

Communicating in Writing with Elected Officials

The letter is the most popular choice of communication with a congressional office. There are many ways to write your representatives – by signing your name to a petition, signing a preprinted postcard, sending mail (express or regular), and e-mail. All types of written correspondence exert influence and make an impact – some more than others at any given time. Generally, the more personal the written contact, the more effective the message will be. If you decide to write a letter, this list of helpful suggestions will improve the effectiveness of the letter:

1. Try to keep it to one page, two at the most.
2. Take care to write legibly, if writing longhand. Don't write on the back of the page.
3. Include your name, address and e-mail address if applicable, to permit a reply and prove district residency.
4. If you are a constituent, say so immediately.
5. Focus on one issue.
6. Be concise and to the point. Include key information, use examples to support your position.
7. Be courteous and reasonable. Never threaten.
8. Your purpose for writing should be stated in the first paragraph of the letter. If the letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it accordingly, e.g. House bill: H.R. _____, Senate bill: S. _____.
9. Be persuasive, but take every precaution to be factual.
10. Never apologize for taking his/her time.
11. Don't write a legislator from another district just because you don't like the views of your own representative.

How to Address in Written Correspondence:

To the Senator:

The Honorable (full name)
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator (last name):

To a Representative

The Honorable (full name)
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative (last name):

4982139

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To the President
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. (or Ms.) President:

Note: When writing to the Chair of a Committee or the Speaker of the House, it is proper to address them as:

Dear Mr. Chairman or Madam Chairwoman: or Dear Madam Speaker or Mr. Speaker:

Addressing E-mail

When addressing an e-mail to a member of Congress, follow the same suggestions as for the printed letter. For the subject line of your e-mail, identify your message by topic or bill number. The body of your message should use this format:

Your name
Address
City, State, Zip

Dear (title) (last name)

(Start your message here)

Steps Towards Clear Constituent Correspondence

1. Put your thoughts into your own words. Your own personal experience makes for excellent supporting arguments.
2. Indicate the state, congressional district, city and county in which you are a voter. If you have family, business or connections related to the issue, explain them.
3. Be factual. Support your position with specific information about how the proposed legislation is likely to affect you and those you know.
4. Try to be constructive. If you believe that proposed legislation is wrong and should be opposed – say so! But indicate specifically the likely adverse consequences and suggest a better approach.
5. Ask for the legislator's vote in support of your view on the issue.

What to Expect From Your Efforts

- Expect a reply, even if it's only a form letter.
- Follow the issue after you write.
- Plan to take further action, by sending a thank you letter if your representative pleases you with a vote or pronouncement on the issue.

Tips on Writing Letters to the Editor

Introduction

This letter-to-the-editor writing guide is designed to help you share your story and support AARP's efforts.

Letters to the editor are great advocacy tools. Media research shows that the letters to the editor section is one of the most widely read parts of the paper. These tips are designed to help you get your letter to the editor published, and help you demonstrate how your community can benefit from health care reform on the national level.

It is important that you use your own words and write in your own voice when writing a letter to the editor. AARP's health care reform position materials will help you tell your own story in your own voice, using statistics that support AARP's advocacy efforts.

The Purpose of a Letter to the Editor (LTE) is not Always Publication

What appears in newspapers is the chief grist of public opinion. Because politicians closely track the attitudes of voters, the media strongly influences legislative decisions and government administrators.

The letters section is one of the most read. These letters are short policy statements and are respectfully treated as such, normally appearing on the page with or near the paper's own editorials. And the threshold of success is not only in being published – it comes when you submit your letter. Unpublished letters to the editor can affect which others make it to newsprint. Typically, an editor will want to publish a selection of letters that fairly represents those that were received. The more letters that agree with your point, the more likely your point – even if it isn't your actual letter – will make it to newsprint. Newspapers, not surprisingly, like to sell newspapers.

Editors will often use the number of letters received on an issue to gauge the public's interest in it. The more interest is perceived, the more the paper is likely to devote space to coverage of that issue in the future. Also, letter writers can impact even the position of the paper itself.

Sending a copy to the targeted legislator is a good idea and helps increase the value even if your letter is not printed.

Tips on Getting a Letter to the Editor (LTE) Published

One of the most efficient and effective ways to educate the public about issues of concern is by writing a letter to the editor of a local newspaper. If printed, a letter to the editor can reach thousands of politically aware, influential people. Elected representatives read local newspapers, especially the editorial pages where letters to the editor are printed. The following tips can help your letter get published.

