



Writing Elected Officials: Letters and Email

A letter or email expressing a particular viewpoint may sway an elected official's viewpoint – especially if he or she is wavering on the issue. It is important that the legislator receive your viewpoint while the issue is being debated before the vote. The key to grassroots success is the show of concern from constituents who care. Personal correspondence will carry that message. Your message should be presented as effectively as possible in written correspondence. Following are some helpful hints when writing elected officials, either by letter or email.

By Letter

Introductions

- Your name and home or work address should be included on the letter and envelope.
- Include your name in the first line of your letter along with the name of your organization and/or the fact that you are a constituent.
- Write directly to the elected official representing you. Letters received from citizens outside that district or state would be referred elsewhere.
- Always send a personal letter on your own stationery – never send a form letter. Remember that you are writing from the standpoint of a concerned citizen or industry professional; a form letter may defeat your purpose.

Be Frank

- State your purpose at the outset. Utilize the rest of the letter to expand your views.
- Attempt to confine the letter to one subject. Too much information may decrease the force of your argument and complicate your legislator's efforts to act upon it.
- Be brief – although brevity should not be achieved at the expense of clarity and completeness. A letter more than one page in length might not be read immediately.
- Do not assume a legislator is as well-informed as you about a given problem. Explain the situation clearly and concisely. Remember that a legislator (even the most knowledgeable and eloquent) cannot keep abreast of everything.
- If your industry, interest group, or organization has campaign talking points, then use them in your letter to support your viewpoint.



- Many industry organizations' Public Affairs or Advocacy sections of their website include general talking points. Your industry organization's Public Affairs department may have a model letter to use as well.
- Letters concerning a particular piece of legislation should include the assigned reference number, as well as the subject matter. Several bills may have been introduced pertaining to the same topic.
 - For example, House bill: H.R. ____; Senate bill: S. ____
- The letter's conclusion should clearly state whether you want the official to support or oppose the legislation.

Personalize

- Elected officials want to hear how the legislation you are writing about will affect your life, your business and your employees.
- Attitude is important. Polite and positive-sounding correspondence may be more impressive than belligerent or negative-sounding correspondence.
- While many topics addressed in correspondence to legislators are of an emotional nature, beware of the use of nonfactual arguments. Your view will only be weakened if you use them.
- Elected officials seldom base decisions on mere philosophy. They want to know exactly how votes will affect their constituents and, subsequently, their re-election. State the facts and use clear illustrations. Reciting barren concepts will result in an ineffective letter.

Addressing Correspondence

- Follow the proper etiquette for addressing elected officials. All members of Congress should be called "Honorable" on the envelope and with the internal address.

To a Senator:
The Honorable (Full Name)
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

To a Representative of Congress:
The Honorable (Full Name)
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator:

Dear Representative:



Request a Response

- Ask for a reply. Request that your elected official write you back to let you know where they stand on your issue of concern.
- Do not be surprised if you receive a general response. Don't be discouraged.
- If you receive a response letter it means your letter was read and counted. That's the most important thing.

Thank You's

- Follow up with a letter of thanks when an elected official responds to you as requested.
- If your elected official supports a piece of legislation important to you or your industry, write your lawmaker a note of thanks and let them know you appreciate their work and service.

By Email

In general, the same guidelines apply as with writing letters to elected officials. Here are some tips in locating the email address for your elected official.

Federal Government Information

- Go to www.contactingthecongress.org. Contacting the Congress is a very up-to-date database of congressional contact information for the current Congress.

State Government Information

- State websites provide the most information at your fingertips. There is no consistent URL stream for the State Legislature websites, except that they are typically a .gov site. Go to your online search engine and type the "state" name you want to research and the word "legislature" (e.g. Arizona legislature and we find www.azleg.gov). The first few websites found will be the one you're looking for.
- State Legislature sites typically enable you to search your state and local officials by zip code.

Local Government Information

- Similarly, county websites provide the most information for local governments. County government websites URL streams typically have the county name followed by the state name abbreviated followed by .gov. Go to your online search engine and key-in the "county" name you want to research and the word



“government” (e.g. Placer County government, and we find www.placer.ca.gov).

- County government sites typically provide you a complete list of Board of Supervisors and County Committees and Commissions.

The following tips provide specific instructions to use when emailing your elected officials.

Introductions:

- Some offices receive hundreds of emails a week. The most important emails are those from constituents.
- Always include your street address, city, state and zip code in the top of your email so the office knows your message is from a constituent and needs attention.
- Include your name, organization and the fact that you are a constituent in the first line of your email.
- Write directly to the elected official representing you. Emails received from citizens outside that district or state would be referred elsewhere.

Content

- Address only one issue in each email.
- The closing sentence of your message should always reiterate exactly what you are asking the elected official to do.

Request a Response

- Many offices will respond to emails by sending an auto-response (generic) acknowledging that the office received your email. These offices usually follow up with a written letter response.
- If you receive a response letter it means your letter was read and counted. That's the most important thing.