

# Write your Congressman or Congresswoman

**Only you can voice your opinion  
where it will count**



You are represented in the United States Congress by two Senators and one Representative. They are not the only ones you may write. You may send letters to all of the Representatives and Senators if you want but only the letters to your two Senators and one Representative will express your opinion to your elected Congressmen or Congresswomen.

You may also write to your State Legislators. The process is the same but closer to home. Don't forget your County and City officials. For now let's stick with those in Washington, D.C.

Something needs to be inserted here and now. If you are having a problem with a federal agency such as the Social Security Administration or the Internal Revenue Service, and you feel the need to contact your elected official about it, don't write a letter! On the same page where you will be finding your Congressman's or Congresswoman's mailing address should be listed all their 'local' offices. Call the nearest one and make an appointment to speak, in person, with a staff member. Gather all your material and show up a bit early for your appointment. By the way, you will probably be better off contacting your Representative's office. They just love to help taxpayers and voters, not that Senators don't.

Before you write to your two Senators and one Representative, you must know who they are by name. You also need to know their Washington, D.C. mailing address.

You might prefer to send them an email instead of a letter. A word of caution about sending emails to Congress. On their web sites, some Senators and Representatives have a link to a 'form' email. Filling in blanks and checking boxes seems rather impersonal to me. I prefer to put my words on paper, sign it and then place my letter into an envelope with a stamp on it.

There are several places to obtain the names and addresses but the best and easiest only require you to enter your ZIP code including the four digit extension (ZIP+4, i.e. 93015-2156). If you don't know your extension, go to <https://tools.usps.com/go/ZipLookupAction!input.action> and enter your residential address. This site will then return your address as the Post Office prefers it, including your ZIP code with the four digit extension. Copy that information, the address as the site gives it, and use that as your return address on all your correspondence.



What you should do before getting too far into this, is create a new folder. Call it "Congress" or something like that. Open a single file in that folder and enter your address as the U. S. Postal Service prefers it. Save that file as "Addresses." As you find the three addresses you will need, copy them and paste them into this file.

Now that you know where you are, according to the U.S. Postal Service, you are ready to find out who represents you in Congress. Go to this web site, [www.contactingthecongress.org/](http://www.contactingthecongress.org/) and scroll a little bit down the page to find where to enter your ZIP+4 code. Hint: they are fill-in-the-blank boxes on the left side. This site will then exchange your ZIP+4 with your Senator's and Representative's names and a link to their 'form' emails. Click on each name to bring up a page

about them, including the address you will need for your letters and a whole lot more. Copy that address and paste it into your “Addresses” file in your “Congress” folder.

Now a few words about what happens once your letter gets to Washington. I know, you haven’t written it yet, but knowing the process your letter will go through should help when you compose your letter. There will be variations of this procedure but this is basically the same system for all Congressional offices (or anyplace else that gets a lot of mail).

Put yourself behind the desk of the Mail Clerk in your official’s office. Senator’s get tons of mail! Representatives don’t get quite as much unless they are the Speaker of the House or a Chairperson of a big and important committee. (Yes, you may write to them even if they are not your Senator or Representative.)



Here comes the morning mail. All different sizes and colors of envelopes are there. What are you going to do first? That’s right, sort the mail. Put all the same size envelopes together. You will probably glance at the return address to see if someone important like a large campaign contributor has written. Those go in a pile all by themselves.

Most, if not all, of the offices have automatic mail openers. Machines that slice part of the envelope off so the clerk doesn’t have to manually open each and every envelope. No time for that. Let the machine do it for you.



Now, you as the Mail Clerk, open the first letter. Here are some things for you to automatically check. Is there a return address on the letter? If not, is there a return address on the envelope? Some offices might staple the envelope and the letter together. Next question: is this letter from a constituent; that is someone who voted for or could vote for (or against) this elected official?

Already you have three piles: Constituents mail; non-constituents mail; have-no-clue who’s mail (no return address). You are making progress. Next thing to check, is the letter signed: yes or no? Now you could have up to six piles of envelopes,

Now for the important stuff! Why is this person writing? Are they for it or against it? More stacks! Each separate issue has a stack of Pro letters and a stack of Con letters. The Mail Clerk’s desk is full and they have just started. More mail is coming!



