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Speak Up! Writing to Policymakers

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A problem becomes a public issue when it has an impact on many people. The affected people usually have different opinions on how to solve the problem. The solution to such a problem is public policy. To develop the policy, the officials need to know the opinions of many people.

Writing a letter to policymakers is an easy, effective way to let your opinion be known. Typing skills aren't necessary; a readable handwritten letter is fine. A personal letter expressing your opinion carries more weight than your signature on a form letter.

Before you write

Gather as much information about the issue as possible before putting your opinion in writing. Where will the resolution to an issue be decided? Will it be at the local, state or national level? Will the decision be made by elected officials or agency people? When will the decision be made — in a month? In two months? The sooner you make your feelings known, the better. Refer to MU publication [GH3970](#), *Speak Up! Get Involved in Public Policy* for specific ways to gather information. MU publications [GH3971](#), *Speak Up! A personal Plan for Involvement in Public Policy*, and [GH3972](#), *Speak Up! Be Sure Policymakers Hear You*, provide other information about getting involved in public policy decisions.

After gathering together all available information, define the problem. What are the issues? Consider all the alternatives you can think of to resolve the problem. Who is affected by each alternative? How will they be affected?

Next, think about the facts. How do you feel about the issue? Your opinions will be based on the facts you have gathered and your values.

Guidelines for writing

- Write on only one subject at a time.
- Outline and write down your thoughts in an organized manner. Carefully read what you have written. Are your thoughts clear and to the point? Are they as brief as possible? Try to keep your letter to one typewritten page. A half-page may even be better.

- Begin your letter by telling who you are and why you are concerned. If you are writing for a group, tell who they are and how many there are. Be sure your name and address are clearly included in the body of the letter. Envelopes are thrown away.
- Tell briefly what action you think officials should take and why. If you are writing about technical information, tell what knowledge you have that makes your opinion valid.
- If you are writing to several people about the same issue, do not send copies of one letter. Make each letter a little different.
- If you are writing about a particular bill, give the name and number of the bill. U.S. House bills are HR ####; U.S. Senate, S ####; State House, HB ####; and State Senate, SB ####. If you don't know the name and number, give enough information about the content so the person knows what you are writing about.
- Be courteous in your writing. Never make threats.
- Pay attention to when you send your letter. Try to send your letter while the issue is being discussed by the decision-making group. If you feel strongly about an issue, you might consider sending a letter early in the discussion and another just before a decision is made.
- End your letter with a thank you and express your interest in future action. You may also ask the person to whom you are writing what their opinion is about the issue and the basis for that position.
- Write a thank you if the person to whom you wrote your letter does something of which you approve. Decision-makers are delighted by expressions of thanks.

If the policymakers decide against you, don't be discouraged. Continue to write letters based on facts you have gathered telling officials how you feel and why. Decision-makers want to hear from you.

Sample letter:

Your Address Date

Name Salutation

Introduction

Identify yourself.

Give brief reference to your occupation, business or organization. Purpose of Letter

Tell why you are writing.

Refer to the bill by name and number, if appropriate. Give facts and/or figures to support your position.

Closing

Request a reply indicating his/her position regarding the issue.

Thank the legislator for his/her consideration of your position. Complimentary
close
Your name

Below are samples of appropriate formats to use when writing local, state or federal officials.

Local officials

When writing to the mayor, use the following heading at the top of the letter: The

Honorable (full name)
City or Town Hall City,
State Zip

Address him/her as "Dear Mayor (last name):" and continue with the body, closing with
"Sincerely yours," and then your name, typed and signed.

When writing to a councilman, use the following heading:

Councilman (full name), or if a woman, use Counselor (full name) City or
Town Hall
City, State Zip

Address as "Dear Mr. (Ms., Mrs.) (last name):" and continue the letter as above.

State officials:

When writing to the governor, use the following heading: The

Honorable (full name)
Governor, State of Missouri Room
216 State Capitol Jefferson City, MO
65101

Address him/her as "Dear Governor (last name):" and complete the letter as stated above. You
can substitute "Sincerely yours," in the closing with "Respectfully yours,".

When writing to a state senator or representative, use the following heading:

Senator (Representative) (full name) State
Capitol
Jefferson City, MO 65101

Address him/her as "Dear Senator (Representative) (last name):" and continue as above.

Federal officials

When writing to the president, use the following heading: The

President of the United States
The White House Washington,
D.C. 20500

Address him/her as "Dear President (last name):" and continue with the same form as above, substituting "Respectfully yours," in the closing.

When writing to a U.S. senator: Senator

(full name)*

____ Senate Office Building*
Washington, D.C. 20510

Address him/her as Dear Senator (last name):

*Senator John Ashcroft's office is 170 Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510. Senator Christopher Bond's office is 293 Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510.

When writing to a U.S. representative use: Representative

(full name)

House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Address him/her as "Dear Congressman/Congresswoman (last name):" and continue as above.

References

Walker, Katey, "Make Your Voice Count," Cooperative Extension Service (C-670), Kansas State University, June, 1985.

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