



Communicating with Elected Officials

Heightened security measures have dramatically increased the time it takes for a letter sent by post to reach the offices of federal or state legislators. More and more, citizens are using emails and faxes to communicate their concerns and increasingly elected officials' offices prefer electronic communications for constituent contact. As a general rule, Members of Congress are far more likely to heed your message if you are one of their constituents. The following tips aim to improve the effectiveness of your correspondence, regardless of the means you choose to deliver your message.

TIPS FOR WRITING CONGRESS

State your purpose for writing in the first sentence of the letter. For example: As your constituent, I am writing to urge your support for increased funding for health care.

If your letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it. And make sure that you are referencing the correct legislation to the correct body of Congress. House bills are H.R. ____; Senate bills are designated as S. _____. It is also important to know the status of the bill.

Be courteous.

If appropriate, include personal information about why the issue matters to you to make your point.

Address only one issue in each email.

Close your letter with a restatement of your purpose and indicate the response that you expect.

Addressing Your Correspondence to a Senator:

The Honorable [Jimmy Stewart]
__(room number)__(name of) Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator [Stewart]:

Addressing Your Correspondence to a Representative:

The Honorable [Jimmy Stewart]
__(room number)__(name of) House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

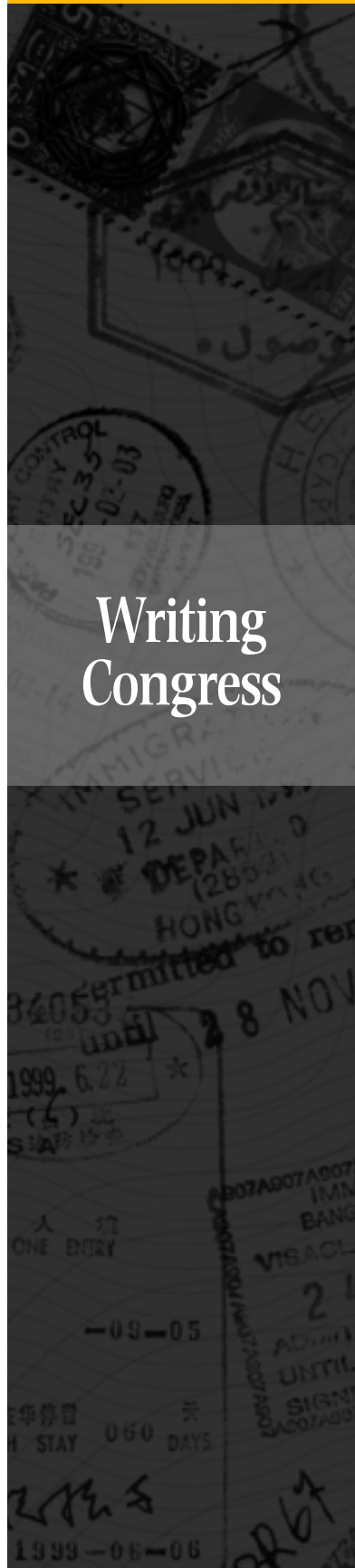
Dear Representative [Stewart]:

TIPS FOR PHONING CONGRESS

Telephone calls are usually taken by a staff member, not the member of Congress. Ask to speak with the aide who handles the issue about which you wish to comment. (See our guide to Congressional staff here.)

After identifying yourself as a constituent, 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. ____]."

State your reasons for your support or opposition to the bill. Ask for your senators' or representative's position on the bill. You may also request a written response to your telephone call.



Writing Congress



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THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

INTRODUCTION:

Anyone may draft a bill; however, only members of Congress can introduce legislation, and by doing so become the sponsor(s). There are four basic types of legislation: bills, joint resolutions, concurrent resolutions, and simple resolutions. The official legislative process begins when a bill or resolution is numbered – H.R. signifies a House bill and S. a Senate bill – referred to a committee and printed by the Government Printing Office.

STEP 1. REFERRAL TO COMMITTEE:

With few exceptions, bills are referred to standing committees in the House or Senate according to carefully delineated rules of procedure.

