

Writing to a Member of Congress

Since the Anthrax postal scare of 2001, e-mail is the preferred option for sending written communication to Members of Congress. E-mail is just as effective as a First Class letter and it is received immediately by the Member, not in the six to eight weeks it takes a mailed letter to arrive. Communicating by fax is also effective.

Some specific tips:

1. Try to stick to one typewritten page; two pages at most. If writing a regular letter, don't write on the back of a page. If writing longhand, take care to write legibly. In e-mail, always use proper net etiquette (avoid using all upper case letters as this connotes shouting, etc.).
2. In a short paragraph, state your purpose. Stick with one subject or issue. Support your position with the rest of the letter.
3. If the subject of your letter is a bill, cite it by name and number.
4. Be factual and support your position with information about how legislation is likely to affect you and others. Avoid emotional, philosophical arguments. Don't flame* or spam** legislators.
5. If you believe legislation is wrong and should be opposed, say so. Indicate the likely adverse effects, and suggest a different approach.
6. Ask for the legislator's views and his/her support, but do not demand that support. Remember, Senators and Representatives respond to a variety of views, and even if they do not support your position on one issue or bill, they may support it the next time. So, ask for the legislator's views and express that you look forward to hearing from them on this issue soon.
7. If writing a letter, make sure your name and address are legible. In e-mail, make sure your name, full address, and e-mail address are included.
8. If writing a letter, the suggested style is:

The Honorable _____
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510
Dear Senator _____

The Honorable _____

United States House of Representative
Washington, D.C. 20515
Dear Representative _____

(Begin e-mail by Dear Representative _____ or Dear Senator _____)

**Flame - insulting or derogatory e-mail.*

***Spam - to inundate someone with e-mail, usually in an attempt to overload and crash the person's Internet system.*

Adapted (in part) from the 1991 U.S. Congress Handbook

A New Era: Embracing Opportunities in the Face of Grave Challenges

The Arc, UCP, AAIDD, AUCD, NACDD, & SABE

DO's and DON'Ts WHEN DEALING WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

DO

DON'T

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| 1. <u>Make an appointment.</u>

By e-mail, fax or phone.
Confirm the appointment.
Appointments with legislative aides are also very important.
(Ask for the aide responsible for the issue(s) you wish to discuss.) | <u>Arrive unexpectedly and expect to see the official.</u> |
| 2. <u>Be on time for the visit.</u> | <u>Be upset if your Member can't see you personally.</u> |
| 3. <u>Be positive and friendly.</u> | <u>Be late for the visit.</u> |
| 4. <u>State the reason for your visit.</u>
-Be concise and specific.
-Introduce yourself and identify the group you are representing.
-Briefly describe the issue(s).
-Limit the number of issues to be discussed.
-State your position and recommendation on the issue(s). | <u>Be confrontational.</u>
(Don't ever threaten or berate the official.) |
| 5. <u>Personalize the issue(s).</u>
Tell how the bill or action will affect you, your family, friends or neighbors. | <u>Try to discuss several different issues.</u> |
| 6. <u>Provide reliable data/facts to support your position.</u> | <u>Talk only in terms of numbers and statistics.</u> |
| | <u>Give incorrect information.</u> |

(over)

DO

DON'T

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| 7. <u>Provide the names of people who can be resources for the Member and give him/her additional information - tell him/her you will get the answer.</u> | <u>Try to answer questions that you don't know.</u> |
| 8. <u>Leave a written summary of your position.</u> | <u>Leave issue papers or other lobbying documents (e.g., Action Alerts).</u> |
| 9. <u>Have a picture taken with official (if possible).</u> | <u>Make a funny face or obscene gesture while your picture is being taken with your Member of Congress.</u> |
| 10. <u>Write a thank-you letter.</u>
-Thank the official for the visit
-Summarize the visit.
-Identify follow-up steps committed to by official and yourself.
-Ask for the official's commitment.
-Request a reply.
-Send photo print (if taken) identifying persons in photo and date. (Enlargements have a better chance of appearing on office wall/desk.) | <u>Forget to write a thank-you letter.</u> |
| 11. <u>Arrange for the official or staff person to meet people with mental retardation, cerebral palsy, and related disabilities of all ages who are receiving community-based supports and services in the state or district. Get to know the staff of the Member of Congress in their district office in your state.</u> | <u>Ignore the Member for the rest of the year.</u> |
| 12. <u>Have others write letters.</u>
-Write about one issue only.
-If writing about a bill refer to the title and number.
-Be brief. (One or two pages if possible.)
-Be specific. (Tell your position on the issue and why you hold that position.)
-Share personal experiences.
-Ask for the official's commitment.
-Request a reply. | |

