

What you can do ...

WRITE TO A PUBLIC OFFICIAL



So Others Might Eat

Writing public officials is an effective way to influence them. They pay attention to their constituents' interests and concerns. A steady stream of letters or e-mails about a particular issue will put it on their radar screen, especially if the communications are clearly individual products, not form letters. Form letters can be useful models, but they should always be individualized.

Public officials and their staff are busy people. So you need to construct your letter or e-mail in a way that will grab their attention and deliver your message quickly and clearly. The following guidelines will help.

- **Decide on your message.** You may have many issues you want the official to consider, but each letter or e-mail should be about only one issue. And it should advocate a specific action or course of action to address the issue. That's how officials and their staff process constituent input, so that's how you should write.
- **Choose your vehicle.** Generally speaking, hard-copy letters have more impact than e-mails. However, some officials prefer e-mail. So call the official's office and ask—unless time is of the essence. If you're writing about a decision that will be made within days, then e-mail or fax. Allow a long lead time—at least 10 days—for letters mailed to U.S. Senators and Representatives. Current security procedures make delivery very slow.
- **Use proper titles.** In internal addresses and addresses on envelopes, the official should be designated as "The Honorable," and both first and last names should be used—for example, "The Honorable William Jones." For the salutation, use the official's position and his or her last name—for example, "Dear Senator Jones."
- **Begin with the essentials.** Lead off with the key facts about yourself. Say you are a constituent and add anything else about yourself that's directly relevant to the issue—for example, your membership in a concerned organization, paid or volunteer work that has given you experience with the issue. Then state what specifically you are asking the official to do. And be sure to ask, not tell. If your request concerns a particular piece of legislation, use the official name of the bill and, if possible, the bill number. You can find these for federal legislation by using the search function at <http://thomas.loc.gov>. For legislation awaiting action by the Washington, D.C. City Council, search at <http://www.dccouncil.washington.dc.us/lims/searchresults.asp>.
- **Support your position.** Use the next paragraph—or, at most, two paragraphs—to briefly state the reasons you are advocating the action. Try to relate the action to *local* impacts, because officials care most about the communities they serve. Focus on facts, including what you know from your personal experience. If you have several key arguments, consider using bullets.
- **Request a response.** Ask the official to let you know what he or she intends to do.
- **Include complete contact information.** Your letter or e-mail should include complete contact information—your full name, address, telephone number, and e-mail address. For hard-copy letters, use your letterhead, if you have it, or create letterhead in your document. For e-mails, put the contact information at the end.
- **Follow up.** If the official acts as you requested, write a thank you letter. It's very important that officials know when they have acted as their constituents wish—and that constituents are watching.