

TOOLS FOR ACTION

This toolkit offers tips on a variety of methods to make a difference.

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Tips for Writing to Elected Officials

Writing to your elected official is one of the easiest ways of conveying your thoughts and concerns on an issue to elected officials. Taking five minutes to write to them does make a difference.

It is especially important to write to your own legislator. When an elected official receives numerous letters or emails on a specific issue, it does influence their vote. Some tips for writing a letter to an elected official follow:

- Address elected officials properly (e.g. "Rep. _____").
- State that you are a constituent.
- Include your full name and address. If you have met the legislator before, you may want to provide a brief summary of where you met.
- Write the email or letter as an individual. Legislators prefer hearing from “real constituents,” rather than representatives. Write about your personal experience and how the issue affects you.
- Be brief and concise. An email should be one or two paragraphs, while a letter should not exceed a page.
- Mention legislation by citing a specific bill number and name or its principal sponsors (You can search for specific bills [here](#)). If the bill is not well known, a short summary of the bill may be necessary to include.
- Request a specific action. Be sure to state exactly what you want the elected official to do. If appropriate, ask the legislator to vote for a particular bill or amendment, request a hearing, or co-sponsor a bill.
- Ask the legislator to reply to your letter or email. Ask that he or she state their position on the issue in the reply.
- If writing a letter, include a return address. Ensure that you include a return address in your letter.
- Write a follow-up letter or email. If you asked for a reply and did not receive one within a week, write another letter asking for a response. If the legislator complied with your request (e.g., voted favorably for a bill), send a thank you note. It is a refreshing change to most letters they receive.

Tips for Writing Effective Letters to the Editor

The editorial page is one of the most important sections of any newspaper. More people read the



"Letters to the Editor" section than many other portions of the newspaper. This is an ideal forum for conveying your message about an environmental issue.

Editors view this section of the paper differently, usually depending upon the circulation size of the newspaper. Some Editors may see the "Letters to the Editor" as a community bulletin board where various opinions are sought to be printed. For a widely circulated newspaper, hundreds of "Letters to the Editor" come to the newspaper each day. Editors of these newspapers wish to publish criticism, praise or feedback to the stories and columns that have recently appeared. Editors are also looking for ideas and facts. By providing your Editor with information on your issues, you are helping them to do their jobs. Keep in mind that Editors are not required to print your letter, but usually they feel responsible for equitably and accurately depicting all sides of an issue.

A legislator is very sensitive to the editorial opinion published in papers in their jurisdiction.

The followings are some tips and suggestions for writing a letter to the editor of a widely circulated newspaper or your community newspaper.

- Learn the newspaper's style. Read several "Letters to the Editor" in the paper which you wish to send a letter to in order to gain a sense of the style of letters the Editor prints. Understand the newspaper's audience and its circulation size.
- Use your own words. Don't use a form letter. Let your personality and thoughts show by being serious, humorous or ironic, but don't be nasty or offensive. Remember that a hint of restrained anger is often more effective than strident outrage. Plus, creative letters using humor or irony will have a more lasting impression on the reader.
- Localize your letter.
- Explain how the issue will affect your area.
- Know your subject. Be sure you know your subject or issue if you are going to criticize or attack someone or something. Use facts and take the time to do research if necessary.
- Offer a solution. Whether stating a specific or general approach to an issue, solutions are always a more intelligent manner of following up on criticism.
- Identify the responsible person in your letter. Name the decision maker, elected official or person in your letter.
- If you want the public to contact a specific legislator, include their phone number or address in the letter.
- Keep it brief. Keep your letter succinct and more readers will read the entire text. Avoid rambling sentences and big words. A letter less than or well under 200 words has a better chance of being printed.
- Another rule of thumb is to write no more than four to six paragraphs with each paragraph consisting of two to three sentences. In addition, limit the number of points you make and stay on the same subject.
- Be aware that your letter may be edited for length and content. Check the "Letters to the Editor" section of the newspaper for word limit instructions. Some editorial writers will edit letters for readability and length.
- Type your letter. It is best to type your letter or legibly handwrite your letter to the Editor.



- Fax or email your Letter to the Editor. If the newspaper is circulated daily, fax or email your letter so it will get there quicker and possibly printed faster.
- Sign your letter. Most Editors will not accept a letter unless it is signed by the author. If sent by email, they will generally call to confirm you sent it.
- Include your address and daytime phone number. Most Editors will not accept a letter unless you include your address and daytime phone number. Be aware that someone from the newspaper may call you to verify facts. Check for any other requirements in the "Letters to the Editor" section of the newspaper.
- Watch the newspaper for your letter. If it does not show up within a few days or in the next issue, call the Editor's office to politely ask about the letter. They may be able to offer an explanation or other tips to help you the next time you submit a letter.

Placing a Phone Call to an Elected Official

As a citizen, you have the right to call and express your opinion to an elected official.

When the phone rings in our legislator's office, they are obligated to answer. When the phone rings continuously at our legislator's office regarding a specific issue, the elected official is compelled to take heed and hopefully take action.

