How to Write an Effective Letter to Your Policy Maker

Taking action through the UCS website is one important way you can communicate your views to your legislators. All congressional offices monitor correspondence from their constituents. However, handwritten, mailed letters sometimes can have a greater effect. They give the legislator the impression that the issue was important enough to you that you took the time to write them a personal letter.

Well-written, thought-provoking letters from members of the community can influence a legislator’s decisions. Just a couple personal letters into an office over a short period of time can bring an issue to the attention of your legislator and have a big impact.

Usually the response to your letter will be a standard letter reply. Since congressional offices receive hundreds or even thousands of letters and emails each week, staff do not have the time to send personalized replies in most cases. The important issue is whether the reply answers your questions or responds directly to your request for the legislator to take a certain position. If it does not, write again and request a clear answer.

With increased security on Capitol Hill, postal mail can take anywhere from four to six weeks to reach your legislator. If your message is urgent, such as related to an upcoming vote, send a personalized email or fax instead. Follow these simple steps to ensure your letter is as effective as possible:

1. **Address your letter correctly.** Be sure you have the correct address and salutation on your letter. You can find the address of all of your legislators here by simply entering your zip code. If you are sending an email, many offices require you to fill out a webform, rather than send an email to a specific person. Following the directions on the legislator’s website will ensure your letter goes through the proper channels and is read by the appropriate person.

2. **Write to the legislators for whom you can vote.** Elected officials are most interested in your opinions if you are their constituent.

3. **Address only one issue per letter.** A letter that addresses one specific topic will have more impact and receive a quicker response than one covering multiple issues. If you have professional expertise on the issue you are addressing, be sure to describe it.

4. **Ask for something specific.** Ask the legislator to take a particular action, such as cosponsoring a bill or taking a leadership role on an issue. Ask the legislator to state his or her position in a letter of response.

5. **Keep it short.** To make sure your letter is read rather than skimmed, make your points quickly and concisely.

6. **Make it personal.** Tie the issue to your personal expertise or experience, or to the district or state represented by the legislator. Use your own words.

7. **Use your institution’s letterhead, if applicable.** If you work in an academic, private, or government setting, consider sending your letter on your institution’s letterhead. While you
should be clear that your opinion is a personal one, using your institution’s letterhead will grab
the reader’s attention and help to establish your credibility. Be sure you are allowed to use
letterhead on correspondence of this nature before you drop your letter in the mail.

8. **Be courteous.** Rudeness will always alienate your reader.

9. **When appropriate, express your appreciation.** Like anybody, legislators appreciate an
   occasional “well done.” Furthermore, in this manner you signal that you are paying attention to
   your legislator’s activities.

10. **Include your return address on your letter.** By including your address in the letter, the reader will
    know that you are a constituent and will know what address to send a response to.

11. **Follow up.** Follow-up letters often have a much larger impact than the initial communication.
    Thank the legislator for taking a correct stand, or ask questions about any unsatisfactory answers.
How to Have a Productive Phone Call With Your Legislator's Office

Telephoning your legislator’s office is a useful way to communicate your opinions, especially on issues where an action is pending, such as a vote. You will not speak to the legislator directly. As with letters, legislative staff track the number of calls they receive on various topics. Just a couple phone calls into an office over a short period of time can bring an issue to the attention of your legislator and have a big impact. Here are some tips to help you make that call:

- **Call congressional offices directly or through the switchboard.** If you do not have the direct number, you can reach U.S. representatives by calling 202-225-3121, and U.S. senators by calling 202-224-3121. Ask the operator to connect you to the individual office.

- **Ask to speak to the aide who handles the issue about which you are calling.** Your call will be more influential if you speak to the correct aide. However, Congressional aides are very busy and this is not always possible. If you cannot speak directly with the aide, leave a message with the receptionist stating your views.

- **Let them know that you are a constituent.** Elected officials are most interested in your opinions if you are their constituent, so be sure to say the city and state you are from.

- **Know your facts.** Be sure you have the basic information about your topic in front of you when you call. You should be able to specifically describe the topic about which you are calling and state your opinion on what your legislator should do.

- **Note your expertise.** If you have professional experience on the issue on which you are calling, be sure to mention it. It will help to establish your credibility on the issue and may event prompt the aide to ask you for some guidance on the issue.

- **Be brief.** Aides receive a high volume of phone calls every day, so keep your call short.

- **Be timely.** Timeliness is especially important when you are phoning. If the vote on your issue is imminent, the aide is much more likely to pay attention to what you say.

- **Consider calling the local office.** Calling the office in your district or state, rather than the Washington office, can sometimes be very effective. If you are calling about a vote or other timely issues, always call the Washington office. But, if you are calling generally about an issue that affects your district or community, calling the local office can be a good way to make them aware of an issue.