

# WRITING A LETTER TO YOUR LEGISLATOR

**NONPROFITS RELY GREATLY** on mail campaigns to persuade legislators to support the organizations' positions. Whether you are organizing a mail campaign or writing just one letter from your organization, it is important to keep in mind that the competition is stiff. More than 200 million pieces of mail are sent to Congress each year (even more emails), and state legislatures are bombarded as well, so give careful thought to your letter. (The chart on page two shows proper forms of address to be used with various state and federal officials.) The general rules presented here apply to letters, emails, and faxes.

## EMAILS

Due to security reasons, all mail sent to the U.S. Congress is irradiated before delivery. This means that timing delivery to coincide with a legislative action is almost impossible. An effective alternative is email or fax and these methods of message delivery require some additional attention. First, the subject line of your email should include some reference to your being a constituent. For example, use "Constituent Request." Second, given the volume of emails and faxes that each office receives, you may want to send a follow up message. This message should again provide the content of your original message as well as reference the first message sent. For example, "Thank you for taking the time to consider my position, I want to provide you with this (fax or email) as a follow up to the (fax or email) I provided yesterday." You could also follow up with a phone call.

## SHOW A CONNECTION

If you know the legislator, make that clear in the first paragraph. This will alert the person opening the mail to give the letter special attention. Send letters only to your own legislator, unless you are the president of a group with members from other legislative districts. Even then, legislators tend to pay only limited attention to mail from outside their districts.

## MAKE IT PERSONAL

Some legislators downgrade the importance of a letter if they think it has been motivated by an organization as part of a campaign. If you ask your board members, volunteers, or members

to contact their legislators, consider asking them to send their letters on plain or personal stationery. This may get greater attention than a letter on your nonprofit's letterhead. Do, however, mention your nonprofit group if you are fairly certain that it will strengthen the impact of your letter. Handwritten letters are fine, as long as they are legible. They often get more attention than typed letters.

## INCLUDE A CALL TO ACTION

Ask the legislator to reply, and ask very directly whether he or she will support your position. Legislators are masters of non-replies—that is, letters that avoid giving you their positions. To smoke out his or her position, be as direct as possible while still being courteous.

## BE RESPECTFUL

Like everyone else, legislators dislike a threatening tone. Chances are excellent that your legislator will be very aware of the political fallout of not voting for your proposal, and so it serves no useful purpose to even hint about it. Keep in mind the old saying that you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar.

## BE ACCURATE AND TIMELY

Be certain that the legislator's name is spelled correctly and that the address is right. Envelopes get detached, so put your return address on the letter. Be certain that your legislator receives the letter before the vote.



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### GIVE THANKS

Thank the legislator. Legislative staffers repeatedly say that legislators seldom receive thanks. Sending your thanks is the right thing to do and is a great way to strengthen a relationship. But also write to let the legislator know if you disapprove of the way he or she has voted. That will get attention, too.

### GIVE THE FACTS

Don't overstate your nonprofit's influence; it will only detract from your message. However, do let your legislator know the size and mission of your group. Legislators are very aware of how much attention to pay to almost every group in their districts, so don't overstate — or understate. Just give the facts.

### CANNED LETTERS?

There have been mixed reviews of postcards, template letters, emails and similar communications produced in centrally organized efforts to mobilize grassroots support on issues. Some discount the impact of postcards and "canned" letters. Others hold that they can be helpful. As Common Cause advises, any letter is better than none. That's still good advice.

### >> MORE TIPS FOR WRITING THE LETTER

- Keep your letter to one page
- Put it in your own words
- Avoid jargon
- Use only those acronyms that you are certain the legislator will know
- Cover only one issue per letter
- In the first paragraph, ask for the action you want your legislator to take
- Send an enclosure if you think more information is needed
- Enclose relevant editorials and news stories from local papers in the legislator's district to get his or her attention
- Identify the legislation clearly including the bill number
- Sign your letter above your typed or printed name

## PROPER FORMS OF ADDRESS

	PERSON ADDRESSED	SALUTATION	COMPLIMENTARY CLOSE
President of the United States	The President The White House Washington, DC 20500	Dear Mr. President:	Sincerely Yours,
U.S. Senator	The Honorable United States Senate Washington, DC 20510	Dear Senator _____:	Sincerely Yours,
U.S. Representative	The Honorable United States House of Representatives Washington, DC 20515	Dear Mr./Ms. _____:	Sincerely Yours,
Governor	The Honorable Governor of	Dear Governor _____:	Sincerely Yours,
State Representative	The Honorable House of Representatives State Capitol	Dear Mr./Ms. _____:	Sincerely Yours,
State Senator	The Honorable The State Senate State Capitol	Dear Senator _____:	Sincerely Yours,

\*Note the guidelines for sending emails on the previous page of this information sheet.