

## Writing an Effective Letter to Congress

Writing to your congressperson is one of the treasured principles of American democracy. While it is a right we all enjoy equally, it is not a task that we all do equally effectively. What follows are some of the principles that can give your letter the greatest possible impact.

1. **Keep it Simple.** Know what you are going to say and say it directly. If you have more than one issue to discuss, you need to write more than one letter. Multiple issue letters go to the bottom of the pile, as do letters that are rambling or confusing. Make your point as directly and logically as you can.
2. **Keep it Personal.** The more personal your letter is, the more impact it will have. Congressional offices are inundated with hundreds of form letters and post cards every day. Most of them are simply discarded. Only if the issue matters at the moment are they even counted and reported to the elected official as a statistic. Present your case in your own words and sign the letter by hand. Go for snail mail rather than email. Spring for first class postage rather than a postcard. The more trouble you have taken, the more trouble they will take.
3. **Stick to Your Own Representative or Senator.** Congressional staff members rarely pass on the comments of people from “out of the district.” The only exception to this is communications from very influential people.
4. **Keep it Polite.** Never threaten an elected representative or staffer, even with political consequences. Threats engage the defensive reaction in the office. The threat of political action may get your concern before a campaign staffer or Press Director, but only as a way of proving that your influence is not as great as you think. Actual threats of any kind bring legal consequences! The most influential way to communicate is through logic. If you are angry about something, it can be effective to say so, but not to act it out.
5. **Present the Facts.** If you are writing about a piece of legislation or an administrative ruling, know its name and number. Use the SOT Web site to gather information before you write. Letters proposing reasons to support or oppose a particular piece of legislation can be very helpful. Make sure you offer your information in as brief and clear a fashion as you can. Letters should rarely exceed one page!
6. **Do Not Repeat.** It will never help your case to send multiple letters on the same issue. Unless circumstances change dramatically, or significant time elapses, a second letter will diminish the first one. Calling to see if a letter has been received is the quickest way to lose your influence. Send your message, as clearly as you can, and then let go.
7. **Be patient.** How rapidly you receive a response depends upon the circumstances in the office to which you have written. Most offices receive several boxes of mail every day. Every letter (or at least those from within the district) is opened by someone and should eventually receive a reply. If the office is understaffed or if they are getting a lot of mail on your topic or another one, then delays will occur. If they need more information from you (a rare occurrence, indeed!) they will contact you. It is not unusual for a number of weeks to pass before you receive an answer.
8. **Don't Expect Direct Access.** Very few letters ever come before the elected official. Staff members, who direct them to the appropriate part of the office, review most letters. This does not mean that you have no influence. If the staffer sees the value of your letter, then it will move up the ladder and may eventually come to the top. That “personal” signature on the reply is more than likely the product of an autopen or a staff member. If you chance to see the elected official and ask if he or she received your letter, expect an affirmative answer and an awkward moment. Your question will have been in bad taste and will have indicated how little you understand the process. Wait for that happy moment when, after a series of well-crafted and informative letters, the Representative or Senator calls you directly and asks for your input. It happens all the time.
9. **Don't Get Discouraged.** Some people come to believe that their letters make no difference at all. Nothing could be further from the truth. Elected officials like to hear from constituents and, for the most part, really want to represent their interests and desires. They want your letters.