STEP 2. COMMITTEE ACTION:

When a bill reaches a committee it is placed on the committee's calendar. A bill can be referred to a subcommittee or considered by the committee as a whole. It is at this point that a bill is examined carefully and its chances for passage are determined. If the committee does not act on a bill, it is the equivalent of killing it.

STEP 3. SUBCOMMITTEE REVIEW:

Often, bills are referred to a subcommittee for study and hearings. Hearings provide the opportunity to put on the record the views of the executive branch, experts, other public officials, supporters and opponents of the legislation. Testimony can be given in person or submitted as a written statement.

STEP 4. MARK UP:

When the hearings are completed, the subcommittee may meet to "mark up" the bill, that is, make changes and amendments prior to recommending the bill to the full committee. If a subcommittee votes not to report legislation to the full committee, the bill dies.

STEP 5. COMMITTEE ACTION TO REPORT A BILL:

After receiving a subcommittee's report on a bill, the full committee can conduct further study and hearings, or it can vote on the subcommittee's recommendations and any proposed amendments. The full committee then votes on its recommendation to the House or Senate. This procedure is called "ordering a bill reported."

STEP 6. PUBLICATION OF A WRITTEN REPORT:

After a committee votes to have a bill reported, the committee chairman instructs staff to prepare a written report on the bill. This report describes the intent and scope of the legislation, impact on existing laws and programs, position of the executive branch, and views of dissenting members of the committee.

STEP 7. SCHEDULING FLOOR ACTION:

After a bill is reported back to the chamber where it originated, it is placed in chronological order on the calendar. In the House there are several different legislative calendars, and the Speaker and majority leader largely determine if, when, and in what order bills come up. In the Senate there is only one legislative calendar.

STEP 8. DEBATE:

When a bill reaches the floor of the House or Senate, there are rules or procedures governing the debate on legislation. These rules determine the conditions and amount of time allocated for general debate.

STEP 9. VOTING:

After the debate and the approval of any amendments, the bill is passed or defeated by the members voting.

STEP 10. REFERRAL TO OTHER CHAMBER:

When a bill is passed by the House or the Senate it is referred to the other chamber where it usually follows the same route through committee and floor action. This chamber may approve the bill as received, reject it, ignore it, or change it.

STEP 11. CONFERENCE COMMITTEE ACTION:

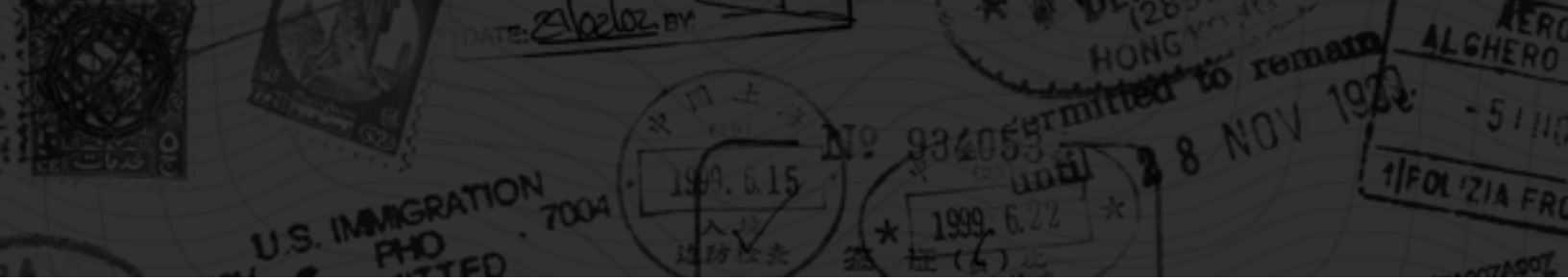
If only minor changes are made to a bill by the other chamber, it is common for the legislation to go back to the first chamber for concurrence. However, when the actions of the other chamber significantly alter the bill, a conference committee is formed to reconcile the differences between the House and Senate versions. If the conferees are unable to reach agreement, the legislation dies. If agreement is reached, a conference report is prepared describing the committee members' recommendations for changes. Both the House and the Senate must approve of the conference report.

