

How To Write To Congress

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Writing to Congress is the single best way to express your view on public policy. The average consumer has a surprising ability to influence legislation by crafting a well written missive. Let's find out what the common mistakes to avoid are, how the process works, and the best ways to ensure your letter has the greatest impact.

Why Personal Letters Beat Form Letters

Don't get suckered in by the quick and easy "Write to Congress!" form letters littering the internet. Form letters are not an expression of values; they are a show of organizational strength. If the NRA convinces five million people to send letters opposing gun control, it shows that the NRA can muster five million people to action, not that five million people necessarily care about gun laws. Congressional offices know this and generally disregard form letters.

So what happens when you send a letter?

Every office has its own procedures for tabulating constituent correspondence, but most will produce a report at the end of week breaking down how many letters were received by issue area, separating out form letters from letters sent by individual constituents.

Members treat each type of letter differently, but most look for individual letters as a barometer of their district's concerns. These are the letters that have the most influence, the ones we will show you how to write.

What Should Your Letter Say?

We adhere to the three paragraph rule: introduce yourself, introduce your issue, request action.

Congressional offices have staffers whose days are spent solely on the mail, so make their lives easier by keeping letter succinct and to the point.

- **Introduce Yourself:** There is a two-prong test for determining your worth: 1) Are you a constituent? 2) Are you an important constituent? Feel free to puff up your chest. Are you a lifelong member of the district? Are you associated with community groups? Say so! Convince the reader that yours is a voice of experience and wisdom.
- **Be specific:** Don't just ask a Member to oppose mandatory binding arbitration agreements. Ask them to rush to the floor to **support S.1782**, The Arbitration Fairness Act of 2007.
- **Marshall Facts:** Your argument—and you are making an argument—must be supported by facts. Feel free to use facts gleaned from us or other sources, but don't copy and paste paragraphs of pre-written text from form letters. Personal experiences are particularly effective, and often moving. Share them!
- **Be Exceedingly Polite, Please:** Congress attracts haughty personalities. Staffers don't appreciate being spoken down to or insulted. You are trying to rally them to your cause, so be nice.

- **Clearly State Your Request:** Plainly tell your representative that you want them to support or oppose a certain bill. If you want a response, explicitly (but politely) ask for one.

It should go without saying that your letter should follow all formal style guidelines, such as a return name and address, and should be free of spelling and grammatical errors.

Send Your Letter To The Right Place

Only write to your representatives. You have three: one Representative in the House, and two Senators. Do not send more than three letters. Some citizens try to get their voice heard by writing to all 435 members of the House. Congressional courtesy compels the 434 Members who do not represent the zealot to forward his letter to the one lucky Member who does. This angers the Member's staff greatly at the expense of any point you are trying to make.

The addresses for your **Representatives** and **Senators** are available online, but don't waste your time with an email. Letters carry significantly more weight. Send your letter to the Capitol, where the legislative staff is based, though it will take a while to arrive since all incoming Congressional mail is irradiated thanks to those still-unidentified Anthrax mailers.

For an even greater impact, send your letter care of the staffer covering the issue. These staffers – called Legislative Assistants – are the Member's eyes and ears on their assigned issue areas. Finding the staffer destined to read your letter is easy: call the Capitol switchboard (open 24 hours a day!) at (202) 224-3121, ask for your Member's office, and ask the person who answers for the name of the staffer handling the issue area or bill number. Once you get that name, address your letter like this:

Member Of Congress
c/o Staffer
Office Building/Number
Washington, DC 20515

What Should You Expect In Return?

It depends. There are 535 Congressional offices and each handles constituent correspondence differently. The vast majority respond to letters with either a form letter pre-written by a Legislative Assistant, or with a more personal response written by a Legislative Correspondent. Controversial issues that attract many letters normally receive a form letter response, while smaller issues or specific questions often receive the attention of a personalized response.

Conclusion

Members of Congress work for you. Without your votes, they won't stay in office. They go to great lengths to cultivate a positive relationship with you, their boss. Very few people take the time to write to a Member of Congress, so the few that do carry a disproportionate influence.

Fifteen minutes is well worth the time to influence a \$2 trillion enterprise.