

# Effective Letters to Congress

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# Overview

- Essential elements and characteristics of a good letter
- Why these elements and characteristics make a good letter
- And then whatever you wish to talk about ... .

# Disclaimer



This is me ...

This is Senator Merkley ...



# Essential Elements of a Good Letter

## Length and Format

- GOOD: 1 or 2 pages maximum
- BAD: the forty-page outline of your memoirs
  
- GOOD: clean, readable font (even hand-written)
- BAD: illegible scrawl, fancy typeface, Crayons, excessive photos or charts, etc.
  
- GOOD: reasonable paragraph lengths
- BAD: no paragraph breaks

# Essential Elements of a Good Letter

## Organization

- **FIRST SENTENCE:** Guide to how the letter should be categorized.
  - “I urge you to vote yes/no on ... .”
  - “I am writing to ask for your help with ... .”
  - “I hope you can help me find information about ... .”
- **FIRST PARAGRAPH:**
  - Concise summary of the entire issue.
  - Include specifics (esp. bill number or claim number).



# Essential Elements of a Good Letter

## Organization

### ● IF YOU HAVE MIDDLE PARAGRAPHS:

- Expanded (though concise) discussion.
- Referrals to resources for further information.
  - “The Washington Post recently ran a series of stories on mortgage fraud that I found very informative ... .”
  - “In October 2009, the Cato Institute issued a policy analysis on regulating the Federal Reserve, which offers a different view ... .”
  - “Essentially, I would like you to amend the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA) to prevent cases like *U.S. v. Drew*, 259 F.R.D. 449 (C.D.Cal., 28 August 2009) from ever happening again.”
- Alternative requests (if applicable).

# Essential Elements of a Good Letter

## Organization

- **FINAL PARAGRAPH:**
  - Restate and summarize your request.
  - State (in one sentence) your primary reason for the request.
  - Request for a response or say you don't need a response.
  - Optional: "Thank you for ... ."

# Essential Elements of a Good Letter

## The Fine Details

- Include your full contact information.
  - Full name (first, middle initial, last).
  - Mailing address and a valid email address.
  - Telephone number(s) where you can be reached.
- Send your letter to the “home office” in the state, not to Washington, DC.
- Or better yet, submit it via email or webpage form.



# Why Are These Elements “Good”?

## Workflow Management

- Members of Congress receive hundreds of thousands of letters, phone calls, emails, faxes, and other communications from constituents each year.
  - In an average week, Senator Merkley’s office receives about 9,500 communications. That is about 495,000 per year.
  - For the first six weeks of the year, the office has received an average of 1,600 telephone calls a day (and 22,000 communications per week).
  - Members of Congress want to reply to everyone, but can’t do so personally – that’s why their staffs send out replies.
  - Member of Congress have to work differently than they did 50 years ago – or even just 15 years ago.

# Why Are These Elements “Good”?

## Public Impact and Government Help

- A good letter can help a Member of Congress make a point in committee or on the chamber floor.
- A good letter makes it easier for a Member of Congress to help that constituent get a response from a government agency.

# Final Thoughts

- You have a First Amendment right to write to Congress.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, *and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*”
- Do your homework.
- Don't insult anyone or attack someone's character.
- Don't say “I know you're just going to throw this letter away ... .”

# Final Thoughts

- Content and organization matter. Method of delivery does not matter. Even a Twitter post or Facebook comment will be noticed.
- Don't simply cut and paste a template. Use your own words.
- And with email ...
  - Send an actual letter, not stream-of-consciousness ramblings.
  - No txt spk (o rly? ya rly!) or dank memes.
  - **AND PLEASE DON'T USE ALL CAPS – YOU DON'T NEED TO SHOUT TO BE HEARD IN AN EMAIL MESSAGE!**