



The successful letter applies the three R's: be right, reasonable and repetitive.



Do not underestimate the power of a personal letter. Many people tend to drift toward the ease of a postcard or launching a petition. Politicians recognize this ease so you need thousands to make an impact. These tactics are effective for the less committed who won't take the time to write a letter. But **20 good letters are big guns, counting for 20,000 votes.** There is no overestimating their impact.

One of the biggest hurdles in effective letter writing is the groundless fear that you have to be an expert to discuss an issue. This is a fear that many civil servants cultivate. In fact, it is their job to help you understand the technical details. Interestingly, the minister himself will likely know less about the issue than you do.

Letters are used to measure constituent's feelings and can serve as a basis for action. The successful letter applies the three R's: be right, reasonable and repetitive.

Rule 1: State your position clearly and identify a specific request. The most common weakness in letters is to be unclear about what you want.

Rule 2: Ask specific, leading questions that require a civil servant to write the response. The strategy is not just to let them know your opinion, but to make them work on your behalf, and keep working until they resolve the issue.

Rule 3: Make it clear that you expect an answer.

Rule 4: Send copies to other politicians. Copies or a "c.c." are not guaranteed to obtain a response. Individually addressed letters will expand your effectiveness with little extra work. After all, you wrote the letter, so spread your impact far and wide.

Rule 5: Keep a copy and send additional copies to organizations working on the issues.

Expect a long wait. Ministers are notoriously slow. When your letter arrives at its destination, if it addresses specific facts on an issue, it will be passed down into the bowels of the bureaucracy for some civil servant to respond.

General letters will be dealt with by a form response written over the Minister's signature.

What should you expect for an answer?

Response 1: Zero. The Minister has ignored your questions and said absolutely nothing. This is all too frequent.

Response 2: Affirmative, agreeing with your stance. This is more likely the answer you'll receive from Opposition members of government or supportive backbenchers. If they're genuinely on your side, they'll



appreciate the moral support.

Response 3: Newspeak. This is the current truth or policy, which is a selection of the facts in support of their position. Facts to the government are simply whatever can be provided by the bureaucracy. The answer may also take the tact of trying to overwhelm you with technical details.

[continued on reverse]





The Write Stuff: The Importance of Letter Writing

Now you've received your response. Ministers live with the fantasy that you'll go away. Here's when the fun begins.

Go back to your first letter and begin a second one. It is this follow-up letter that will be annoying enough to make them take you seriously. This time they will know they can't just brush you off as they have attempted with the first letter.

Tactic 1: Ask again all the questions the Minister didn't answer or didn't answer fully.

Tactic 2: Point out all the inconsistencies between their response and others you have received on the issue or with their government's public statements. If you've struck gold, there'll be inconsistencies within the letter itself. Point them out too.

Tactic 3: Point out the weaknesses in their arguments.

Tactic 4: Restate your position and make it clear that you expect a response.

Letter writing is like a long slow game of ping pong. If you really want to have an effect, it's the second and third letters that start scoring.

A phone call to a politician carries the weight of 100 votes, a letter the weight of 1,000. Conventional wisdom.

Sending letters to the Opposition leaders and critics can often be useful. Sometimes they will warm up and go after the Ministers in the Legislature. Sending to Ministers not directly responsible for the issue is a sign to the government that everyone is being drawn in and they can no longer avoid taking a stand.

Lest we forget, there is your own Member of Parliament. If they're a backbencher, their days are quiet and lunches sometimes too long. A phone call or two on any issue tells them they've got a hot issue getting out of control. It'll ruin their whole day.


You'll likely get a personal reply and it could sound very informed. Their facts are just newspeak from a Minister or their bureaucrats. (You can fantasize over how some faceless bureaucrat is sweating out how to respond without looking silly). Once you've got your Member of Parliament on the run, keep them there.

Letter-writing parties or just passing around paper and stamps at an event are a good way to get the jump. You might want to consider a contest for the most creative or witty letter.

Don't forget letters-to-the-editor. Local papers almost always print letters. The larger papers cannot print every letter they receive - the volume is just too great. But don't be discouraged. Keep it brief, and remember that just one letter in a major newspaper may reach over half a million people. That's influence.

But whatever technique, if you can get nine of your friends write a letter too, then you have just leaned 10,000 votes on a politician. Remember, the pen is still mightier than the sword. Have fun.

From an article entitled "Game of Letters" by Ron Reid, Seasons, 1980.

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