

The Do's and Don'ts of Legislative Letter Writing

In state and national capitols, letters are the barometers that measure political interest. Letters are counted and they do make a difference. But not just any letter is influential. Just as people at the grassroots level have become more organized in their letter writing campaigns, legislators have become more savvy in distinguishing a drummed-up letter from an expression of personal concern. So it is especially important that your letter be personal, thoughtful, specific, and concise. Your letters should be written with the expectation that they will be read by someone of sensitivity and intelligence, but who may be slightly less well informed than you are on your particular issue.

Here are some do's and don'ts to consider in writing a convincing letter.

- **Do** spell your legislator's name correctly and know whether he/she is a senator or delegate. All should be addressed as "The Honorable."
 - **Do** write as an individual constituent. Because legislators pay the most attention to personal letters from their constituents, it is important that your letter express your own views. To make this clear, it will help to use personal stationary rather than a postcard or form letter, express your views in your own words rather than those of another, and refer to previous communications with the member, if possible.
 - **Do** write one page or less. Because legislators are so busy, they do not have much time to read through a long, involved letter in order to discover your point. If your letter is limited to one page, they can scan it more quickly. If you have more information than will fit on one page, include it as background material, clearly marked as such and attached to the letter.
 - **Do** cover only one subject and clearly identify it as such. For example, at the top of the page, below the date write "Re: name of the bill or issue." This will speed up the routing of the letter in the office. If you have more than one subject which you would like to cover, then write a separate letter for each one.
 - **Do** be as specific as possible. Regardless of what you are writing about, be as specific as possible in describing it. If it is a particular bill, try to refer to its number, the person who introduced it, and what it will do. Similarly, if you refer to the position of the delegate, it will demonstrate your specific interest in his/her actions. Show as much knowledge as you can, but don't hesitate to write merely because you are not an "expert."
 - **Do** make your letter timely. Try to ensure that your letter arrives while the issue is alive. Your legislator will appreciate having your views and information while the bill is before him/her.
 - **Do** ask the legislator to do something specific. It is important to ask for a specific action such as: "Please vote for the budget amendment for Norfolk State University."
 - **Do** include your name and return address on the letter.
 - **Do** type letters if possible, but handwritten letters are fine if they are legible. Write each legislator individually, avoiding photocopies or carbons.
 - **Do** write to your own senator and delegate and to others whom you know personally.
-
- **Don't** write a letter that demands or insists the legislator vote for or against a certain bill.
 - **Don't** write a chain letter or form letter.
 - **Don't** threaten the legislator with defeat at the next election.
 - **Don't** become a chronic letter writer.
 - **Don't** send carbon copies.

¹Adapted/Reference: University of Virginia Government Relations - Advocates Materials