

Communicating with Policy Makers

Writing an effective letter to your policy maker

Writing a letter to your member of Congress is an effective and easy way to communicate your views, because all congressional offices monitor correspondence from their constituents. Your letter will be open, read, and most likely answered by an aide. Although the legislators themselves usually do not read letters, that does not mean your letter will not have an impact. A well-written, thought-provoking letter from an expert can educate an aide, thereby influencing the legislator as well.

Usually the response to your letter will be a standard letter or collection of paragraphs. Since congressional offices receive hundreds or even thousands of letters and emails each week, staff does not have the time to send personalized replies in most cases. The important issue is whether their reply answers your questions or responds directly to your request for the legislator to take a certain position. If it does not, write again and request a clear answer.

Hill pundits argue that a personal letter with hand-written address on the envelope is the best way to get your legislator's attention. However, with increased security on Capitol Hill, postal mail can take anywhere from four to six weeks to reach your legislator. If your message is urgent, such as related to an upcoming vote, send a personalized email instead. Recent research shows that a personalized email, and even a personalized fax, is nearly as effective at influencing your legislators. The tips below apply to postal mail, email, and faxes. When choosing which method to use, consider the urgency of your message (is there a vote coming up soon?), if you would like to use your institution's letterhead, and which method is simplest for you (any letter is more persuasive than no letter!).

TIPS:

1. **Address your letter correctly.** Be sure you have the correct address and salutation on your letter. You can find the address of all of your state legislators at this link <http://www.malegislature.gov/> and for federal legislators & the President at <http://www.usa.gov/Contact/Elected.shtml> . If sending an email, many offices require you to fill out a web form, rather than send an email to a specific person. Following the directions on the website will ensure your letter goes through the proper channels and is read by the appropriate person.
2. **Write to the legislators for whom you can vote.** Elected officials are most interested in your opinions if you are their constituent. Occasionally it may be useful to write to committee chairs, even if they do not represent your district or state.
3. **Address only one issue per letter.** Such a letter will have more impact and receive a quicker response than one covering multiple issues. If you have professional expertise on the issue you are addressing, be sure to describe it. Don't expect that the aide reading the

letter will assume that an ecologist or a physicist (for example) has any expertise related to climate change.

4. **Ask for something specific.** Ask the legislator to take a particular action, such as cosponsoring a bill or taking a leadership role on an issue. Ask the legislator to state his or her position in a letter of response.
5. **Keep it short.** To make sure your letter is read rather than skimmed, make your points quickly and concisely.
6. **Make it personal.** Tie the issue to your personal expertise or experience, or to the district or state represented by the legislator. Use your own words.
7. **Use your institution's letterhead.** If you work in an academic setting, consider sending your letter on your institution's letterhead. While you should be clear that your opinion is a personal one, using your institution's letterhead will grab the reader's attention and help to establish your credibility on the issue. If you work in a private or government setting, make sure you are allowed to use letterhead on correspondence of this nature.
8. **Be courteous.** Rudeness will always alienate your reader.
9. **When appropriate, express your appreciation.** Like anybody, legislators appreciate an occasional "well done." Furthermore, in this manner you signal that you are paying attention to your legislator's activities.
10. **Include your return address on your letter.** By including your address in the letter, all readers will know that you are a constituent and will know what address to send a response to.
11. **Follow up.** Follow-up letters often have a much larger impact than the initial communication. Thank the legislator for taking a correct stand, or ask questions about any unsatisfactory answers.