With the Mail Clerk’s work load and sorting methods in mind, you are almost ready to start your letter. But first, here are ten ‘rules’ that you must follow.

1. Each letter must have your complete name and home address always placed at the very top of the first page. (More about multiple page letters later.)
  - a. If you receive your mail at a Post Office Box, put that box number on a separate line right below your residence address followed by one line containing your city, state and ZIP+4.
  - b. If you are using letterhead stationery from where you work or from some organization, you are speaking for that organization! If you are not the spokesperson for them, don’t use their letterhead!
  - c. Your own letterhead stationery is perfectly acceptable as long as your home address is included, if not, add it. Suggestion: nothing really fancy.



2. Date your letter.

- a. The date on your letter should be the same as the date on the envelope's postmark or possibly the day before.
- b. It is always a good idea to 'sleep on it' and review your letter the next day. Then mail your letter but you might want to change the date on the letter.

3. Type or print.



- a. If at all possible, either type your letter or have your computer print your letter.
- b. If typing or printing is not possible, then write your letter as legibly as possible. Ask a friend to read it out loud as a test of its legibility.
- c. No smudges, no erasures, no misspelled words, no ~~struck out words~~ and no peanut butter!

4. This is a business letter not fan mail.

- a. It is always preferred to use standard sized paper (8-1/2 by 11 inches) and a business envelope (#10).
  - i. Forget fancy colored paper. White or off-white is best. Same with the envelope.
- b. Include the person's complete address on both the letter and the envelope.
- c. Above their address, always put one of these (include in your "Address" file):
  - i. "The Honorable Senator (their complete name)"
  - ii. "The Honorable Representative (their complete name)."



5. Salutation.

- a. When writing to your or any other Senator, the proper salutation for both men and women Senators is:
  - i. "Dear Senator (their last name):"
- b. When writing to your or any other Representative, the proper salutation is:
  - i. For women: "Dear Congresswoman (their last name):"
  - ii. For men: "Dear Congressman (their last name):"
- c. Always end your Salutation with a colon ( : ).

6. Your first paragraph.

- a. This short paragraph states exactly why you are writing and what you are writing about (remember what the Mail Clerk is looking for).
  - i. Try not to write about the "Environment" or "Taxes" or anything else in general.
  - ii. The more specific the better.
  - iii. One subject per letter! If you want to write about two issues, write two letters. Put the letter about each separate issue in its own envelope.
- b. Go to this excellent web site: <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas.php>. This is the Library of Congress' Thomas web site. (Yes, it is named after Thomas Jefferson. You can read why on the Thomas home page.)
  - i. In the center of this page, under "Legislation in Current Congress" you will find "Search Bill Summary & Status." If you know the bill number you can search for that or you can enter a "Word/Phrase" and search that way.



- ii. You can actually spend hours on this one site and still find something new. They even have links to live video of House and Senate sessions. Want to know what bills your Senator or Representative is sponsoring? They are all listed. Current status of any bill, all right there, just click and find out. There is even a link to “State Legislature Websites” which goes to just what it sounds like.
  - c. If you are writing your Congressperson about a specific bill pending before Congress, use the Thomas site to find its number and title. Copy that bill’s number and title from the Thomas site and include that in your first paragraph such as:
    - i. I am writing about H.R.1 “Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act.”
  - d. If writing to a member of a specific Committee, use the Thomas site to find which Committee has the bill you are writing about and then begin your first paragraph such as:
    - i. I am writing to you as a member of the \_\_\_\_\_ Committee about H.R.1 “Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act.”
      - 1. Each major committee has their own staff and presumably their own Mail Clerk.
- 7. Your second paragraph
  - a. This paragraph is the most difficult of all and may take more than a single paragraph. This is where you commit yourself to being for or against the subject as stated in your first paragraph.
  - b. Use good English! If you don’t know the English language well enough to write this letter, find someone who does know the language and ask them to write it for you. There is nothing wrong with this! The thoughts expressed will be yours not necessarily theirs. Your address and signature will be on the letter which makes it yours.
  - c. Be courteous and respectful. You may feel like calling your Congressperson a dirty so and so but don’t; even if they are! Especially if they are!
  - d. (I am going to leave your second paragraph and continue on but will return.)
- 8. Your last paragraph.
  - a. Thank the Senator or Representative for their attention to this matter.
    - i. Your elected official may never see your letter but thank them anyway. You are actually thanking everyone who does see your letter.
    - ii. The Mail Clerk may be the only person to see your letter. If you have clearly stated what you are writing about (first paragraph) and your position (second paragraph) then the Clerk places your letter in the correct stack. Thank them for that if nothing else.
- 9. Close.
  - a. Use any closing you prefer but remember this is a business letter. “Yours truly,” or “Sincerely,” or “Respectfully,” are all good.
  - b. Always follow your close with a comma.
- 10. Signature
  - a. Leave three or four blank lines after your Close.



