

# Writing Effective Letters to Officials

## Why Bother?

Letter writing is an effective way to influence government. To a certain extent, politicians and bureaucrats rely on letter writers to give them a sense of public opinion. As with letters to the editor, one person's point of view can be interpreted as representing the views of many. And because it requires more time and thought, a letter writing campaign can be more influential than a petition.

## What to Say -- and How to Say It

Of course what you say in your letter is up to you. Letters can support or oppose a policy. They can urge action on a specific issue. Theoretically, if enough letters advocate a particular course of action, it will happen. But for a letter to a politician to be effective, it first needs special care in the way it's written.

Above all, be brief, specific and reasonable. There should be no ambiguity. Deal with one issue at a time. The people you are writing to are very busy. To help organize your thoughts, follow these simple steps:

1. Use the proper forms of address.

The salutation of a letter to a provincial minister should be addressed to:  
The Hon. John Doe, MLA,  
Minister of ....  
Address ....

The salutation of a letter to a mayor should be addressed to:  
His Worship Frank Leonard  
Mayor of Saanich  
770 Vernon Ave, Victoria, BC V8X 2W7

2. Identify the Issue:

Obviously, the more the issue falls within the government's sphere of influence, the more likely it will be taken seriously. You might start with:

“Dear Minister/Mayor/Councillor, I am writing with regards to .....

3. Identify Your Stake in the Issue:

Remember, you do not have to be an ‘authority.’ It's enough to say: “I am a resident of Strawberry Vale (or Saanich) and am concerned about...”

4. State Your Opinion

Again, say what you wish to say, but summon all of the sobriety and dignity you can muster. Government people are fundamentally conservative and see themselves as standing on very established (though not always secure) moral ground. They also adore reason and logic. Because they live in a world dominated by elaborate formality, they will politely ignore anything that seems inflammatory or emotionally overwrought.

5. Make Your Request

The tone should be respectful. Include reference to the role played by the representative you are writing to, e.g., “I urge you, in your role as... , to...”

6. Offer Encouragement

Whether they acknowledge it or not, government people are public servants. So, show them you know how difficult their job is.

You might say: “I realize that you have many competing interests to deal with on this issue, but please remember that the long-term quality of life for our children and community are at stake...”

Also, politicians are human and will react to criticism like anyone else. It would be better to suggest they have been poorly advised than to tell them they do not know their elbow from their armpits.

**Tactics: Who to Write to and Why**

- You might as well start at the top where there is the most influence. The chair of a committee will pass it along to the members of that committee.
- Perhaps request that the MLA, Mayor, Councillor meet with you within a specified time frame. Such requests are not to be brushed off – they are your right as a taxpayer.
- Write to the top civil servants who are actually running a ministry or municipality. They are very influential because, more than anyone else, they have usually been around long enough to know what’s really going on.

**Send Copies to All Concerned:**

Send copies of your letters to people of influence. (Think about our MP?) Just be sure to include “cc: ...” at the end of the letter, followed by a list of those receiving a copy.

*Adapted from a document from the Sierra Club of Canada’s website*