

Writing Effective Advocacy Letters

Last Update: May 2005

This sheet contains tips and resources for lobbying decision-makers to take specific actions on issues through letter writing. It focuses on political decision-makers—legislators and executive-branch officials—but most of the suggestions can be applied more broadly, such as to private organizations or businesses.

Why is Letter Writing Important?

By writing a letter, you are taking a small but essential step toward an action you support. Most political representatives keep tallies of the number of letters received on an issue and use those tallies to gauge public opinion. Just a few letters can sway a decision-maker's position on an issue, especially if few other constituents have written about that issue.

Furthermore, by writing a letter, you are declaring your refusal to sit back while others make important decisions for you. You are refusing to abandon the duties of active citizenship that are a sine qua non in a democratic society.

How Should the Letters Be Sent?

Congressional staff members tend to rank the importance of communications on the basis of how they are sent.

1. **PERSONAL HANDWRITTEN OR TYPED LETTERS:** The single most effective form of communication is a personal letter, either neatly handwritten or typed. That is why this fact sheet will focus primarily on mailed letters.
2. **PHONE CALLS:** Phone calls are generally less influential.
3. **PERSONAL FAXES:** These are often not as effective as phone calls.
4. **PERSONAL EMAILS:** The aides who read constituent correspondence often pay little attention to emails, even if the emails are clearly personal. This is partially because staffers are unable to determine if the writer is a constituent; therefore, if you do send an email, state that you are a constituent in the first sentence and include your address and phone number as proof.

REALIZE THAT POSTAL MAIL MAY TAKE A MONTH TO REACH MEMBERS OF CONGRESS OR THE WHITE HOUSE: It is important to note that because of the 2001 anthrax scare, all Congressional letters undergo decontamination. As a result, it is best to assume that all letters will take about a month to reach members of Congress or the White House. If your issue is not urgent, it is definitely best to send a handwritten or typed letter. If the message needs to get through in less than a month, you should send a fax or call the office. This delay is not as long for federal agencies or for state officials.

SEND TO THE WASHINGTON, DC, OFFICE: Issue letters should always be sent to the Washington, DC,

office—which deals with legislation matters—and not to the regional office.

WRITE YOUR ADDRESS ON BOTH THE LETTER AND THE ENVELOPE: Make sure to also include your complete address on the envelope itself. This allows the staffers to easily identify you as a constituent whose concerns are important.

What Are Some Guidelines for Letter Writing?

AVOID FORM LETTERS: In all cases, an obviously personal communication will be considered with much greater attention than a form letter or form email.

WRITE ONLY TO YOUR REPRESENTATIVES: It is usually ineffective to write to legislators outside of your own district, though there are exceptions when key legislation is being decided or when contacting committee or Congressional leaders.

IDENTIFY YOURSELF AS A CONSTITUENT: Tell the decision-maker that you are a constituent. Politicians pay the most attention to the views of citizens who are able to vote for or against them in the next election.

STATE THE ISSUE FIRST: In the first sentence, summarize the action that you want the decision-maker to take. If applicable, give the number, title, and original sponsor of the bill, amendment, or resolution, so that it can be easily identified without confusion. (For example, you might say, "I strongly urge you to cosponsor the Pi Act (H.R. 314), sponsored by Representative Circumference, as it would expand research on the number pi.")

STICK TO ONE ISSUE: Your letter will have the greatest impact if you urge the decision-maker to take one specific action only.

BE CLEAR: If busy staff members cannot decipher your message, they will simply make an assumption about what you meant to say.

BE CONCISE: Try to explain your request and reasons for it in about two paragraphs; include just a few powerful facts or statistics. Your letter should not exceed one page.

INCLUDE A PERSONAL CONNECTION: Focus on how the issue affects you and others you know. Include a short anecdote, or explain how much you care about the issue. Not only will this create an emotional connection with the reader, but it will also prevent the appearance of a form letter.

WRITE EVEN WHEN THE DECISION-MAKER SUPPORTS YOUR POSITION: The knowledge of constituent support will encourage the decision-maker to maintain his or her stand

and will ensure that he or she takes similar positions in the future.

STAY POLITE: If you know the policymaker opposes your position, be assertive but remain courteous at all times. Your message will be strongest if you appear rational, informed, and confident. A nasty or threatening letter may actually hurt your cause, not help it.

What is the Format for a Letter?

All parts of a business letter are generally kept to the left-hand margin:

1. DATE: Begin with the full date near the top of the page.
2. RECIPIENT ADDRESS: A few spaces down, write the address to which you are sending the letter.
3. SALUTATION: Next is the salutation. It is usually written as "Dear [person's title] [last name]:" (for example, "Dear Senator Schumer:" or "Dear Governor Pataki:").
4. BODY: The body should be short and concise. The paragraphs are not indented, and each paragraph is separated by a blank line.
5. SUMMARY: Include a one-sentence summary of the action you want the decision-maker to take.
6. REQUEST A RESPONSE: Thank the reader for considering the letter, and ask for a response. For

example, you might say "Thank you for your attention to my concerns. I look forward to hearing back from you."

7. CLOSING: The closing is usually written with "Sincerely" followed by a comma.
8. SIGNATURE: Sign your name underneath the closing.
9. NAME AND ADDRESS: Type your name and full address underneath the signature.

Here is a model of the structure:

[date]

[recipient address]

Dear [title] [surname]:

[body paragraph #1]

[body paragraph #2]

[thank you and request for response]

Sincerely,

[signature]

[your name]

[your complete address]

Contact Information

What follows is contact information for a few of the state and federal policymakers in the Albany area as of May 2005 (for more details, see Project Vote Smart, <http://www.vote-smart.org/>). Keep in mind that a personal handwritten or typed letter is most effective.

FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS

Phone: (202) 225-5076

Fax: (202) 225-5077

STATE POLICYMAKERS

SENATE (WASHINGTON, DC, ADDRESSES):

The Honorable Charles Schumer
313 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510
Phone: (202) 224-6542
TTYD Number: (202) 224-0420
Fax: (202) 228-3027

The Honorable Hillary Clinton
476 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510
Phone: (202) 224-4451
TTYD Number: (202) 224-6821
Fax: (202) 228-0282
Fax: (202) 228-0121

HOUSE (WASHINGTON, DC, ADDRESS):

The Honorable Michael McNulty
2210 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-3221

PRESIDENT AND VICE PRESIDENT:

President George W. Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500
Phone: (202) 456-1414 Switchboard
Phone: (202) 456-1111 Comments
TTYD Number: (202) 456-6213 Comments
Fax: (202) 456-2461

Vice President Richard Cheney
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500
Phone: (202) 456-1414 Switchboard
TTYD Number: (202) 456-6213 Comments
Fax: (202) 456-2461

SENATE (CAPITOL ADDRESS):

Senator Neil D. Breslin
New York State Senate
414 State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12247
Phone: (518) 455-2225
Fax: (518) 426-6807

ASSEMBLY (CAPITOL ADDRESS):

Assemblymember John J. McEneny
New York State Assembly
Legislative Office Building 648
Albany, NY 12248
Phone: (518) 455-4178
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GOVERNOR (CAPITOL ADDRESS):

Governor George E. Pataki
State Capitol
Albany, NY 12224
Phone: (518) 474-8390
