



GUIDE TO WRITING A MEMBER OF CONGRESS

I. When should a citizen write to a member of Congress?

A. To express an opinion:

- about a current issue on which you feel strongly
- about the Congressman's voting record on that issue
- about upcoming legislation

B. Ask a question:

- Why does your party support a specific stand on an issue?
- What is his or her opinion on a specific issue?
- What are the challenges facing a representative in Congress?

C. Propose legislation:

- Explain a problem you see in your community. Depending on the representative you chose to write, this could be a national, state, or local issue.
- Suggest a solution to a problem.

II. Preparing to Write the Letter

A. Selecting a Member of Congress:

- Which Congressional committees would address your issue? Who chairs this committee? Do your own representatives in Congress sit on these committees?
- Is your representative's political ideology more liberal or more conservative than your own? What Members of Congress share your political views?
- What recent legislation has your Member of Congress sponsored? This can indicate an area of interest or expertise for your representative.
- Which Members of Congress have sponsored bills similar to the ideas you are proposing?

B. Research your issue:

- Find out if any organizations share the same feelings about your topic. How do these organizations gather information and support for their position?
- Read recent newspaper and magazine articles about your issue. What statistical or factual evidence can you gather that supports your opinion?

III. Write the Letter

A. Traditional Mail: More formal and serious but often gets a slower response.

B. Electronic Mail: Quicker response time but often a less detailed response.

- Congressional staffers commented that email is less effective than traditional or "snail" mail. Written correspondence is often taken more seriously.

T.J. Brown
1776 Independence Way
Charlottesville, Virginia 22902

January 9, 20--

The Honorable Eric Cantor
329 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Use Project Vote Smart to find your official's

Dear Congressman Cantor:

*Begin by
identifying
who you are
and why you
are writing.*

My name is T.J., and I am a twelfth grader from Monticello High School. I am very concerned about how our nation celebrates the Fourth of July holiday and hope you can answer a couple of questions.

In the 225 years since the Declaration of Independence was written, our understanding of this document and its importance to the history of this nation has increasingly declined. According to a recent poll of graduating high school seniors, almost half of them did not realize that the July 4 holiday commemorates the signing of this great document. Years ago people would celebrate the Fourth by gathering together to read the Declaration of Independence and discuss the importance of the tiny American colonies breaking free from the tyranny of the British Empire. Today the holiday is marked by mega sales at the local shopping mall and contests to consume the most hot dogs in fifteen minutes. These are great for the economy, but they certainly do not encourage respect for freedom, liberty or the sacrifices of past generations.

*Explain
why you
think your
issue is so
important.*

I believe it is up to legislators to provide guidance to our country by passing a law requiring all stores to close at 2 pm on July 4. This would allow all Americans to properly celebrate the holiday rather than working or shopping. Congress could also encourage a more thoughtful approach to the day by providing forums for discussion of our history and readings of the Declaration of Independence nationwide.

*Offer a
specific
solution.*

I am interested in your reaction to this proposal. Is this an issue you would be willing to discuss with other Members of Congress? Do you have any suggestions for making my proposal appealing to you and other legislators?

*Ask that
the
official
write
back with
his or
her
opinion
and
thank
him or
her for
reading
your
letter.*

I appreciate your consideration of these questions and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

T.J. Brown