Communicating With Congress

TIPS ON WRITING TO A MEMBER

The latter is the most popular choice of communication with a congressional office. If you decide to write a letter, this list of helpful suggestions will improve the effectiveness of the letter.

Addressing Correspondence:

• **To a Senator…**
  The Honorable (Full name)
  United States Senate
  Washington, DC 20510
  Dear Senator (Last Name) :

• **To a Representative…**
  The Honorable (Full name)
  House of Representatives
  Washington, DC 20515
  Dear Mr./Mrs./Ms. (Last Name) :

**Note:** When writing to the Chair of a Committee or the Speaker of the House, it is proper to address them as:

  Dear Mr. Chairman or Madam Chairwoman:
  or Dear Mr. Speaker:

Purpose of your letter:

• Your purpose for writing should be stated in the first paragraph of the letter. If the letter pertains to a specific piece of legislation, identify it accordingly, e.g., House bill: H.R.____, Senate bill: S._____.
• Be courteous, to the point, and include key information, using examples to support your position.
• Address only one issue in each letter; and, if possible, keep the letter to one page.

SENDING E-MAIL TO CONGRESS

When addressing an e-mail to a Member of Congress, follow the same suggestions as for a printed letter. For the subject line of your e-mail, identify your message by topic or bill number. The body of your message should use this format:

Your Name
Address
City, State ZIP

Dear (Title) (Last Name)

Start your message here.
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SUGGESTIONS FOR A PERSONAL VISIT

Meeting with a member of Congress, or congressional staff, is a very effective way to convey a message about a specific issue or legislative matter. Below are some suggestions to consider when planning a visit to congressional office.

Plan Your Visit Carefully: Be clear about what it is you want to achieve; determine in advance which member or committee staff you need to meet with to achieve your purpose.

Make an Appointment: When attempting to meet with a member, contact the Appointment Secretary/Scheduler. Explain your purpose and who you represent. It is easier for Congressional staff to arrange a meeting if they know what you wish to discuss and your relationship to the area or interest represented by the member.

Be Prompt and Patient: When it is time to meet with a member, be punctual and patient. It is not uncommon for a Congressman or Congresswoman to be late, or to have a meeting interrupted due to the member's crowded schedule. If interruptions do occur, be flexible. When the opportunity presents itself, continue your meeting with s member's staff.

Be Prepared: Whenever possible, bring to the meeting information and materials supporting your position. Members are required to take positions on many different issues. In some instances, a member may lack important details about the pros and cons of a particular matter. It is therefore helpful to share with the member information and examples that demonstrates clearly the impact or benefits associated with a particular issue or piece of legislation.

Be Political: Members of Congress want to represent the best interest of their district or state. Whenever possible, demonstrate the connection between what you are requesting and the interest of the member's constituency. If possible, describe for the member how you or your group can be of assistance to him/her. When it is appropriate, remember to ask for a commitment.

Be Responsive: Be prepared to answer questions or provide additional information in the event the member expresses interest or ask questions. Follow up the meeting covered during the meeting, and send along any additional information and materials requested.
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THE ROLES OF THE CONGRESSIONAL STAFF

Each member of Congress has staff to assist him/her during a term in office. To be most effective in communicating with Congress, it is helpful to know the titles and principal functions of the key staff.

Commonly used titles and job functions:

**Administrative Assistant (AA) or Chief of Staff (CoS):** The AA reports directly to the member of Congress. He/she usually has overall responsibility for evaluating the political outcomes of various legislative proposals and constituent requests. The AA is usually the person in charge of overall office operations, including the assignment of work and the supervision of key staff.

**Legislative Director (LD) or Senior Legislative Assistant (Sr LA), or Legislative Counsel (LC):** The LD is usually the staff person who monitors the legislative schedule and makes recommendations regarding the pros and cons of particular issues. In some congressional offices there are several LAs and responsibilities are assigned to staff with particular expertise in specific areas. For example, depending on the responsibilities and interest of the member, and office may include a different LA for the health issues, environmental matters, taxes, etc.

**Press Secretary (Press) or Communication Director (Comm Dir):** The Press Secretary's responsibility is to build and maintain open and effective lines of communications between the member, his/her constituency, and the general public. The Press Secretary is expected to know the benefits, demands, and special requirements of both print and electronic media, and how to most effectively promote the member's views or position on specific issues.

