Lecture Notes

As your textbook explains, "Proposals are vital to a democracy."  Every country, every state, and every community has its share of problems.  In order to solve these problems, citizens must help do their share.  Part of what we all can do is use our brains.  We can think about the problem, consider possible solutions, and finally propose a solution that we think best solves the problem and ask others to consider it.

In your letter to the editor, you will be proposing a solution to a current local problem.  But what problem?  And how can it best be solved?

**Here are some things to consider before you begin drafting:**

One of the best ways to get started in drafting this paper is to make a list of current local problems.  What problems does your community face?  If you don't know, how can you find out?  (One way to find out is to check out a local newspaper, particularly the editorial sections.  Here you'll find that a great number of people are already engaged in a conversation about current local problems.)

Once you've made a list of problems, you'll want to chose one to actually focus on in your letter.  I recommend you choose the problem that most affects you or those you care about, something that you actually have a stake in.  Any writing is always better when the author cares about his or her subject.

Next, you'll want to define the exact nature of the problem.  Is this really a problem?  How so?  Who does the problem affect? (If it doesn't affect anyone--or if the cost of the solution would outweight the benefits, you'll want to choose a different topic.)  How long has this problem existed?  What are the causes of this problem?  Who is responsible for this problem?  What are some specific examples of the effects of this problem?

Once you've determined the exact nature of the problem, you'll want to start thinking about possible solutions.  What solutions have been tried so far?  What solutions have others proposed?  What solutions have been successfully (or unsuccessfully) used to deal with similar problems?  How can the causes of the problem be dealt with?  How can the harms (or negative effects) of the problem be alleviated?  What kinds of solutions are actually feasible (practical)?

Next, you'll want to choose the best solution.  You'll want to choose a solution that could actually be employed, and one in which the benefits outweigh the costs.  You'll also want to think about how you can deal with the typical opposing responses (such as "Things are fine," "It's not that big of a problem," "People won't do it," "We can't afford it," etc.).

Finally, spend a little time thinking about your audience, the readers of your local newspaper.  You'll want ask yourself questions such as:  What do they already know about the problem?  Do they already consider this a significant problem?  Are they aware of some of the solutions that have been discussed?  What kinds of biases might they have about this issue?  How can I best reach these people and minimize opposition to my solution?

Once you've thoroughly worked through the above issues and questions, writing the letter should be a piece of cake.  As you're drafting, keep in mind the following:

1.) The opening paragraph is important.  How can you get your reader's attention and respect in the very first paragraph?

2.) The problem should be clearly defined (or described) before you propose your solution.  The harms (or negative effects) of the problem and who specifically suffers from these negative effects should be clear.

3.) The solution should be a detailed as possible.  Consider all of the steps that would have to be taken.  Consider all of the costs.  Consider all of the benefits.  Be as specific as you possibly can.  Be prepared to explain why this solution is better than other alternative solutions.