

How-To Guide

Writing Effective Letters to Decision Makers

In this guide, you will learn how to:



- Identify your audience
- Create a well-written message
- Express your feelings effectively in writing
- Ask for the change you want

Why write a letter?

A well-written letter can be an effective way to communicate your interests and feelings about particular issues with decision makers in your community.

Generally, there are two types of letters you can choose to write to decision makers, positive or negative. A positive letter states your support for a proposal or pending decision, or may praise decision makers for making decisions that have had a positive effect on your community. Conversely, a negative letter states your opposition to a proposal or pending decision. A negative letter may sometimes criticize the lack of attention to an issue that negatively affects you and your community. It can be a good way to alter decision makers of the need to address the problem.

Whether negative or positive, the key to having the most influence when you write letters to decision makers is to make sure they are clear, thoughtful and well written.

This product was developed using two evidence-based training programs. Consumer Involvement in Advocacy Organizations was researched and developed by the Research and Training Center on Independent Living at the University of Kansas. Additional information was adapted from Living Well with a Disability, a health promotion program for people with disabilities, researched and developed by the Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities at the University of Montana.

This is a revision of a document originally published by the University of Kansas Research and Training Center on Independent Living, © 1984, Tom Seekins and Stephen B. Fawcett, funded by a grant (#G008006928) from the National Institute on the Handicapped. Reproduced in May 2017 with written permission from RTC/IL under grant number #90RT50250100 from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research, part of the Administration on Community Living.



Strategies for Putting Your Thoughts in Writing

What is the issue you want to talk about in your letter?



Why is this issue important to you?

In addition to describing the issue you're writing about, it's important for you to tell how and why it's important to you. How does this issue affect your life? How does it affect the lives of others in your community? You also need to consider what the solution might be, and what do you want the recipient of your letter to do.

Use this space to describe why this issue is important to you and make some notes on the action you'd like to see as a result of your letter.



Who should you write to?

The recipient of your letter is your **audience**. You can put a lot of thought and effort into writing a letter but if it doesn't reach the right person, it might not make the difference you want it to. You will want to find the name, title and office address of the individual most responsible for the issue your letter addresses.

For example, if the issue is related to policy-making in your neighborhood, such as zoning changes or planned development, you might write to your city council representative. If an issue is citywide, you may write to the mayor. In the case of non-elected decision makers, such as business owners or directors of service organizations, you may write to the corporate president, executive director or board chair.



What if you don't know who to write to?

If you're not sure who to write to, do a little research before you write your letter. The first place many people search is online. Internet research may be useful but you might find it difficult to find useful information if you're not sure what to search for.

Local newspapers and city or county websites are good places to start. Organizations whose work focuses on the issue you're interested in may also have good information.

When reaching out to individuals in your community, explain the issue of concern as clearly as possible so they can point you in the right direction.





What does your audience need to know?

If you are writing a letter to a decision maker in order to offer your point of view on a policy, rule, change in law, or to request assistance with a problem in your community, you need to think about what they need to know in order to take action. What information do you have that could be helpful?

If you are writing to your city council representative, you will want to identify what neighborhood you live in and why you support or oppose a new policy or rule change as a member of their constituency.

If you are writing to the mayor to raise awareness of a community-wide problem and to ask for assistance, you will need to explain what the problem is, how it affects you and other individuals in the community, and why you think the mayor should address it.

Use this space to describe the information your audience may need to know about the issue in order to take action or make a decision.



Expressing your feelings in writing

Letters to decision makers generally have either a positive or a negative tone. When writing a letter, you need to make your feelings clear if you want a decision maker to understand your point of view. They can't ask for clarification if they are confused. If a decision maker reads your letter and is unsure whether you support or oppose an issue, or doesn't understand why you feel the way you do, your letter won't carry much weight.

The tone in your letter might be concerned and angry, or happy and praising. Whatever the tone you choose for your letter, it is important to consider how to express your feelings in a way your audience will receive well.

If you're angry about an issue or pending decision, it's fine to communicate that anger to decision makers, but how you do it will make the difference between your letter having influence or being ignored. For example, using inappropriate language or threats to communicate anger will alienate the reader, but expressing your concern clearly and calmly will improve your chances of being heard.

Example:

I do not support the decision to remove the light at the crosswalk on 6th and Main and **I feel worried about it because** I use that intersection frequently and I want to feel safe when I cross the street.

Use this space to list your feelings about the issue and explain why you feel that way.



Getting Started

Many people find it difficult to begin writing a letter. The best way to start is to take it one step at a time. Break your letter down into sections. The first draft doesn't have to be perfect, just start with getting your ideas down on paper. Use the following suggestions to help guide your writing.

See if you can identify how the sample letter on the next page incorporates each step.

