Isabelle Francais for AKC

Make Your Contact Count

Writing a Letter to a Government Official

Writing a letter can be an effective way of making your voice heard in your town, county, state, or in Washington, D.C. To give your correspondence the most impact:

- Address only one issue in each letter.
- Legislators receive a lot of e-mail. If you have time, mail the letter instead. If you e-mail, use the format of a traditional letter.
- Be brief. Keep your letter to one page.
- Be courteous, but make your point and don't be apologetic. If you're angry or feel strongly, you can let that show, but be polite.
- State your specific purpose or position in the first paragraph.
- Refer to specific legislation by number and title.
- Mention if you are a constituent, or identify another connection with the recipient's district.
- State why you support or oppose a particular measure. Don't concede the other side's points, even if you agree with some.
- Personalize your letter. If you must use a form letter, type or write it yourself.

To a Federal Senator:
The Honorable (name)
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator _____:

To a Federal Representative:
The Honorable (name)
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman or Congresswoman _____:

To a State Senator
The Honorable (name)
(state capital address)

Dear Senator _____:

To a State Representative:
The Honorable (name)
(state capital address)

Dear Assemblyman or Assemblywoman _____: OR
Dear Representative _____: OR
Dear Delegate _____: (title used in that state)

Calling a Government Official

When there is no time to write a letter, a phone call to your legislator's office can be effective in delivering a quick, simple message. To give your phone call impact:

- Plan exactly what you want to say before you call.
- When you place your call, ask to speak to that person's staff assistant who handles your issue. If you get to speak to the official, that's a bonus.
- Make your message short and simple. State your name and your main point: "Please vote against Senate Bill 123" and then say why in a few sentences.
- End by repeating your name, where you live, and/or your connection to the legislator's jurisdiction. Give a phone number and offer to provide more information if the legislator requests it.
- If the person who handles your issue is not available, leave your name and phone number. If your call is to support or oppose an upcoming vote, also give your main point as part of the message.
- If you don't know a federal legislator's direct number, call the Capitol switchboard at 202-224-3121 and ask for that Senator or Representative's office.
- Look in the telephone book for listings of government offices to find telephone numbers for state and local officials.
- Follow up with a letter if there is sufficient time.

Meeting With a Government Official

Meetings with legislators can be a productive way of communicating, although some may be able to meet personally with only a fraction of their constituents. To give your meeting the maximum effect:

- Schedule an appointment in advance.
- Plan, time, and rehearse your comments prior to the meeting.
- Appoint a spokesperson who will do the talking beforehand if you go with a small group. Dress professionally.
- Get to the main point within five minutes
- Other group members may add comments, but should only do so to reinforce or elaborate on your main point.
- Answer any questions accurately and briefly. If you don't know the answer, say so and offer to follow up.
- End by asking the official to do what you want him or her to do, such as "Will you vote for Senate Bill 150?"
- Leave a one-page statement of your issue and position.
- If you meet with a staff aide instead of the legislator, remember that educating the staff is very important too. Many legislators rely heavily on their staff's advice.
- Follow up with a thank-you letter, answers to any of the legislator's questions that were not handled during the meeting, or any other information you offered to gather for the legislator.

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