

Writing as a Political Act

Politics is about persuasion, so writing is a political act. You can use your words to change the world in several different ways. You can write books and essays on political issues. But most of us don't. Instead, we write our representatives to let them know how to represent us. We write letters to the editor to register our opinion about something we saw in the newspaper. Or we write opinion pieces on issues near and dear to us.

There are guidelines for each of these kinds of writing. In writing to your representative, you are usually writing to support a position s/he has already taken, or you're writing to persuade him/her to support your position. In both cases, be brief. Say who you are, and which bill or position you support. If you know the bill number, use it; if you don't, be as clear as you can. Say why you support your position. Tell a story about how the issue affects you, your family or your job. Or say why, as a citizen, you think the issue affects the public good. If you're hoping to change your representative's mind, offer evidence, and *ask them a specific question or two* that invites them to see the issue your way. Tell them how they will benefit by supporting your position. Then urge your representative to take action, and ask for a response.

Members of Congress have their own zip code, so you can address them like this:

The Honorable _____
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable _____
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

In writing a letter to the editor, the most important rules are:

- 1) Be brief.
- 2) Be brief and clear.
- 3) Be brief and original.

You want to be brief because you have a better chance to be published, and you have a better chance of being read. Long letters are often edited by the editors, and sometimes that changes the effect of your ideas.

Within your short letter, say *what you're responding to* (a news article, an editorial, an opinion piece). State your position and offer evidence for it—sometimes expert evidence. This can sometimes be done in a single sentence. (Anthony Lewis says that . . . , but I think that OR “Jim Farrell says that . . . , but in a recent report, the Union of Concerned Scientists say)

In either case—writing to representatives or editors—don't take too long to compose your message. You want to get in the habit of speaking your mind, and it's not habit-forming if it's a pain in the butt. Don't aim for “the perfect standard” because that will give you writer's block.