

## How to Write Your Elected Official

When you come across an issue you feel strongly about, instead of yelling at the television, you can actually do something about it—write your elected official.

“Why should they care what I think?” you may ask. Well, you are one of their constituents—that makes it their job to represent you in government. They work for you, and if they don’t do their job and satisfy the people they represent, they can get voted out of office in the next election.

The First Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees the right of all citizens to communicate with their elected representatives:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and **to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.** “

This is a right Americans are fortunate to have—and don’t exercise nearly enough. Many men feel cynical and apathetic, that politicians are so corrupt that it’s not worth their time to petition them. But that just turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy! Things will never change if good men don’t get involved and hold their politicians accountable. Writing your representatives may seem like only a small thing, but politicians need to know that their constituents are paying attention.

Writing to your Congressman, or any other elected official, isn’t as hard or time-consuming as you might imagine. Follow the guidelines outlined below, exercise your citizenship, and make your voice heard.

### Before You Write Your Representative

#### 1. Hone in on exactly why you are writing.

It is important to sum up your purpose in one sentence, and not the kind with six commas. This is the first step, and it is important to give you focus and inform the rest of the process. Under most circumstances, this will be the first line of your letter.

#### 2. Figure out whom you should be addressing.

You need to make sure you are sending your message to the right person. This can sometimes take a little bit of homework, depending on your issue. Sometimes your senator or representative is not the best person to handle your issue. For example, if you are concerned with land zoning, this is probably best addressed to your town or county level officials, and issues of state law go to your state legislator.

#### 3. Pick the appropriate medium for your message.

Almost all public officials have a website these days—just Google their name and then look for the “Contact” link on their page. They may have specific instructions on how they prefer to be contacted.

- **Hard copy:** This is the most dignified and time honored method. There is something about committing a message to paper that makes it all the more official and concrete. Generally this is your best route if you have the time to do it right, and you want to be taken seriously.
- **Email:** Best for when time is not particularly urgent and you don’t care all that strongly about an issue, but you still want your voice heard.

• **Phone call:** If you hear on the news that something is being voted on today or tomorrow and you can get a live person from their office on the horn, this is the way to make sure your message gets through before it is too late. Keep it short and factual and be very clear on what your position is. If it's not that urgent, it's better to use another avenue.

## Writing the Letter

**1. Open the letter with an appropriate salutation.** For a Representative or Senator, "To the Honorable John Doe," is a good way to go. Using a title here is also acceptable, "Dear Supervisor Petrone," for example. Also, make sure your full name and address is on the letter itself—envelopes can get lost, and you need to be sure they can verify if you are a constituent or not and send you a response.

"Keep it short." -NY State Assemblyman Jim Conte

**2. Get straight to the point.** The first line of the letter should summarize why you are writing and what it is that you want (you should already be clear on this if you followed the above guidelines). Options include, "Thank you for..." "I support the passage of..." "Bill XYZ should not be allowed to pass," etc. If it's about a specific bill, include its official name and number if possible (ex. "USA PATRIOT Act HR 3162").

**3. Back up your concerns.** Hard facts and statistics cited from a specific, published source (be sure to say where you get the information from) can support your position much better than nebulous statements and pure opinion. Personal stories are often appropriate. If you can tell a story of how this issue affects you or your family specifically, that helps to "bring it home." Politicians love to be able to call out their constituents by name and put a face on the cause. This also helps to develop a more personal connection between you and your representative.

**4. Always remember to be respectful.** This is someone of power and influence you are addressing, and generally you are looking for them to do you a favor. Impugning your recipient's character or honesty is counterproductive. Above all, do NOT include anything that could be construed as a threat, unless you enjoy the prospect of the FBI investigating you.

## Receiving a Response

You may or may not receive a response, depending on the person you address, the issue you discuss, how many people wrote in about that issue, how busy the office is with other mail, how busy the official is at the moment, and other factors too varied to count. The bottom line is that if you don't get an answer, it may not be any fault of yours.

More likely than not, any response you do get will be some sort of a form letter. Keep in mind when you are reading their response that this person most likely got to their office at least in part because they are gifted wordsmiths and diplomats, which is to say, you'll need to read between the lines. If they can honestly say, "I agree with you and I voted accordingly," of course they will do so. Flowery talk about taking your views into consideration or such without an explicit "I voted this way," means they voted the other way, and they know you won't like it, but they are trying to make it sound like they are still on your side.

If they do something special to help you out, [a thank you note](#) to let them know that your issue has been resolved is a respectful courtesy.