



Advocacy Education Series

Ten Steps to Composing Persuasive Letters

Identify Yourself as a Constituent

Put your name and complete address on both the envelope and the letter. Legislators will only feel compelled to respond to constituent mail, so it's important to establish immediately that you live in their district.

Use Proper Forms of Address

Address your lawmaker as *the Honorable*. Also, be sure to get their title correct, e.g. Senator, Representative. Use *the Honorable* in the address and the office title in the salutation (Dear Senator Smith). Courtesy is important and will make the legislator or staff more receptive to your message.

Be Brief and Simple

Try to stay on one page. Keep your letter to no more than two. In the first paragraph, state your purpose and what you want. Avoid the temptation to be comprehensive in explaining the legislation and making all possible arguments.

State (and Repeat) Your Ask

Make your position and/or request clear in both your opening and closing paragraphs. Be specific. State what action you want. If you want the legislator to co-sponsor a piece of legislation, say so. If you want to know the legislator's stand on an issue, ask what it is. If you want support on a particular issue, request it and a response. Don't ask your legislator to simply *care* about the issue.



Personalize Your Message

A personal letter is much more effective than a form letter. While form letters, postcards, and petitions may be read and counted, they don't carry the weight of a personalized, individual letter. Volume does not necessarily equal effectiveness. If you've read one, you've read them all – literally. Persuasive constituent mail humanizes issues by placing them in a local, personal context. When sample letters are provided for your use, incorporate your own words and personal perspective into the text.

Be Polite and Avoid Ultimatums or Rudeness

Everyone responds better to praise than criticism. Threats and ultimatums do little to convince a legislator to adopt your position. If a legislator does take the course of action that you suggest, send them a note of thanks. This will only help build a long-term relationship with the legislator and staff.

Do Not Enclose Additional Material

Additional reports or newspaper articles are rarely read or filed. If you have a particularly useful resource, mention it in your letter and offer to provide a copy upon request. Overwhelming an office with paper runs the risk of your letter being discarded along with the offending pile of paper.

Do Not Exaggerate or Lie. Ever. Period

Make Your Message Timely

Don't procrastinate. Your letter is not helpful if it arrives after a vote. Be aware of the legislative process (is the bill in committee or coming up for a vote on the floor?) and time your letter accordingly. Faxes can allow you to get your letter to a legislator at critical junctures in the process.

Send a Copy of Your Letter to NACDL

Knowing that you've contacted a legislator helps us coordinate legislative strategy and additional lobbying. Also, send NACDL a copy of any response you receive.

