

Learn to Write Your Elected Representative

There oughta be a law...

Had enough? Has one of your elected representatives gone back on their campaign promises again? Or are they proposing a piece of legislation that could drastically affect the welfare of you and your community? Whatever the case, act now before it's too late! Politicians often use the excuse, "Well, we put it to the people, and they decided..." This often means that the citizens concerned with the issue didn't voice their opinions loudly enough.

Write to persuade the people with a vote. Members of Congress often weigh their constituency's opinion before they cast a vote or propose legislation. How do they know what that opinion is? They check their mail. Their staffs may also keep a tally of phone calls received regarding a particular issue.

But watch out! You may very well find such letter writing addictive. In addition, it can provide a wonderful sense of empowerment, and it'll help you be more active in the political process.

Before you begin:

Be certain you're writing to the correct official, otherwise, the official knows that your opinion won't count at election time.

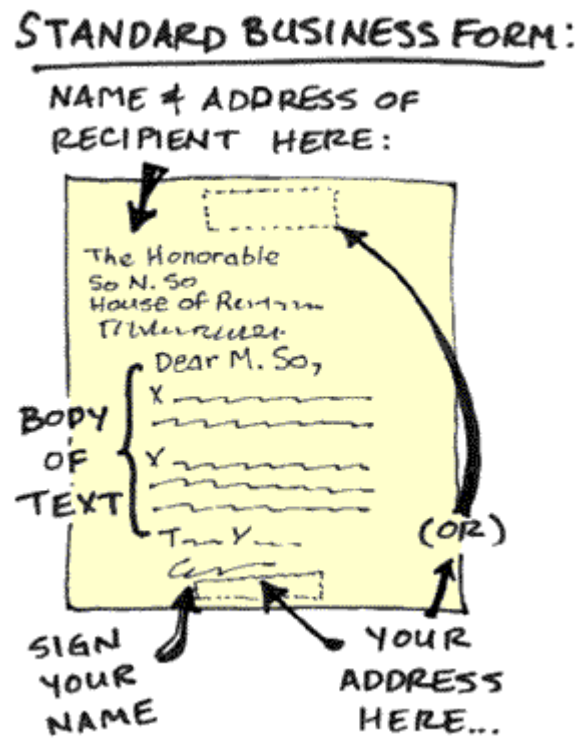
If you don't know who your legislators are, use the resources at <http://www.blessedhopeacademy.com/Government.htm>

Step One: Address your letter

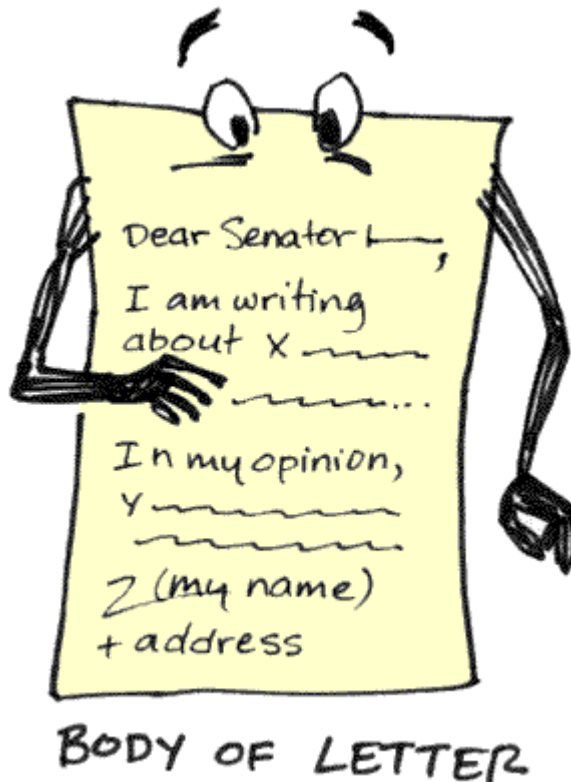
Letters to members of Congress ideally should resemble business correspondence. Your name and address can appear either centered at the top of the page or directly underneath your signature. You can also include your phone number as part of your address. The address of the recipient appears on the left, above your salutation.

If you wish to be perfectly correct, The Honorable should appear as the top line in the congressperson's address. Their first and last names then stand alone on the next line.

(See Sample Letter to Member of Congress)



Step 2: Draft your letter



Now take a moment to consider exactly what you want to say. You'll want to state clearly what issue concerns you and what your stand is. You'll also need to devote at least a couple of sentences to arguing your point, so sit back and consider why you feel so strongly about this particular problem.

You'll begin, of course, with a greeting. If you're writing a Representative, address him or her as Mr. or Ms. Are you writing a Senator? Begin with "Dear Senator," followed by their surname.

Explain in your very first sentence what your concern is. If you're writing about a specific bill, refer to it by name or number (e.g., House Bill _____), if you know it.

Be sure to address only one concern in a given letter.

You can always write again next week on a different matter.

Then argue your point. Your elected representative will be especially interested in learning about your community and how the proposed legislation will affect it. Be as specific as possible, and provide examples that support your assertions.

If you didn't include your name and address at the top of the letter, put them under signature. Your zip code is essential--it informs your elected representative that you live in their district.

Step 3: Revise your letter

Once you've drafted your letter, leave it alone for a while. Then come back and read it through from beginning to end.

If possible, trim your letter to a single page. Longer letters are likely just to get skimmed, rather than read carefully.

If you've written an angry letter, edit it especially carefully. Stating that you're furious is one thing. Launching into a diatribe or insulting the character of the person to whom you're writing, however, greatly reduces your power to persuade.

On the other hand, you may find in rereading it that your letter doesn't state your feelings strongly enough. Don't hesitate to add the adjectives that will convey that you're really enthusiastic or deeply troubled about the issue.

Bring in the reserves. You can attach to your letter copies of articles from your local paper, for instance, that help prove your point. Look for headlines that are provocative and demonstrate the community's concern, e.g., "Locals protest nuclear dump site."

Step 4: Follow Up

Once you've sent your letter, you may find you want to follow it up.

You can call the House of Representatives' switchboard at (202) 225-3121. The Senate's main number is (202) 224-3121. Ask the operator who answers for the office of your elected representative. Of course, it's extremely unlikely that you will get to speak to your elected representative directly. However, the staff member you speak to should take notes as to your position and convey your message.

You can also follow up on a particular issue by going to meet your elected representative when they hold a public meeting in your locale. Your local paper should announce such meetings.

If you feel very strongly about an issue, you may find you want to write to your elected representative again. Do so as you gather more evidence relating to your argument. Don't merely repeat what you've said before.

You may also want to consider writing to other elected officials who can affect the outcome you're interested in.

- Write to the Speaker of the House at the House of Representatives.
- Find out who chairs the committee most concerned with the issue you're particularly interested in and contact them as well.
- Go straight to the top! Write to the President at the White House.