

Congress Merge: Hints for Communicating with Congress

One of the many wonderful aspects of living in the United States is that we can have a direct influence on the way we are governed. To do so, you need to become your own advocate with Congress. Members of Congress listen to their constituents and care about constituent opinions. But to be effective, you must communicate properly with your representative and senators. Members of Congress are people, too, and as you would react negatively to someone who sent you an angry or threatening letter, so do they. So to be effective, you need to follow some guidelines that are founded on civility and common sense:

Be courteous and respectful in all communications. Don't use threats.

Letters, Faxes & E-Mails

Unless you have a personal, first-name relationship with a member of Congress or one of their staff members, the way you guarantee that your communication will be effective is to make sure the receiving office instantly can identify you as a constituent. If they can't, there is an excellent chance your communication will be discarded without being read. Start each communication with your name and address at the very top:

Ms. Sally Jones
123 Main Street
Wabash, IN 98765

When writing a member of Congress it's important to use the proper salutation. For senators it's "Dear Senator" (and the senator's last name: Dear Senator Lansing:). For members of the House of Representatives (according to House rules), the way to address female members of the House is "Congresswoman" and male members is "Congressman" (Dear Congresswoman Munster: / Dear Congressman Calumet:). However, using "Dear Representative" (Dear Representative Hammond:) is acceptable.

If you are sending a letter, fax or e-mail already prepared for you, take a minute to put the message into your own words. And remember, courteously written communications are more likely to be read and have positive impact than a page or two of ravings and rantings.

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Here are some other key points to remember in writing to your legislators:

- Be courteous and respectful in all communications. Don't use threats.
- Know your issue! Request documents from your organization that provide background information on the issue and the elected official you wish to contact. This information can be particularly helpful in drafting letters. If you are doing this on your own, do your homework to be knowledgeable in your communication.
- Keep your comments brief, pertinent, and factual. Cover only one issue per letter. Explain how the issue would affect you and/or your organization.
- Limit your comments to one page or two at most. Elected officials hear from hundreds of constituents daily so a brief letter is more effective than a multi-page one.

- Identify the subject in the first paragraph. If you are writing in reference to a particular bill, refer to the measure's House or Senate bill number and/or title, if possible.
- Be reasonable. Don't ask the impossible.
- Be constructive, not negative. If a bill deals with a problem, but seems to represent the wrong solution, propose constructive alternatives. Recognize that you might have to compromise.
- If you support a particular bill, say so. If you are writing in opposition to legislation, include specific examples of how the measure would adversely effect you and suggest an alternative approach if possible.
- Avoid stereotyped phrases, jargon, and sentences that give the appearance of form letters.

Also, don't forget that elected officials are people too and they like to be told when they've done something right. Send them a congratulatory note when they do something that merits approval. If you are sending an e-mail to a representative, you won't receive a response via e-mail but will receive one through the mail (rules of the House -- however, you can communicate with House staff members via e-mail). Senators respond to e-mail with e-mail. If you follow these guidelines and establish a working relationship with the elected official or one of their staff, you might be sending and receiving e-mails on a regular basis.

The Best Communication: A Personal Visit

The most effective way of communicating with a legislator is to personally meet with them or their staff. Unless you are planning a trip to Washington, DC, this means visiting their local

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office. Don't expect the legislator to be in their local office if Congress is in session on the date of your visit. If you have the opportunity, note when Congress is in recess (please see the [Congressional Schedule](#)) and make a point to visit the legislator's district office then. You also can see if your representative and senators have on their [Web sites a listing of their district offices](#) (most do) and whether they list times when they will be there. You increase the chance of actually meeting the legislator by visiting at this time.

It is very important to remember that all contacts with elected officials must be constructive even if their opinions contrast with your own or those of your organization. It's one thing to disagree with someone, it's another thing to be a jerk about it . . . be respectful, courteous, and professional.

If you meet the legislator either in the Washington or local office, send them a thank you card after the meeting. In the card or letter state that you would like to meet again to tell them more about your profession and the issues about which you are concerned. Try to attend any social gathering which your elected official may attend; this is a good way to nurture the friendship.

Telephone Calls

Unless you have established a working relationship with a legislator or one of their staff members, telephone calls are best limited to times when a bill is coming up for a vote and you want to urge the legislator to vote for or against it. If you have established a working relationship with the legislator or one of their staff members, then call them to discuss it. But, keep in mind you may not be able to talk with the legislator personally. When in Washington elected officials have hectic schedules and a good part of their day is spent in committee meetings or on the floor of the House or Senate. Instead of calling your legislators' Washington office consider calling a local district office instead. For one, it's less expensive than a long distance call to Washington and, two, district offices tend not to get swamped with phone calls as do Capitol offices.

If this is your first call to a congressional office, you'll talk with a staff member. The first thing you

need to do is state your name and the fact that you are a constituent of the legislator. Then briefly state the nature of your call, i.e., urging the legislator to support or oppose a particular piece of legislation:

"Hello, my name is Sally Smith and I am a constituent of (name of senator or representative). I am calling today to urge them to support/oppose HR 1234. Thank you."

These types of calls are very important to legislators and the vast majority of offices keep track of these calls.

In Conclusion

Your congressional communications can be as effective as you wish them to be, all you have to do is take a little time to know your issue, be civil, to the point, and be reasonable.