



Citizen Advocacy 101

Excerpted from Citizens in Action: How to Influence Government

Written Correspondence

Following are a few tips for effective written communications (which include letters and e-mails).

- **Be Relevant:** You'll need to demonstrate your relevance to the policymaker with whom you're communicating. For elected officials, that means you'll need to either have an in-district address or demonstrate some other level of connection, such as having employees in their district or state, for example..
- **Be Thoughtful:** The key to being effective in your written communications is ensuring that someone on staff actually thinks about what you have to say. Your "voice" must be heard above the cacophony of voices represented by the flood of postcards, letters, e-mails, and faxes that pour into policymakers' offices every day. By far, the most compelling and effective letters combine a thoughtful approach to policy issues with a careful explanation of why it's important to the author personally.
- **Be Personal:** Volume does not equal effectiveness. In reality, one thoughtful, well-argued letter can have more impact than 100 postcards or petition signatures. Why? Because policymakers and their staff recognize the time and energy spent writing the thoughtful letter. It sends a signal that the constituent really cares about the issue -- and perhaps cares even more than the constituents who simply signed their names to a postcard do.
- **Be Brief:** Do your best to keep the written communication to one page or, even better, one "screen" for e-mails. With so many communications to review and respond to, officials and their staff appreciate your efforts to get to the point -- quickly.
- **Ask for a response:** Given the limited time and budgets in a policymaker's office, priority will always be given to letters that require an answer. Asking for a response means someone on the staff has to think about what you've said and, in some way, address your concerns or comments. If you make it impossible for the office to respond (by not including your address, for example) you virtually assure that no one will think about what you had to say.
- **Confine letters to one subject:** If you have strong views on a number of topics you want to bring up with policymakers, it may be more effective to write individual letters for each topic. This is especially true if the subject areas are wide-reaching. By confining your written communications to discrete subjects, you will likely receive a response much more quickly because your letter won't need to be reviewed by as many staff people before a response can be drafted.