

Writing your senator or congressman

Advice on writing your elected senators and congressmen in Washington.

Like it or not, the federal government is big enough and powerful enough that it touches the lives of almost everyone in the country. Therefore, almost everyone, at one time or another, has the opportunity to write their Congressman or Senators about a government issue that affects them personally.

Most people write to their Congressman or Senators for one of two reasons: to express their opinion about a political issue or an upcoming vote in Congress, or to ask for help in dealing with a federal government problem. You can also write and invite your Senators or Congressman to attend an event in your community, to request a flag that's flown over the Capitol, to get congratulatory greetings for a friend or relative, or to get help with an appointment to one of the service academies.

If you're writing to express your opinion on an issue, it's helpful to keep your letter short and to the point. It is best to limit yourself to writing about one issue at a time. Letters that cover four or five issues tend to wander and can be hard to read, and are less likely to catch the attention of your Congressman or his staff. And because your Congressman receives hundreds of letters a day -- sometimes thousands of letters a day -- a short letter is much likelier to be read than a long letter.

Use your own words in writing a letter. Using your own words is much more effective than echoing an argument you've read somewhere else. Use common, conversational language, like you'd use in talking to a friend. And don't engage in insults or partisan name-calling, because there's enough of that in Washington to go around as is is.

Don't feel as though you have to understand all of the legislative process before you write. There's no need to include, for example, the number of a specific bill that you're writing about if you don't know what it is. However, if you're writing to ask your Congressman to take a specific legislative action -- like voting a bill out of committee or co-sponsoring a new bill -- you might want to check and see whether or not he's already done what you've asked him to. The Library of Congress has a service called THOMAS that allows you to check on the status of any bill, or to see how your Congressman voted on a past bill.

If you're writing for help with an issue, it's important that you explain your situation in detail. Your Congressman will more than likely copy your letter and send it to the agency with which you're experiencing difficulty, so it's important that you mention all the facts. If you have previous letters from the agency, or other important paperwork, like military

or medical records, it's important to send copies with your letter. However, please don't send originals of such important documents.

If you're writing about a Social Security problem, a military problem, or Medicare or Medicaid benefits, please include your Social Security number. If you're writing about a tax problem, please include either your Social Security number or your tax identification number, if it's a business tax issue. If you're writing about an immigration problem, please include your alien registration number. If you're having trouble with the Veterans Administration, please include your VA number, and if you need old Army or Navy records, include your old service number. Including these important pieces of information helps speed your inquiry.

In the first paragraph of your letter, be sure to state what you want to have happen. Your Congressman will be more than happy to help you solve your problem with a federal agency, but in order to proceed, it's important that she knows what kind of help you want. No matter what kind of help you want -- a transfer to another military post, a visa for a relative overseas, a correction of an IRS mistake on your income tax -- be sure to spell out exactly what it is you are asking your Congressman to do.

The Privacy Act of 1974 requires that your Congressman get your written permission before he or she can contact a federal agency on your behalf. Therefore, it's important that you sign your letter. This gives your Congressman the permission to help you. If you're writing to help a friend or relative, they must also provide their signature, as well. This applies even if they're overseas, or ill, or elderly. You can ask your Congressman for a "privacy form" which the person you're writing about can sign.

If you have concerns about an issue before your state legislature, or are having difficulties with an independent state agency, write your state representative or your state senator. Your Congressman likely will not be able to help you with an issue involving your state government. Also, your Congressman -- even if he or she is a lawyer -- cannot represent you in court and cannot intervene in a legal matter on your behalf. If you need legal assistance, you must contact a lawyer.

Here are some general do's and don'ts when writing your Congressman and Senators:

DO use the right address. The address for all Congressman is: United States House of Representatives, Washington D.C. 20515. The address for all Senators is: United States Senate, Washington D.C. 20510.

DON'T send mail to a Congressman who doesn't represent your district or a Senator who doesn't represent your home state. The exception to this would be sending mail to a Senator or Congressman who's a member of a key legislative committee that's considering a bill you're interested in.

DO take the time to make sure you contact the individuals who represent you in Congress.

DON'T write your letters in longhand if at all possible. Typed letters are much easier to read.

DO put your name and address on both the envelope and the letter. If the envelope gets lost, and your address doesn't appear in the letter, you probably won't get a response. Also, include your telephone number in case a staff member needs to contact you.

DON'T use paper other than standard white paper, 8 1/2 by 11. Also, don't put lots of clips and staples in your letter. If you must send a lot of documents, use a binder clip and remove any staples. Everything you send -- especially if you're asking for assistance -- may go through a copier. Colored paper doesn't copy well, and non-standard paper or paper with lots of staples may get mangled.

DO be positive in presenting your ideas or in asking for assistance. You're much more likely to be heard if you use positive, friendly language rather than rancor or abuse.

DON'T be afraid to speak out on important issues. Your Congressman values your opinion! Also, if you run into trouble with a government agency, don't be afraid to contact your Congressman. Congressmen and Senators help thousands of people each year with problems just like yours.

DO visit your Congressman or Senator's web page if you'd rather send e-mail. Offices handle e-mail differently; some have a standard address, others will have you use a form, and others don't even have e-mail

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