Legislators work to serve the people. They cannot do their jobs effectively if they do not hear the opinions and interests of the people, especially the citizens in their district.

The following are some recommendations for placing a phone call to your elected official.

- Prepare. Have an outline or a mini-script of what you intend to discuss with the legislator. Do research before, if necessary, so that you know the subject and its relevancy to current legislation.
- Relax. If you are nervous, relax and treat the phone call like a normal telephone conversation. Do not read verbatim from a prepared script, but ensure that you speak coherently and slowly.
- Identify yourself. Identify yourself by giving your name and your address.
- Be brief. Clearly and concisely state your position and make your point. Limit your call to one issue. Make a separate phone call for other issues.
- Identify the legislation. Make sure you identify the legislation you are discussing by name and number or by its sponsors. If the legislator or staff person is not familiar with the legislation, provide them with a brief summary.
- Ask their viewpoint. Ask the legislator their view on the legislation.
- Ask for a vote. Ask the legislator for a commitment to vote for or against the legislation.
- Don't argue. It will be ineffective to engage in a longwinded argument with the legislator or staff person about the issue. You will be more likely to get your message across by keeping your conversation clear and succinct. Be courteous, direct and fair.
- Don't be discouraged. Don't give up if you get a busy signal. This simply means that others are getting through with a message as well. (You can always send a fax if you can't get through right away). Also, don't be discouraged if you speak with a staff person. Most legislative aides are very reliable in relaying the message and knowledgeable of the issues. Continue the conversation as if they are the legislator.



- Follow up. Send a note to the legislator thanking them or their staff for their time. This is a great opportunity to briefly restate your position in writing.
- Be positive. Positive phone calls to your legislator can be very helpful. If your official has a good environmental record or has recently supported pro-environmental legislation, a commendation is always received favorably by the legislator.

Meet In-Person with Your Elected Officials

Meeting with an elected official is simply the face-to-face version of writing a letter or having a telephone conversation.

Most legislators want to meet with citizens to hear their concerns and recommendations. You only have to be a citizen passionate about an environmental issue to get your message across, not an expert lobbyist.

Because you hold the power of the vote, your opinions carry more weight than any number of lobbyists. Don't be afraid of lobbying as it is simply expressing your opinion and trying to sway someone that your view is the correct one.

Arranging the Meeting...

1. Call your legislator's office and make an appointment. Ask to speak with the appointments secretary or scheduler.
2. Identify yourself as a constituent of the legislator, stating where you live.
3. Briefly explain which issue you would like to discuss with the legislator.
4. Request a 30 minute meeting with the elected official (you might be given less time, but it doesn't hurt to ask for 30 minutes).
5. If the legislator is unavailable, request a meeting with a legislative aide or other staff person who is responsible for or knowledgeable about your environmental issue.
6. Send a note or fax to confirm the appointment. Include the time, date and location of the appointment, as well as your name, address and daytime phone number.

Preparing for the Meeting...

1. If possible, gather a small group (three is optimum) to accompany you during the meeting. Bring different members of the community if applicable, such as a business owner, teacher, doctor, scientist, homemaker, etc. If you are representing a larger group or organization(s), be sure to convey that to the legislator.
2. On your own or in the group, determine the message you wish to convey before meeting with the legislator. If in a group, divide out the tasks of who is the main spokesperson, and who will speak or answer questions regarding specific topics. Also, assign someone to take notes and to write the follow-up letter). Be sure to include brief personal stories or experiences which demonstrate why this issue is



important to you or the group. Ultimately, you want to keep your message brief and simple so that your legislator understands the issue.

3. List all arguments for and against and develop responses. This will avoid being put on the spot when the legislator disagrees with your argument.

4. Prepare your message or information in a letter or fact sheet format to leave with the legislator. Have other voters or organizations prepare letters of endorsements or other supportive materials. If you wish to convey amendments or revisions to legislation, provide your edited version of the bill. Remember, if you bury them in paper, they may not read it!

5. Familiarize yourself with the legislator's voting record or their history. This will help you to relate to them and determine which arguments will be most effective (e.g., economic or religious).

6. Role play your presentation with others who can provide feedback. Practice until you are confident and know the information or message, but do not memorize it like a script. Make sure that the information you are presenting to the legislator is limited enough to allow time for questions and discussion.

During the Meeting...

1. Be on time. Some elected officials may not be on time due to meetings or hearings. Be patient and flexible. If the legislator must leave early, ask to continue the discussion with a staff person.

2. Dress nicely. Initial impressions are important in this setting and a good one can only help your message, not detract from it.

3. Relax. Do not feel that you need to be an expert. All that matters is that you are an intelligent citizen with voting power. Your best tool will be to show how genuine your concern is for the issue.

4. Remember to have everyone introduce themselves and their organization if appropriate.

5. Make eye contact. This shows confidence. Speak with authority and remember that they are people too.

6. Begin with a compliment such as stating how good their environmental voting record is or at least thanking them for taking the time to meet with you.

7. Make your opening remarks a brief and clear description of the issue, your position on it and what you want the elected official to do. If a legislation is involved in the discussion, be sure to state the bill number, name and sponsors.

