



Effective Ways to Communicate With Legislators

Five Rules for effective communication

1. **Be brief.** A legislator's time is limited. Keep it short.
2. **Be appreciative.** Acknowledge past support and convey thanks for current actions.
3. **Be specific.** Identify the issue or bill you wish to address. Know your message.
4. **Be informative.** Clearly state your position and give reasons why an issue or bill should be supported.
5. **Be courteous.** Be positive and polite. Ask for a specific action or support. Do not demand or threaten.

Personal Visits

- ❑ **Know your legislator.** (Name of legislator, political party, ideology, State or District he represents, his legislative positions and committee memberships)
- ❑ **Know when the best time to time to schedule visits is.** Timing is everything. All legislative bodies have their own cycles. Make a point of knowing when the legislature meets, when key committee hearings are held, when bills are marked up, when debate is scheduled, when recess is scheduled. Time your visit accordingly.
- ❑ **Know who to bring.** Delegates should be constituents, and citizen advocates should outnumber staff. Keep the delegation small enough for an easy exchange of views.
- ❑ **Know how to make your case.** Make sure everyone understands and agrees on grounds rules before the visit. Choose a spokesperson who will lead the discussion, cover the main points and keep the conversation focused. Not everyone needs to speak to make a contribution. Be prepared to answer hard questions.
- ❑ **Know why you're there.** Have a clear agenda. Tell the legislator what specific legislation you want him or her to support. Legislators can't keep track of all pending legislation. Make it easy for them to help you.
- ❑ **Know what you don't know.** Practice your presentation with at least one person who is unfamiliar with your issues. They may point out inconsistencies or ask questions that you've overlooked. Edit your presentation accordingly.
- ❑ **Know what to bring.** Bring a policy statement or fact sheets that supports your position. Keep paper to a minimum—one page is best.

Letters

Letters are a simple and powerful way to let a legislator know how you feel. Legislators pay attention because letters represent votes. And each letter is deemed to represent several likeminded citizens. Your letter may be formal or informal, typed or handwritten.

- ❑ Be sure to identify yourself as a constituent and include your contact information.
- ❑ Use the correct form of address.
- ❑ Write from your own experience. A personalized letter carries more weight than a form letter.
- ❑ Limit yourself to two or three paragraphs—no more than a page.
- ❑ Using the correct form of address for your legislator is important. First impressions count.

Forms of Address

Congress

For Senators:

The Honorable _____ (full name)
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator _____:

For Representatives:

The Honorable _____ (full name)
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative _____:

State

For Governors

The Honorable _____
Office of the Governor
State Capital
City/State/Zip

Dear Governor _____:

For Lieutenant Governors:

The Honorable _____
Office of the Lt. Governor
State Capital
City/State/Zip

Dear Lt. Governor _____:

For State Senator

The Honorable _____
Address

Dear Senator _____:

For State Representative

The Honorable _____
Address

Dear Representative _____:

E-Mail and Fax

These options are best used when time is of the essence, e.g., in the days approaching a key vote. Follow the same general rules as regular correspondence. The following are especially important for email.

- Put your name and address at the top of your message so it is clear you are a constituent.
- Be very brief and personal. If you are working from a form message, personalize it.
- Make your view known in the subject line (e.g., "Support Mission College") and do not expect a response. Staff may check only the subject lines to gauge public opinion on a particular issue.
- Avoid attachments, which are rarely read.
- Use e-mail sparingly to avoid being considered "spam."
- Proof carefully, especially when writing in haste. Mistakes may cost you credibility.

Telephone Calls

Telephone calls are appropriate and easy, especially if there is a vote pending. When should you call? Call to ask support before a hearing or floor vote, to ask for help with legislative colleagues or to convey urgent concerns.

- Start by identifying yourself, where you live and why you are calling.
- Write down your key points.
- Again, be brief and express thanks.
- Write down when you called, whom you spoke with and the outcome of the call for follow up and a thank you note.
- Encourage others to call.

- Times to telephone include: to ask support before a hearing or a floor vote; to ask for help with legislative colleagues; and to convey urgent local concern. Judge how far to pursue by the reaction. Remember that it is more difficult for a legislator to compromise in a conversation than by letter.

Find your legislator's address, phone number and email at Project Vote Smart.
<http://www.vote-smart.org/index.htm>

Excerpted and adapted from the American Library Association's Issues and Advocacy Action Kit
<http://www.ala.org/ala/issues/toolsandpub/actionkit/contents.htm>

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