chuck's wife contacted Ken and told him to come take me to the hospital – no matter what... which he did, until I made such a fuss about Little Pete, Ken turned around and picked him up and he went to the hospital with us;

For my dear friend Pat, who received a call from my wife who was at work in Concord, who dropped everything at a moment's notice to get to the hospital to relieve Ken as he had an appointment of his own; to the Doctor and Nurses and FRH – who came and got me out of the car – I think? Who stayed in my room – I think? To Liam and Dan – You poor souls need to be recognized as well. Only today did I find out these two brave men have burned that ground nest not once, but four times – and the wasps are not dead yet!!

I am sure I have missed some names and faces along the way. Please don't hold it against me – contact me and fill in the rest of the story. This town is like an old quilt. Well worn, a comfort when needed, always close by and nothing I will ever give up.

Andover is a great place to live and I couldn't be more proud to be a part of it.

*Kathy Hildebrand*

The mission of *The Andover Beacon* is to serve and strengthen the Andover community. To that end, we welcome (by the 15th!) civil, reasoned letters addressing specifically local issues, events, and developments. Submissions must not be critical of another's religion; blasphemous; obscene; hateful; legally objectionable; or commercial in nature. The *Beacon* reserves the right to edit or not publish submissions it deems inappropriate for any reason.



## NEW Winter Hours

**Beginning Nov. 1**  
Fri. & Sat. 11 A.M. to 10 P.M.  
Sun., Mon., Wed., Thu.  
11 A.M. – 9 P.M.  
Closed on Tuesdays

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