



The Right to Write

Surprisingly few people ever write their elected officials. Perhaps 90 percent of Americans live and die without ever taking pen in hand and expressing a single opinion to the person who represents them in Congress. Yet that representative's vote may decide what price they will pay for the acts of government either in dollars, in human lives or the quality of our environment.

Communicating with a modern-day congresswoman or senator is more important than ever. In the days of Calhoun, Clay, Webster and Lincoln, congressmen lived among their constituents for perhaps nine months of the year. Through daily contacts in a district of fewer than 50,000 people (House members now represent ten times that many) they could feel rather completely informed on their voters' beliefs and feelings.

Today with the staggering problems of government and increasingly long sessions, Members of Congress not only must vote on many more issues than their predecessors, but they rarely get to spend more than 60 days a year in their home states. Thus the mailbag is the best "hot line" to the people back home. With the advent of the Internet, we have even more access to our elected officials. But sending a well crafted email is just as important as sending a properly constructed letter.

Writing your elected officials is easier than you think. In fact, it's one of the simplest and most effective ways to influence public policy on behalf of the environment. Here are a few tips:

- **Address it Properly**

The Honorable _____
U.S House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable _____
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

- **Identify the Bill or Issue**

About 20,000 bills are introduced each Congress so it is important to be specific. If you write about a particular piece of legislation, try to give the bill's number or describe it by a popular title: "endangered species act" or "Interior appropriations bill."

Sending Paper Mail in an Internet World

Since the 2001 Anthrax attacks, postal mail delivered to Congress is now thoroughly scanned. This will cause delays of several weeks, so be sure and send your letter to arrive in time to make a difference before a vote. If you want to get around the scanning delays, you can send a postcard with your thoughts and concerns — no envelope, no scanning!

If time is short, you can post your thoughts to your House or Senate through the "contact me" web form on their web sites. To find your House member, go to www.house.gov and click on the Representative link on the left.

To reach your Senators, go to www.senate.gov and click on the Senators tab at the top menu bar.



- **Focus on Your Delegation**

As a constituent, your views are most valued by the Members of Congress you vote for. Focus your energy on your House member and two senators. With the advent of email and mass communications, it's often easy, with a click of a button, to send the same letter multiple times to one Member or the same message to many Members of Congress, including those that live outside your zip code. These kinds of efforts are counterproductive. Stick to your delegation and once is enough for each issue.

- **Be Reasonably Brief**

In 2004, the House and Senate offices received 200,000 million postal and email communications. That's a lot of mail. So keep your letter concise and to the point. Try to limit your correspondence to one issue.

- **Write Your Own Views**

In this age of form email activism, this bit of advice is more important than ever. Hill offices say that even a couple of sentences added to an email form letter gives that communication greater weight. Hill offices often hear from Audubon lobbyists and other groups on the issues we work on. But they are even more keenly interested in how you feel about legislation and how it affects you. Take an extra minute and add that to your email.

- **Ask for a Response**

If your elected official is equivocal in his response, write again and request clarification. Don't hesitate to ask questions. Your elected official works for you. Don't sound demanding or threatening, however. Polite persistence works best.

- **Give Your Reasons for Taking a Stand**

Your representative may not know all the effects of the bill and what it may mean to an important segment of his or her constituency. Tell them why it is important to you and your community.

- **Be Constructive**

If a bill deals with a problem you admit exists, but you believe it takes the wrong approach, offer your elected official an alternative, if you can.

- **Ask for Specific Action**

This is important! If your questions and concerns are general, the response you get in return will likely be just as general. Ask for a specific action, such as cosponsoring a bill you support, a NO vote on legislation you oppose, or your Member's position on upcoming legislation.

- **Use Personal or Business Letterhead**

Even if you don't have stationery, be sure to include a complete return address on the letter and envelope. This is even more important on an email — make sure you include your email address, postal address and zip code on your email.

- **Say "Well done" When it is Deserved**

Members of Congress are human too and they appreciate a "good job" when they have taken an action you approve of. Thank yous tell them you are watching how they vote; and thanking our supporters makes it that much easier to encourage positive action on behalf of the environment the next time around.

Even if you think your representative went the wrong way on an issue, a non-threatening letter stating your disagreement — and disappointment — would be welcome. This too lets your elected official know you are involved in the process and tracking issues important to you.

Some Don'ts

- Don't make threats or promises
- Don't berate your representative
- Don't pretend to wield vast political influence (but do let them know you are an active member in your Audubon chapter, which enjoys xxxx members).
- Don't try to write on every issue that comes up (don't be a pen pal; get a family member or neighbor to write on that other issue).

During the two-year life of Congress, the House and Senate will record hundreds of votes. But in a very real sense these will be your votes too. With narrow vote margins and a tough partisan climate, the stakes are very high for the issues we care about. Every letter to Congress counts. Use these tips to make your letter or email count for all it's worth!

Adapted from "The Right to Write" by the late Congressman Morris Udall.