



## Effective Written Communications & Phone Calls

### Which Written Form Is Best?

There are a lot of myths and misperceptions about written communications. In fact, you may have heard that “e-mail doesn’t work” or “personal handwritten notes are always best.”

In general, though, what really matters is the message. A thoughtful, personal relevant e-mail will have far more influence than an angry, rambling handwritten letter from someone that is in no way relevant to an official. It’s more important to focus on *what* you’re saying than *how* you say it. A well-crafted and thoughtful message delivered in any one of these ways will be given equal attention.

There is one important caveat to this general advice. Unfortunately, security measures were dramatically increased in Washington, D.C., in the wake of Anthrax mailings to the U.S. House and Senate after 9/11. As a result, all postal mail must endure a radiation process which takes time and weakens the integrity of the paper. In short, radiated mail comes out of the process late and not looking very good. Given this situation, e-mails and faxes may be a better way to reach the Washington, D.C., staff. As an alternative, you can consider sending letters or packages that must go through the postal mail to the official’s district office.

### Effective Phone Calls

In some cases, it may make sense to call opinion leaders. This is especially true for very short term, immediate asks, such as asking an official to vote yes or no on a certain policy issue. Calling a policymaker leaves a much more personal and direct impression than a written communication.

### Adapting Your Message for a Phone Call

A phone communication works particularly well for certain circumstances, such as:

- Short and urgent messages, such as “vote yes” or “vote no” on a bill that is being considered in the near future
- Direct communications with staff people with whom you’ve developed a relationship
- Following up on previous communications with the office (such as e-mails or meetings)
- Setting up meetings with staff or following up on meeting requests with members
- Press or media inquiries

Phone communications generally aren’t a good way to introduce a new idea, although if this is your only option you should certainly use it.

## Deciding Who to Call

Who you call in the office (or, for that matter, which office you call), will depend in large part on what you're asking for. Some messages can be left with the person answering the phone, where others might require a more substantive conversation with the relevant staff person. Review the following circumstances to help you determine who it would be most appropriate for you to call:

- ☐ Short message registering your position on a specific vote or bill: If your goal is to relay your opinion about how a policymaker should vote on a particular issue, you should call the main line of your Representative or Senator's Washington, D.C. office and relay your message to the staff assistant who answers the phone. If you have a relationship with a particular staffer, you should call them. This gives you yet another opportunity to connect with them and continue building a valuable relationship.
- ☐ Policy discussions: If you want to have a substantive discussion about a particular policy issue, you should call and ask for the staff person who handles that issue. If you would like to chat with them for longer than 15 minutes, ask if you can set up a phone appointment – the staff greatly appreciate your recognition of their busy schedules. To save toll charges, you might want to start with the district or state staff person, although you may eventually be referred to the state capitol or Washington, D.C. staff.
- ☐ Scheduling requests for staff: In most offices with staff, the staff people manage their own schedules. If you would like to have them visit a facility or meet with you while you're in Washington, D.C., you should call the staff directly to request the meeting.
- ☐ Scheduling requests for officials: Most initial requests should be made in writing. About a week after the initial request has been sent in, it may make sense to call the office to follow-up. These requests should be directed to the scheduler or administrative aide.
- ☐ Press or media inquiries: If you are approaching an elected official in a media capacity (i.e., to ask an elected official to write an article for your newsletter), it may be appropriate to ask for the press person. Many state legislators and all Members of the U.S. Congress have folks that fit this description.

## Developing Your Talking Points

When calling about a particular issue, always be ready to provide basic information, such as a bill number and title, if you are asking the official to support a specific bill.

If you are calling as part of a coordinated campaign, be sure to carefully review the organization's talking points but also be prepared to explain your position in your own words. It is always abundantly clear to staff when constituents call as part of a coordinated campaign and aren't really sure what they're talking about. Make sure the message you are delivering is your own, not anyone else's.

While it's always appropriate to be unsure of legislative details (after all, the legislative process is often long and convoluted), be sure that you're familiar enough with the issue you're calling about to answer basic questions. If you're going to be strongly supportive of a particular idea, be sure you know why.

## Managing Questions

When talking on the phone with officials or their staff, you may find yourself confronted with a question you don't know the answer to. The best response is a simple "I don't know, but I'll get back to you," – and then get back to them! Policymakers ask questions for several reasons. For example, they might want to better

understand policy matters, or they may hope to get a sense of your expertise on the matter as well as your ability and willingness to get questions answered in the future.

### **Always Ask for a Response**

As with written communications, the key to effective communication by phone is ensuring that someone actually thinks about what you have to say. Some offices tally phone messages from people seeking to "express their opinion" on a topic, but it's not always the best way to ensure that your message is heard and carefully considered.

Asking for a response serves a variety of purposes. First, you are demonstrating that you care enough about the issue to want to know more. Second, you are forcing someone in the office to put enough thought into the issue to draft a letter from the policymaker about the topic. Finally, officials generally prefer to reflect the opinions and views of their constituents. If a policymaker has enough people calling or writing on a particular issue (and all these people want to know what the policymaker is going to do), he or she might be more inclined to follow the course proposed. That way, the written response is more likely to be of the "I agree with you 100 percent" variety, instead of the "I'm afraid we'll have to disagree" type.