Tips on Writing Letters to the Editor

How to Write an Effective Letter

- Read the guidelines before you sit down to write. The newspaper or magazine website and editorial page should have contact information and guidelines for how to submit a letter.
- Be brief. Strictly limit your letter to the maximum length allowed in the newspaper's guidelines. The shorter your letter, the better your chance of getting important points printed and not having your letter edited because of space limits. (Recommend not more than 150 words.)
- Be relevant: Refer or react/respond to a "news hook," one of the paper's past editorials or to a past news article related to health care reform or a letter to the editor. Search the paper daily.
- Address the editors. Write as if you're talking to the editor of the newspaper,

How to Submit a Letter

- Submit it multiple ways. Today, most newspapers prefer to receive letters to the editor by e-mail or through the paper's online submission form. However, the paper may prefer to receive your letter by fax or surface mail. You can find submission instructions in the newspaper or on its web site. Sending it two, or even all, of those ways maximizes the chance of getting your letter published. But do not submit the same letter over and over – that will just irritate the editors.
- Be email savvy. If you submit by email, paste your letter into the text of the email. Do not send attachments. Many papers will not even open an email with an attachment.
- Once you submit the letter to the editor, post it on your social media platform.

Monitoring

- Send or email a copy of published letters to the editor to your Outreach staff leader.
- Do not be discouraged if your letter is not published. The more you write, the greater the likelihood your thoughts will be printed.

Calling Your Elected Official's Office

Often the most immediate way to communicate with a legislator is by telephone. You should make your voice heard because you are a citizen and you have something to say – and that in itself is valuable.

To find out the mailing address, district office location or telephone number of your Senator or Representative:

- Use the US Senate website <https://www.senate.gov/index.htm>
- Use the US House of Representatives website www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative
- Call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and ask for your Senator and/or Representative

Before you begin your call, there are a few steps to follow:

- Do your homework. Have the correct information and AARP approved key message on the issue.
- Have a firm, clear idea of the point you want to get across.
- Organize your facts and arguments. Consider writing a script.
- Be clear about the action you want your legislator to take.
- Call the office of the elected official during business hours.
- **Calls to the State Legislators** should be made to their local office during legislative session. Calls to members of Congress can be made to their district office if you want simply to leave a message. If you want to speak directly to the member of Congress or their staff you should contact their Washington, D.C. office.

During the call:

- Remember that a staff member, not the member of Congress, often takes telephone calls. Ask to speak with the aide who handles the issue on which you wish to comment.
- Identify yourself as a constituent, not just a voter. Give your own name (not AARP's name), address and district.
- Tell the aide you would like to leave a brief message, such as: "Please tell Senator/ Representative (name) that I support/oppose (S. ___/ H.R.8 ___)."
- You will also want to state reasons for your support or opposition to the bill. Ask for your
- Senator or Representative's position on the bill. You may also request a written response to your telephone call.
- If you are speaking to the legislator, be persistent, but polite.
- Indicate your appreciation for past votes on the issue, if possible.

Staying on Message

What exactly is a message?

A message is designed to create the impression or thought you want an audience to walk away with. Messages should be clear, consistent, and concise.

Is a message different from a slogan?

Yes. A slogan is just one way of packaging a message to make it accessible to the audience. Slogans fall into the same category as a theme line for a campaign, a headline for a brochure, or a sound bite from a presentation or news clip.

What does it take for a message to be effective?

First, the context for the message must reflect an understanding of and empathy for the audience's current feelings on an issue. If you expect an audience to listen, they need to believe that their concerns and feelings are respected.

AARP has great credibility. Importantly, this credibility is not limited to its own members only, but with adults of all ages. It is a powerful position from which to begin, and an advantage that must never be placed in jeopardy.

Second, a message needs to be built on an understanding of what barriers might potentially prevent members of an audience from making the behavior change that is being encouraged. The barriers can be anything from political beliefs to a lack of understanding of a particular policy option to just plain inertia or a lack of interest in the issue.

Third, and probably most important, a successful message must link the thought or feeling being evoked to something personally beneficial. If a case is presented in a way that demonstrates that the benefits outweigh the barriers, a message has a good chance of getting people to change their behavior and take action.

Do's and Don'ts of Staying on Message

These do's and don'ts can help you:

- Stay on message.
- Further the chances of getting your key messages repeated.
- Obtain the public action you want.

Do

- Play offense, not defense. Get your message points out to the public.
- Speak in simple, clear, concise, and easy to understand terms.
- State your main point first. Then, back it up with facts or examples.
- Use facts and figures when appropriate and possible to demonstrate your credibility.
- "Humanize" your message with illustrations and personal experiences.
- Repeat key messages.
- To be credible, be yourself.

Staying on Message

Don't

- Don't be on the defensive and fixated by the question being asked that you forget to make your own points.
- Don't over answer. When you're satisfied with your reply, stop.
- Don't be afraid to pause.
- Don't allow yourself to be provoked. Keep cool.
- Don't fake an answer. If need be, assure your questioner that you will provide the needed facts in a timely manner or refer the questioner to another source.
- Don't ever lie!