**Appointment Secretary (Appt), Personal Secretary, or Scheduler (Sch):** The Appointment Secretary is usually responsible for allocating a member's time among the many demands that arise from congressional responsibilities, staff requirements, and constituent requests. The Appointment Secretary may also be responsible for making necessary travel arrangements, arranging speaking dates, visits to the district, etc.

**Caseworker:** The Caseworker is the staff member usually assigned to help with constituent requests by preparing replies for the member's signature. The Caseworker's responsibilities may also include helping resolve problems constituents present in relation to federal agencies, e.g., Social Security and Medicare issues, veteran's benefits, passports, etc. There are often several Caseworkers in a congressional office.

**Other Staff Titles:** Other titles used in a congressional office may include: Executive Assistant, Legislative Correspondent, Executive Secretary, Office Manager, and Receptionist.
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HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW

Introduction: Anyone may draft a bill; however, only members of Congress can introduce legislation, and by doing so become the sponsor(s). There are four basic types of legislation: bills, joint resolutions, concurrent resolutions, and simple resolutions. The official legislative process begins when the bill or resolution is numbered H.R. signifies a House bill and S. a Senate bill referred to a committee and printed by the Government Printing Office.

Step 1. Referral to Committee: Bills are usually referred to standing committees in the House or Senate according to carefully delineated of procedure.

Step 2. Committee Action: When a bill reaches a committee it is placed on the committee’s calendar. A bill can be referred to a subcommittee or considered by the committee as a whole. It is at this point that a bill is examined carefully and its chances for passage are determined. If the committee does not act on a bill, it is the equivalent of killing it.

Step 3. Subcommittee Review: Often, bills are referred to a subcommittee for study and hearings. Hearings provide the opportunity to put on the record the views of the executive branch, experts, other public officials, supporters and opponents. Testimony can be in person or submitted in writing.

Step 4. Mark Up: When the hearings are completed, the subcommittee may meet to “mark up” the bill, that is, to make changes and amendments prior to recommending the bill to the full committee. If a subcommittee votes not to report legislation to the full committee, the bills dies.

Step 5. Committee Action to Report Bill: After receiving a subcommittee’s report on a bill, the full committee can conduct further study and hearings, or it can vote on the subcommittee’s recommendations and any proposed amendments. The full committee then votes on its recommendation to the House or Senate. This procedure is called “ordering a bill reported.”

Step 6. Publication of a Written Report: After a committee votes to have a bill reported, the chairman instructs staff to prepare a report on the bill. This report describes the intent and scope of legislation, impact on existing laws and programs, position of the executive branch, and views of dissenting members.

Step 7. Scheduling Floor Action: After a bill is reported back to the chamber where it originated, it is placed in chronological order in the calendar. In the House there are several different legislative calendars, and the Speaker and Majority Leaders largely determine if, when, and in what order bills come up. In the Senate there is only one legislative calendar.

Step 8. Debate: When a bill reaches the floor of the House or Senate, there are rules or procedures governing the debate. These rules determine the conditions and amount of time allocated for debate.
Step 9. **Voting:** After the debate and the approval of any amendments, the bill is passed or defeated by the members voting.

Step 10. **Referral to Other Chamber:** When a bill is passed by the House or the Senate it is referred to the other chamber where it usually follows the same route through committee and floor action. This chamber may approve the bills received, reject it, ignore it, or change it.

Step 11. **Conference Committee Action:** If only minor changes are made to a bill by other chamber, it is common for the legislation to go back to the first chamber for concurrence. However, when the actions of the other chamber significantly alter the bill, a conference committee is formed to reconcile the differences. If the conferees are unable to reach agreement, the legislation dies. If agreement is reached, a conference report is prepared describing the committee members’ recommendations for changes. Both the House and the Senate must approve of the conference report.

Step 12. **Final Actions:** After a bill has been approved by the House and the Senate in identical form, it is sent to the President. If the President approves of the legislation, he signs it and it becomes a law. Or, the President can take no action for ten days, while Congress is in session, and it automatically becomes law. If the President opposes the bill he can veto it; or if he takes no action after the Congress has adjourned its second session, it is a “pocket veto” and the legislation dies.

Step 13. **Overriding a Veto:** If the President vetoes a bill, Congress may attempt to “override the veto.” This requires a two thirds roll call vote of the members who are present in sufficient numbers for a quorum.