8. Watch the body language as it can often reveal more than the discussion.

9. Following the opening remarks, continue with your prepared presentation. If you lose your train of thought or get flustered, pull out your fact sheet to refresh your mind or another member of the group can jump in to pick up the discussion.

10. After you have presented your message, let the legislator respond. Listen carefully. If you cannot wait until after the meeting, take notes on what the legislator says.

11. Ask the legislator what you can do to help them support your message.



12. Make sure you have answered the legislator's questions. Answer the questions as best as you can. Don't make up answers. Acknowledge what you do not know. Make a note of the questions you could not answer and tell the legislator you will follow-up to provide them with an answer.

13. Make sure the discussion stays on goal with the message you are trying to convey. If the discussion gets off course, steer it back to the important points or the issue.

14. Be firm about your position, but don't try to change the legislator's mind if they are adamant. Be courteous, direct and fair. Ensure that no personal remarks are made. If you are not seeing eye-to-eye with the legislator and are frustrated, move on to another part of the issue or politely end the meeting. It is important not to alienate the legislator since you need their support on another issue.

15. Unless the legislator is clearly opposed to an issue, ask if they will commit to supporting the issue by speaking out on the floor or voting for or against a bill.

16. Remember to leave the legislator and the staff a copy of your fact sheets, letters or other information.

17. Thank the legislator or staff member for their time, even if they did not agree with your position.

After the Meeting...

1. Before you leave the building, immediately take notes regarding the main points of discussion, the legislator's remarks, any unanswered questions, etc.

2. Complete your research on finding information for the unanswered questions.

3. Promptly follow up the meeting with a thank you letter. Use this to restate your key points, state the answers to the outstanding questions and reiterate any commitments the legislator made. The letter should be signed by all parties who attended the meeting, as well as those interested parties who could not attend.

Testifying at a Public Hearing

Testifying at a public hearing is a great way to make your voice heard.

Public testimony is generally taken at the committee level during a public hearing.

Why public hearings matters:

1. Verbal testimony has an emotional impact, especially on elected officials who may not bother to read the written record.

2. Hearings are often covered by news reporters, and thus are an opportunity to get your message out to the public, not just the agency or committee.

3. The fact that you made the extra effort to come out in person sends an important message to the agency and the public regarding your level of commitment to the issue.

4. Agencies always under pressure to do the wrong thing appreciate some support to do the right thing.



The following are some tips to testify effectively:

- Prepare. Usually there is a time limit, such as three minutes at local hearings, Prepare your presentation to include two or three key points. Practice or role play your testimony. Prepare a written version of your testimony to submit.
- Arrive early. If you do not wish to wait, be sure to show up a half hour early in order to complete and turn in a sign up card. If you do not arrive early, prepare for a long wait if it is a contentious issue.
- Dress appropriately. A good impression can only help your message, not detract from it.
- Listen to other testimony. Make sure you do not repeat what a previous speaker has presented.
- Identify yourself. Begin by giving your name. Usually you must state your full address. It is better to testify as a private citizen. If you are testifying for a special interest group, state the name of the organization or group, briefly describe the group's mission, and state how many members it has.
- Clearly state your position. Give a clear and concise description of your position on the issue or the bill.
- Personalize your testimony. Use your own words and describe personal experiences during the testimony without being melodramatic. Formulated testimony is not as impressive and eloquent as speaking in your own words. Describe or show through pictures how the issue affects you.
- Don't read your testimony. The committee or council will listen to and appreciate your testimony more if you tell it from the heart and not from a script.
- Request action. State exactly what you would like the committee or sponsor to do.
- Offer solutions. Whether stating a specific or general approach to an issue, solutions or feasible alternatives are always well received. If you wish to convey amendments or revisions to legislation, provide your edited version of the bill. Never blame anyone or make accusatory remarks
- Thank the committee. Close your presentation by thanking the committee or council.
- Offer to answer any questions. It is usually acceptable for legislators to interrupt the presenter to ask questions. Answer the question and return to where you left off in your testimony. Be sure to answer questions honestly. If you do not know the answer, say so and, if possible, defer the question to another witness who may have the information.
- Submit your testimony in written format. Be sure to submit your testimony in written format or any other information supporting your message to the committee or council.

Tips for Making a Point at a Town Meeting

A large and well-informed turnout at a town hall meeting or a community forum is an extremely effective way of sending a strong message to your elected officials and the media (and, hence, the general public) that will likely attend.

If your lawmaker is supportive of your issue, a show of support helps to solidify his or her position.

In general, when attending and speaking at town meetings, conduct yourself as you would when testifying at a hearing and/or meeting with your elected officials.

Before the Town Meeting...

1. Try to recruit several others to attend the meeting with you. Be sure to inform them of the date, time, address, and nature of the meeting.



2. Think about how the elected official will likely respond to your questions and prepare in advance what follow-up questions should be asked.

At the Town Meeting...

1. Keep your comments brief, clear, and to the point. Be firm, but don't be rude.

