

Tips for Writing Effective Letters to Elected Representatives

People who think members of local, state, or even federal government pay little or no attention to constituent mail are simply wrong. Concise, well thought out personal emails and letters are one of the most effective ways Americans have of influencing their elected lawmakers.

Members of Congress get hundreds of letters and emails every day, so you will want your correspondence to stand out. Whether you choose to use the U.S. Postal Service or email, here are some tips that will help you write a letter to Congress that has an impact.

Letter or Email?

Both can work effectively. While it is easier to send an email, and all Senators and Representatives now have email addresses, written letters can potentially get closer attention and have more impact. The Senators and Representatives and their staffs get literally hundreds of emails every day. Emails from their constituents are mixed in with other emails from fellow lawmakers and staff members and could get overlooked or at least a delayed response. In addition, some experts still feel that taking the time to send a traditional, handwritten letter is the best way to show you “really care” about the issues you are addressing.

Think Locally

It's usually best to send letters or emails to the representative from your local congressional district or the senators from your state. Your vote helps elect them—or not—and that fact alone carries a lot of weight. It also helps personalize your letter. Sending the same "cookie-cutter" message to every member of Congress may grab attention but rarely much consideration.

It's also a good idea to think about the effectiveness of all of your communication options. For instance, a face-to-face meeting at an event, town hall, or the representative's local office can often leave the biggest impression.

That is not always an option though. Your next best bet for expressing your opinion is a formal letter, then a phone call to their office. While email is convenient and quick, it may not have the same influence as the other, more traditional, routes.

Finding Your Legislator's Address

There are a few ways that you can find the addresses of all of your representatives in Congress. The U.S. Senate is easy because each state has two Senators. Senate.gov has an easy to navigate directory of all current Senators. You will find links to their website, their email and phone number, as well as the address to their office in Washington D.C.

The House of Representatives is a little trickier because you need to search for the person representing your particular district within the state. The easiest way to do so is to type in your zip code under "Find Your Representative" at House.gov. This will narrow down your options but you may need to refine it based on your physical address because zip codes and Congressional districts do not coincide.

In both houses of Congress, the representative's official website will also have all the contact information you need. This includes the locations of their local offices.

Keep Your Message Simple

Your letter or email will be more effective if you address a single topic or issue rather than a variety of issues you may feel passionate about. Try to keep letters to one-page, and any emails to no more than three paragraphs. Many Political Action Committees (PACs) recommend a three-paragraph letter structured like this:

1. Say why you are writing and who you are. List your "credentials" and state that you are a constituent. It also doesn't hurt to mention if you voted for or donated to them. If you want a response, you must include your name and address, even when using email.
2. Provide more detail. Be factual and not emotional. Provide specific rather than general information about how the topic affects you and others. If a certain bill is involved, cite the correct title or number whenever possible.
3. Close by requesting the action you want to be taken. It might be a vote for or against a bill, a change in general policy, or some other action, but be specific.

The best letters are courteous, to the point, and include specific supporting examples.

Proofread Your Letter

Always proofread your letter or email before mailing it. Read over it at least twice, checking for spelling, punctuation, and grammar errors. Make sure you have not

repeated yourself, failed to make your points clearly, or left anything out. An error-free message adds to your credibility.

Identifying Legislation

Members of Congress have a lot of items on their agendas, so it's best to be as specific as possible regarding your issue. When writing about a particular bill or piece of legislation, include the official number so they know exactly what you're referring to (it also helps your credibility).

If you need help in finding the number of a bill, use the Thomas Legislative Information System. Cite these legislation identifiers:

- House Bills: "**H.R.**____"
- House Resolutions: "**H.RES.**____"
- House Joint Resolutions: "**H.J.RES.**____"
- Senate Bills: "**S.**____"
- Senate Resolutions: "**S.RES.**____"
- Senate Joint Resolutions: "**S.J.RES.**____"

Addressing Members of Congress

There is also a formal way to address members of Congress. Use these headers to begin your letter, filling in the appropriate name and addresses for your Congressperson. Also, it's best to include the header in an email message.

To Your Senator:

The Honorable (full name)
(room #) (name) Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510
Dear Senator (last name):

To Your Representative:

The Honorable (full name)
(room #) (name) House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515
Dear Representative (last name):

Contact the U.S. Supreme Court

The Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court do not have email addresses, but they do read letters from citizens. You can mail letters using the address found on the SupremeCourt.gov website.

Key Things to Remember

Here are some key things you should always and never do when writing to your elected representatives.

1. Be courteous and respectful without "gushing."
2. Clearly and simply state the purpose of your letter or note. If it's about a certain bill, identify it correctly.
3. Say who you are. Anonymous letters go nowhere. Even in email, include your correct name, address, phone number, and email address. If you don't include at least your name and address, you will not get a response.
4. State any professional credentials or personal experience you may have, especially those pertaining to the subject of your letter.
5. Keep your letter short—one page is best.
6. Use specific examples or evidence to support your position.
7. State what it is you want to be done or recommend a course of action.
8. Thank the member for taking the time to read your letter.
9. Find your voice - Effective advocacy is storytelling.
10. Do your homework before you start advocating.

What Not to Do

Just because they represent the voters does not mean that members of Congress are subject to abuse or belittlement. As impassioned as you may be about an issue, your letter will be more effective if it's written from a calm, logical perspective. If you're angry about something, write your letter then edit the next day to ensure you're conveying a courteous, professional tone. Also, make sure to avoid these pitfalls.

Do not use vulgarity, profanity, or threats. The first two are just plain rude and the third one can get you a visit from the Secret Service. Simply stated, don't let your passion get in the way of making your point.

Do not fail to include your name and address, even in email letters. Many representatives prioritize comments from their constituents and a letter in the mail may be the only way you receive a response.

Do not demand a response. You may not get one no matter what and demand is simply another rude gesture that does little for your case.

Do not use boilerplate text. Many grassroots organizations will send out a prepared text to people interested in their issue, but try not to simply copy and paste this into your letter. Use it as a guide to help you make the point and write the letter in your own words with your personal perspective. Getting thousands of letters that say the exact same thing can diminish the impact.

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