- b. Type or print your full name.
- c. Always sign your letter! Sign in ink (never pencil!) in the blank lines above your printed name.
  - i. It is all right to print a line of underscores ( \_\_\_ ) above your typed or printed name for you to sign on but not really necessary.
  - ii. Don't cover any part of your typed or printed name with any part of your signature.

Remember the Mail Clerk and their job which is to determine what you are writing about (paragraph one) and what is your position (paragraph two). As soon as the Mail Clerk determines the answers to these two questions, they place your letter in the proper stack and they are then done with it.

Depending on the volume of mail, the next step in processing your letter may be done by the Mail Clerk (if time allows) or by another person on the staff. Let's assume an office with a large volume of mail. Someone, let's call this person the Tally Clerk because their main job is to count the letters, will come over to where the Mail Clerk is working and pick up one or two stacks of mail.

If you want to impress someone with your argument for or against the subject in Paragraph One, this is the person. Your letter will never get past the Tally Clerk unless there is something they see that makes it worthwhile for the next person in the chain to get your letter.

The Tally Clerk's main job is to count (weigh?) the letters that are for and those that are against one specific item. One thing they will definitely pay attention to is your address. Letters from constituents are from people who can vote for or against the elected official so their opinion is most important (or should be). Your elected official wants, most of the time, to be re-elected. Therefore they need to know the viewpoints of their constituents even if they don't agree with that viewpoint.



When all that day's mail has been processed, the Tally Clerk will be able to say that there were X letters for H.R.1 "Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act" and Y letters against it. This count will be reported to your elected official.

Now let's get back to that all important second paragraph. You want your letter to get to your elected official, else why would you write it? With all the volume of mail addressed to them, it is very difficult to get your letter on that elected official's desk. The odds are against you but you can improve those odds.

If you have followed all ten rules given above, your letter will be among those considered even if handwritten (see Rule 3b). Think back to your High School days, would your letter get an "A" grade from your English teacher? If so, then the Tally Clerk will consider passing it on. Letters graded "B" or "C" might stand a chance but a "D" and certainly an "F" graded letter will never even be considered, just counted. Your letter has a lot of competition and as your English teacher certainly told you, "Neatness counts!" So do correctly spell your words (Rule 3c) but you already knew that.



Crafting an argument is the subject of many high school and college level courses. You can spend a small fortune on "How To ..." books. Here is just one way and how I do it. Just because I do it this way doesn't mean that you have to follow my example but, for me, it works.

I wrote a booklet titled, *Getting Your Letter to the Editor Published*, which involves the same process in crafting an argument. Most important advice in that booklet is to keep within the word count as stated in the publication's guidelines.

Newspaper and magazine editors do not like long, drawn out arguments and neither do your elected officials. Therefore, try to keep your letter down to one page or, at most, a page and one half. Anything longer will probably never make it past the second level (either the Mail Clerk or the Tally Clerk).

If you use a second sheet of paper (write on only one side of the sheet), at the very top of the second page, put your name and address and the date (please, the same date as on the first page!). Should your letter's sheets of paper get separated (count on it) at least there is some clue as to where the second sheet should go. See the example on this page but use the Header function on your word processor if possible.

One of the really nice things about a modern word processor over a typewriter or a pad and pencil is that once the words are typed they never have to be typed again. You compose a really good sentence then 'cut and paste' it wherever you need it. If you are reading this on a computer, you have the technology right there at your fingertips—use it.

The first word processors (Electric Pencil, WordStar, etc.) were primitive by today's standards but they worked and probably still do. As a guess, you will never use 90% of the features of your current word processor. But when it comes to writing your Congressman or Congresswoman, word processors on computers make things a lot easier.