STEP 12. FINAL ACTIONS:

After a bill has been approved by both the House and Senate in identical form, it is sent to the President. If the President approves of the legislation he signs it and it becomes law. Or, the President can take no action for ten days, while Congress is in session, and it automatically becomes law. If the President opposes the bill he can veto it; or, if he takes no action after the Congress has adjourned its second session, it is a "pocket veto" and the legislation dies.

STEP 13. OVERRIDING A VETO:

If the President vetoes a bill, Congress may attempt to "override the veto." This requires a two-thirds roll call vote of the members who are present in sufficient numbers for a quorum.



VISITING CAPITOL HILL

Meeting with a member of Congress or congressional staff is a very effective way to convey a message about a specific legislative issue. Below are some suggestions to consider when planning a visit to a congressional office.

PLAN YOUR VISIT CAREFULLY:

Be clear about what it is you want to achieve; determine in advance which member or committee staff you need to meet with to achieve your purpose.

MAKE AN APPOINTMENT:

When attempting to meet with a member, contact the Appointment Secretary/Scheduler. Explain your purpose and who you represent. It is easier for congressional staff to arrange a meeting if they know what you wish to discuss and your relationship to the area or interests represented by the member.

BE PROMPT AND PATIENT:

When it is time to meet with a member, be punctual and be patient. It is not uncommon for a Congressman or Congresswoman to be late, or to have a meeting interrupted, due to the member's crowded schedule. If interruptions do occur, be flexible. When the opportunity presents itself, continue your meeting with a member's staff.

BE PREPARED:

Whenever possible, bring to the meeting information and materials supporting your position. Members are required to take positions on many different issues. In some instances, a member may lack important details about the pros and cons of a particular matter. It is therefore helpful to share with the member information and examples that demonstrate clearly the impact or benefits associated with a particular issue or piece of legislation.

BE POLITICAL:

Members of Congress want to represent the best interests of their district or state. Wherever possible, demonstrate the connection between what you are requesting and the interests of the member's constituency. If possible, describe for the member how you or your group can be of assistance to him/her. Where it is appropriate, remember to ask for a commitment.

BE RESPONSIVE:

Be prepared to answer questions or provide additional information, in the event the member expresses interest or asks questions. Follow up the meeting with a thank you letter that outlines the different points covered during the meeting, and send along any additional information and materials requested.

CONGRESSIONAL STAFF ROLES

Each member of Congress has staff to assist him/her during a term in office. To be most effective in communicating with Congress, it is helpful to know the titles and principal functions of key staff.

COMMONLY USED TITLES:

Administrative Assistant or Chief of Staff:

The Administrative Assistant reports directly to the member of Congress. He/she usually has overall responsibility for evaluating the political outcome of various legislative proposals and constituent requests. The Admin. Asst. is usually the person in charge of overall office operations, including the assignment of work and the supervision of key staff.

Legislative Director, Senior Legislative Assistant,

or Legislative Coordinator: The Legislative Director is usually the staff person who monitors the legislative schedule and makes recommendations regarding the pros and cons of particular issues. In some congressional offices there are several Legislative Assistants and responsibilities are assigned to staff with particular expertise in specific areas. For example, depending on the responsibilities and interests of the member, an office may include a different Legislative Assistant for health issues, environmental matters, taxes, etc.

Press Secretary or Communications Director:

The Press Secretary's responsibility is to build and maintain open and effective lines of communication between the member, his/her constituency, and the general public. The Press Secretary is expected to know the benefits, demands, and special requirements of both print and electronic media, and how to most effectively promote the member's views or position on specific issues.

Appointment Secretary, Personal Secretary, or Scheduler:

The Appointment Secretary is usually responsible for allocating a member's time among the many demands that arise from congressional responsibilities, staff requirements, and constituent requests. The Appointment Secretary may also be responsible for making necessary travel arrangements, arranging speaking dates, visits to the district, etc.

Caseworker:

The Caseworker is the staff member usually assigned to help with constituent requests by preparing replies for the member's signature. The Caseworker's responsibilities may also include helping resolve problems constituents present in relation to federal agencies, e.g., Social Security and Medicare issues, veteran's benefits, passports, etc. There are often several Caseworkers in a congressional office.

Other Staff Titles:

Other titles used in a congressional office may include: Executive Assistant, Legislative Correspondent, Executive Secretary, Office Manager, and Receptionist.



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