



ACLU-NC Activist Toolkit: Writing Your Elected Officials

Whether you are an experienced activist or someone taking action for the first time, the [ACLU of Northern California](http://www.aclunc.org) is here to help every step of the way. Visit our Web site at www.aclunc.org.

The [ACLU-NC Action Center](http://www.aclunc.org/action/activist_toolkit) contains many resources for activists, including this Activist Toolkit with detailed instructions on everything an activist needs. Download instructions and tips on these topics from www.aclunc.org/action/activist_toolkit:

- Running an effective meeting
- Tabling at community events
- Writing an advocacy letter
- Hosting an event for your friends and neighbors
- Publicizing an event
- Planning a campaign

This part of the toolkit will teach you how to write an effective letter to your elected officials, providing helpful information on these important topics.

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Why Write to an Elected Official

If you think your elected officials pay little or no attention to constituent mail, you’re just plain wrong. Your elected officials—from U.S. senators and representatives, to state senators and assemblymembers, to county and city supervisors, mayors, and councilmembers—are all in office for one reason: to represent **you**. They need and want to hear from you.

When a piece of legislation is being considered, elected officials look closely at their constituents’ opinions as expressed through phone calls, faxes, emails, lobby visits—and **letters**. Elected officials receive far fewer pieces of mail than you might imagine. Thus, elected officials

assume that *each letter they receive represents the opinion of many thousands of voters* who did not take the time to write.

Where to Address Your Letter

It is always best to write to the elected official who represents your district. Each Californian is represented by:

- Two U.S. senators
- One U.S. representative
- One California state senator
- One California state assemblymember
- And local county and/or city supervisors, mayor and councilmembers

Federal and state elected officials have an office in the capitol (Washington, D.C., and Sacramento, respectively) and a local or “district” office, or offices, in the geographic area they represent.

For example, U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer has a Washington, D.C., office and district offices in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Fresno, as well as three more offices in Southern California. California State Senator Abel Maldonado has an office in Sacramento, and district offices in San Jose, Monterey, and San Luis Obispo.

Generally, elected officials receive many more letters at their capitol offices, in Sacramento or Washington, D.C., so a group of carefully targeted letters sent to a district office will look like a groundswell of public opinion on an issue.

How to Send Your Letter

- **You can send a letter** through U.S. Mail (either handwritten or typed) to a district or capitol office. A policymaker knows a letter writer is genuinely concerned about an issue when she or he takes the time to write a personal letter.
- **You can fax a letter** (either handwritten or typed) to a district or capitol office. Letters mailed through the postal service to the Capitol in Washington, D.C. can be delayed up to three weeks due to special security procedures. When time is of the essence, it is often best to **fax** to the D.C. office and send mail to a district office.
- **You can email a letter.** Be sure to include your name and home address in the email, identifying you as a constituent.
- **You can sign a pre-printed form letter or sign a petition.** Mass-produced postcards and letters demonstrate to policymakers that a large group of people hold the same point of view on an issue.

- Finally, **you can call your elected officials**, at any of their offices, or make a lobby visit to a district or capitol office.

What to Write

Keep it Brief

Your letter should address a *single* topic. Generally one page, about three paragraphs, is enough to convey your message. A subject line, included below the address and above the salutation, can be helpful. For example: *Re: Vote No on S. 2453, The National Security Surveillance Act of 2006.*

In this age of “cut and paste,” a ***neat and legible handwritten*** letter lets your elected official know you took the time to personally write to her or him, that you care about the issue, and that you will care about how s/he votes. (If your handwriting is not easily legible, a typed or printed letter is fine, but consider adding a handwritten note at the end.)

Keep it Polite

Courtesy is more persuasive than contempt. Your good points can be lost if the elected official or aide reading your letter encounters anger. Never use vulgarity or profanity. And remember, any threat can result in a visit from the Secret Service.

Elected officials are addressed as follows:

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
U.S. Senate, etc.
Dear Senator Feinstein:

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
U.S. House of Representatives
Dear Representative Pelosi:

Three Main Points

First, say why you are writing and who you are. It is important to let the elected official know you reside in their district, or they will likely ignore your letter. List your credentials: you are a constituent, or you represent a local organization, or you have some professional expertise on the subject matter of the legislation.

Second, provide details. Explain facts about the legislation or how it will affect you personally. It is helpful to cite ***both*** the bill number and title. If the official has voted in the way you would wish on similar legislation in the past, thank them for that vote and ask for their continued support. If they have voted against your position, cite the vote, explain how it hurts their district, and express your hope that they will reconsider their position this time. Consider tailoring your

argument to the official's beliefs. For example, discuss budgetary benefits to a fiscal conservative.

On many topics, the ACLU-NC will have "talking points" that provide you with the bill number and title, and information about the legislation. Check the [ACLU-NC Web site](http://www.aclunc.org/issues) Issues section (<http://www.aclunc.org/issues>) for more information.

If no talking points are available, do your homework; make sure you fully understand the issue and what you are requesting. Remember, elected officials handle hundreds of issues a year, and they may not be experts on the issue you are addressing. Part of your role is to educate them.

Here are two good resources for researching pending bills:

- For information about legislation in Washington, D.C.: <http://thomas.loc.gov/>
- For information about legislation in Sacramento:
<http://www.assembly.ca.gov/acs/acsframeset2text.htm>

Third, ask for **the specific action you want**; for example, a "yes" or "no" vote in committee or on the floor, that hearings be held, or that someone be appointed. And politely ask that your elected official respond and inform you of her or his position.

In closing, it is helpful to provide your home address so that the elected official **knows you reside in the district** and can respond to you. A phone number and/or email is helpful but not essential.

Personalize Your Letter

Do you know the elected official? Have you donated to or worked on her campaign? Did you vote for the elected official? Have you served on a local committee that addresses the issue covered in the pending legislation? Do you have a unique personal story that illustrates the importance of the legislation? If any of these apply, share this information with the elected official.

Ask for a Response

A simple phrase such as "Please advise me of your thoughts on this issue and let me know if I can count on your support for [or opposition to] the referenced bill" is a polite way to ask for a reply.

Let Us Know You Wrote and Send Us Their Response

Please let us know who you wrote to and if you got a response. Please send a copy of your letter and its response to organizing@aclunc.org.

Online Action Center & E-Activist Network

[Sign up to be an ACLU-NC e-activist](#) at www.aclunc.org, if you are not already. When critical action is necessary, we will send you a brief e-mail alert telling you about the pending legislation and which elected official needs to hear from you. We'll even provide a link so you can quickly compose an e-mail expressing your concerns for civil liberties. The whole process usually takes about two or three minutes.

Check the [ACLU-NC Action Center](#) at www.aclunc.org/action for the latest alerts and activist information.

Reach out to your elected officials in writing and make your voice heard. Remember, your letter stands for thousands of others.