Most of the time I don't stop to make corrections or rearrange words too often. I keep on writing while the thought is still in my head and hasn't yet made it to my fingers. Sometimes I go two or three paragraphs or just one continuous string of words, not even complete sentences. Yes, a lot of green squiggly lines (grammar needs correcting) appear on the screen but at least my thoughts are down and 'on paper' (not really but close).

I do however tend to do some editing as I go. That is, I rearrange my words, correct spelling, add and subtarct punctuation marks as I enter then on the screen. (I misspelled 'subtract' when I typed the previous sentence and a red squiggly line appeared under it. If I had right clicked on that word, several options would have appeared. All I would have to do is to click on the right one and 'subtract' would be correctly spelled and the red squiggly line would disappear. Ain't computers wonderful!?)

But, let me back up a step. First, take advantage of your computer and the Internet. "Google" your subject, what is it you are for or against. You might be surprised about how much information there is out there just waiting for you to find it. Caution: you might change your mind about this subject while doing your research.



Also, you can copy anything you find and paste it into a simple word processor (such as Microsoft's Word) as a temporary storage place? Did you ever use filing cards in your English Composition, Speech or other classes to organize your thoughts and the results of your research? Then arrange and rearrange the cards until you got them in just the right order? Even add or throw out some cards or change the wording? Same idea but now we have computers.

Caution: Do not use someone else's words unless you put their words in quotation marks ("their words") and give them credit. Copyright Laws apply here just the same as if you were writing for publication. Besides, this is your argument. You may agree with what someone else says about the subject but you don't have to quote them, just don't use their exact words ('paraphrase' is the technical term). Quick examples (his words): John Doe says, "This bill is full of loopholes." Or (your words): I find there are too many loopholes in this bill.

There is a great deal more that can be said about using other people's words and ideas, and a lot has been written on the subject. For our purposes here, don't over quote (one is good, two is ok, three is excessive). Paraphrasing someone is all right but what you write must be your own words.

There is, I suppose, an exception to the above about using other's words and ideas. Your second paragraph could be nothing more than: I am against H.R. 1 "Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act." I agree with Bess Trueheart when she says, "I fear that the Law of Unintended Consequences will take over if this bill is ever passed and signed into law!" You could add more of their argument placed inside the quotes if you wanted. Just don't get too carried away. If you make a long quote, it is Bess Trueheart's letter and not your letter.

With all that in mind start writing your second paragraph: "I am for (or against) this (paragraph one) because..." You need one strong argument and perhaps two or three lesser arguments. After your research and by the time you start writing, you should have your arguments all lined up and ready for your second paragraph. Cut and Paste as needed, rearrange as required, correct spelling as necessary and edit, edit, edit and edit again.

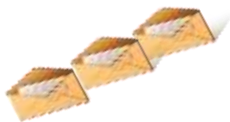
When you are happy with your second paragraph, if you ever are, print out your letter and read what you printed. Read it out loud. Did you stumble over the English or the phrasing or something else? Make corrections until you can read it word for word without stumbling.

Do you like what you have said? And the way you have said it? Is it readable and understandable? Then add the "Thank you" and closing (Rules 8, 9 and 10.

Don't forget to seal and put a stamp on the envelope!

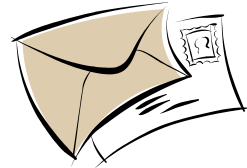
One final thing you should consider. Before putting your letter in the envelope, put it aside for at least one day. In the heat of the moment you might have said something that you really didn't want to say or said it in the wrong way. If it is a subject you feel strongly about, sleeping on it might improve how you express yourself in your letter.

Remember that you want your letter to make it to the desk of your elected official. Think of it this way, every person in the entire chain is looking for a reason to prevent your letter from going further up the line. A well written letter will not give them a reason to stop the progress.



There is nothing wrong with sending that same letter to your two other Congresspersons. I encourage you to do just that. All three need to know your opinion. Just be sure to change the names and addresses both on the envelopes and in the letters!

A sure way to tell that your letter got past at least the second level in the Congressperson's office is when and if you receive a reply. Pat yourself on the back, you made an impression! Your argument for or against something was noted. Writing your letter was a worthwhile effort.



Now, start your next letter!