

The Importance of Letter Writing

Letter writing is an important and effective tool in legislative grassroots activism. Meeting and talking in person or on the phone is very helpful, but letter writing helps put something concrete in hand that helps you to reinforce your position or “iron out” something you may have talked about. The most appropriate time to follow up with a letter is after you’ve personally met with a legislator and talked to them. You can thank them for meeting with you while reminding them about it at the same time. This gives you another opportunity to remind them of what you are asking from them or perhaps to clarify. Sometimes a meeting does not go as well as you would like and the follow up letter gives you another opportunity to leave someone with a good thought about the time spent with you or perhaps another way to think about what you had discussed.

Our elected representatives in the New York Legislature and the US Congressional delegation have been elected to represent us. Our legislators cannot completely do their job unless we do ours. We are their constituents. It is their job to represent us; therefore we must share what is on our minds. We need to tell them how we want represented and what legislation we want them to support, as well as what legislation we do not want them to support, etc. The use of computers and emails, have made letter writing even more valuable, but as an MRO, letter writing is one of our most important tools. We need to continually engage members in the letter writing process, for many of them this will be the only way for them to share their wishes and thoughts with their elected officials.

Sometimes we need to generate a lot of letters from many people about particular issues to get the job done. But note, that even when there is no state wide issue, it is equally important for members to maintain an open line of communication with our elected officials. Letter writing is still one of the most convenient and effective ways to accomplish communication. We can do it early, we can do it late; we can do it after the kids have gone to bed, we can do it while we are waiting our turn at an appointment. We do not have to fit writing a letter into someone else’s schedule; we can do it at a time that is more convenient for us. The bottom line, any letter we write is good, but if you are concerned about proper format and want your letter to project some legislative professionalism, here are some tips in regard to the proper structure of a formal letter to a legislator.

How To Write a Letter to Your Legislators.

Handwritten letters are fine, as long as they are easily read. People who cannot write legibly should type the letter. It is best to use blue or black ink and white paper.

Always start your letter with the date. Aside from correct format, sometimes the date is critical. For instance, if your letter arrives after your issue is already voted on, it is too late to help make an impact. Sometimes the date actually helps you follow up later, but to be proper, always date your letter.

Your name and address should appear after the date on your letter, not just on the envelope. A proper letter includes your name and address but if the envelope is thrown away, your own contact information just disappeared if it was not included on your letter.

The next thing should be **the proper address for whomever you are writing** –again, not just on the envelope, but here inside the letter. As examples, this is the formal way to address a letter.

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer
United States Senate
313 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kristen Gillibrand
476 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Marcus Molinaro
Legislative Office Building 532
Albany, NY 12248

The next thing is the **salutation**. This is where we use their title. Some examples:

Dear Senator Schumer / Gillibrand,

Dear Assemblyman Molinaro,

Dear Governor Paterson,

Always begin your letter by identifying yourself as their constituent and identifying your issue.

Example, "As a resident of your district, I am writing to tell you about my feelings about Axxxx / Sxxxx and why I would like you to -----to prevent this discrimination against motorcyclists."

Always identify legislation you support or oppose by using the bill number if you can. If there is any related legislation, a legislator or staffer might think your letter is about something different than you intended it to be.

Although you should **be courteous throughout your letter**, you do not have to apologize for taking a legislator's time; they work for and represent you. It is not ever a good idea to say anything like "I hope this letter gets past your secretary". It irritates staffers and frankly, staffers can be a lot of help to us so it is not a good idea to irritate them. The letter should be courteous throughout as we do not want to alienate anyone, we are simply asking for support and sometimes explaining why we are asking for it, or sharing why we feel the way we do.

You can **personalize your letter by emphasizing "you"**. Example, "You may not be aware -----to prevent this discrimination against motorcyclists." "You can help address this problem by -----."

Give reasons for your position on the legislation you are writing about. Be reasonable and feel free to personalize the impact the legislation will have on you, your family, business, state, or community. Don't assume they know how you will be affected by the legislation you are writing about because the fact is that many times they do not even have a clue. This is your letter and your chance - tell them about it.

Always recommend what a legislator should do, tell them what action they should take, ask them to support your legislation, etc. Never demand, order or threaten. Don't ask them to do the impossible. Your letter should present you as a reasonable and courteous person. It is important that when you are

communicating with your legislators in person or in a letter that most legislation is the result of compromise. Often times, there is give and take, push and pull that lead to whatever legislation is finally produced.

It is important not to be threatening. Don't brag about your political influence or threaten how you or your organization will vote in future elections.

Our GRASSROOTS EDGE.

It's also VERY important to write your legislator when you approve of something they've done. We are poised to capitalize on things like this in a LARGE way. Know that not many people get involved in communicating with their legislators. Our doing so is how we wield power reserved for effective grassroots organizations. The only thing fewer than the number people who take the time to communicate with their legislators, is the number of people who take the time to express their appreciation or thanks. Sad but true. Most people who contact them are mad, and almost all of them want something. Please capitalize on every opportunity to say **THANK YOU**. These expressions of appreciation will be remembered longer than you know because they can be very rare. Taking the time to make contact with your elected officials when you do not want something or to say thank you is a VERY valuable part of legislative grassroots politicking. It puts you and our organization in a very positive light.

Be sure to **close by clearly asking for the action you wish for** and that your legislator share their position on the issue. Example: "I urge you to ----- and vote for/against Axxxx / Sxxxx and help prevent discrimination against motorcyclists. Please let me know where you stand on this issue."

The **end of your letter should include your name.** Your written signature should be above a legibly printed or typed signature.

Respectfully,

John Doe,

John Doe