- **Open the letter with a salutation.** When writing to an elected official, use “Honorable,” the person’s official title, and full name. For example, “Honorable Mayor Sheila Anyperson.” When writing to an official who does not hold elected office, use “Dear,” their title, and full name. For example, “Dear Mr. Anyperson Jones.”
- **Introduce yourself.** Your reader wants to know who is writing the letter. Tell a little bit about yourself. For example, are you new to the community or a lifelong member? Are you a homeowner or a renter? The information you provide in your introduction should be relevant to the issue you’re writing about.
- **Explain why you’re writing the letter.** If you’re writing a negative letter, state why you’re concerned about an issue or pending policy decision. If you’re writing a positive letter, state why you’re pleased.
- **Summarize the issue as you understand it.** Describe the issue in detail and the problems you see. This gives the recipient an opportunity to understand your perspective and see the issue from a different point of view.
- **Tell how the issue affects you.** Describe your experience. Explain to your reader how this pending decision or issue affects your life. If it affects others in your community, describe how.
- **Ask for the change you want.** Be clear and direct about what you’d like the reader to do in response to your letter. The reader should not have to guess what you’re asking for.
- **Describe how the change would affect you and others.** Explain how the action you’re asking for will affect you and your community. This information is as important as describing the issue. Your reader needs to know how you and other members of the community will benefit from the action taken.
- **Offer to help.** If you have time and energy, offer to participate in the decision-making process. Citizen participation in policy development and decision-making is important if the needs of the community are to be fully understood before a decision is made.
- **Thank the reader.** Make sure to thank the recipient of your letter for their time and attention. Even if the reader disagrees with your position, it’s important to thank them for considering your thoughts. This will make them more receptive to future letters you may wish to write.
- **Sign your letter.** Make sure to include your address and other contact information. This is especially important when writing to members of Congress and other elected officials, as it shows them that you are a constituent.

Sample letter:

September 1, 20XX

Mayor Anyperson
123 Main Street
West City, NH, 12345

Honorable Mayor Sheila Anyperson,

My name is Anyperson Jones and I have lived in the city of West Valley all my life. I use a walker and I have always felt safe getting around town on foot, but as our city has grown, traffic has increased and little has been done to improve pedestrian safety.

Today I am writing to express my concern and frustration about the pedestrian crossing on Main Street near the social service offices that serve many people with disabilities. Over the last year, three people with mobility impairments have been struck by cars at this intersection and, when crossing the street to access the service providers, I have also come close to being hit.

These are the problems as I see them: there is no light, the intersection is poorly marked, and traffic flow is exceptionally heavy because Main Street is a major east/west artery linking the downtown business area with the interstate and developments on the edge of town. In addition to these problems of access during the day, at night the intersection becomes even more dangerous because it is poorly lit.

Because this intersection is such a hazard, to people with disabilities as well as to people without disabilities, I would like to request that a traffic light be installed with a signal that provides enough time for an individual with a mobility impairment to cross safely. I would also like to request that the crossing be clearly marked with reflectors so that oncoming traffic is prepared to look for pedestrians, and well lit at night so that pedestrians can be seen.

These changes would make me feel safer as a person with a disability and would make our community safer for everyone.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. I would also be willing to provide testimony at a public meeting.

Sincerely,

Anyperson Jones
1234 E Street
West Valley, NH, 12345



Editing and feedback

Once you've written a draft of your letter, it's important to have someone review it and give you feedback. Ask a friend or peer to read it and tell you if your letter is clear, if your tone does a good job communicating how you feel about the issue and, most importantly, whether or not your letter gets your opinion across in a way that will be heard.

Once your letter has been reviewed, edit it as necessary and then transfer your draft to a finished form. Use a computer to type it up and use the built-in spell check feature to make sure everything is spelled correctly.

Writing Tips

- **Compose a few drafts of your letter.** The more writing you do, the more polished your finished product will be. Think through what you want to say on each revision so that your ideas are clear, well worded and will have the best chance of influencing the decision-making process.
- **Write in first person.** Use "I" and speak from your own point of view.
- **Make lots of notes.** If you're having trouble getting started, just write down a bunch of ideas until something sounds right. Then start putting your thoughts into a letter.
- **Look at examples.** An internet search will provide many examples of well-written letters. Reading several examples will help you learn how a well-written letter sounds.
- **Write with a friend.** Have a letter-writing date with a friend and compose your letters together. You don't have to be writing about the same issue, but can provide feedback and support and even make letter writing fun.
- **Get feedback and edit.** Always have someone read your letter before you send it, especially if letter writing is new to you. After a while, you'll develop the skills you need to edit your own work effectively.

Remember, letters to decision makers can be an effective way to influence policy changes or other issues that affect your community.

Taking the time to compose a thoughtful, well-written letter will help ensure your voice is heard.