People who think members of the U.S. Congress pay little or no attention to constituent mail are just plain wrong. Concise, well-thought-out personal letters are one of the most effective ways Americans have of influencing the lawmakers they elect.

Members of Congress get hundreds of letters and emails every day, so you will want your letter stand out. Whether you choose to use the U.S. Postal Service or email, here are some tips that will help you write a letter to Congress that has an impact.
Think Locally

It's usually best to send letters to the representative from your local congressional district or the senators from your state. Your vote helps elect them — or not — and that fact alone carries a lot of weight. It also helps personalize your letter. Sending the same "cookie-cutter" message to every member of Congress may grab attention but rarely much consideration.

It's also a good idea to think about the effectiveness of all of your communication options. For instance, a face-to-face meeting at an event, town hall, or the representative’s local office can often leave the biggest impression.

That is not always an option though. Your next best bet for expressing your opinion is a formal letter, then a phone call to their office. While email is convenient and quick, it may not have the same influence as the other, more traditional, routes.

Finding Your Legislator's Address

There are a few ways that you can find the addresses of all of your representatives in Congress.

The U.S. Senate is easy because each state has two senators. Senate.gov has an easy to navigate directory of all current senators. You will find links to their website, their email and phone number, as well as the address to their office in Washington, D.C.

The House of Representatives is a little trickier because you need to search for the person representing your particular district within the state.

The easiest way to do so is to type in your ZIP code under "Find Your Representative" at House.gov. This will narrow down your options, but you may need to refine it based on your physical address because ZIP codes and congressional districts do not coincide.

In both houses of Congress, the representative's official website will also have all the contact information you need, including the locations of their local offices.

Keep Your Letter Simple

Your letter will be more effective if you address a single topic or issue rather than a variety of issues you may feel passionate about. Typed, one-page letters are best. Many Political Action Committees (PACs) recommend a three-paragraph letter structured like this:

Say why you are writing and who you are. List your "credentials" and state that you are a constituent. It also doesn't hurt to mention if you voted for or donated to them. If you want a response, you must include your name and address, even when using email. Provide more detail. Be factual and not emotional. Provide specific rather than general information about how the topic
affects you and others. If a certain bill is involved, cite the correct title or number whenever possible. Close by requesting the action you want to be taken. It may be a vote for or against a bill, a change in general policy or some other action, but be specific. The best letters are courteous, to the point and include specific supporting examples.

**Identifying Legislation**

Members of Congress have a lot of items on their agendas, so it's best to be as specific as possible regarding your issue. When writing about a particular bill or piece of legislation, include the official number so they know exactly what you're referring to (it also helps your credibility).

If you need help in finding the number of a bill, use the Thomas Legislative Information System. Cite these legislation identifiers:

- House Bills: "H.R._"
- House Resolutions: "H.RES._"
- House Joint Resolutions: "H.J.RES._"
- Senate Bills: "S._"
- Senate Resolutions: "S.RES._"
- Senate Joint Resolutions: "S.J.RES._"

**Addressing Members Of Congress**

There is also a formal way to address members of Congress. Use these headers to begin your letter, filling in the appropriate name and addresses for your congressperson. Also, it's best to include the header in an email message.

To your senator:

*The Honorable (full name)*

*(room #) (name) Senate Office Building*

*United States Senate*

*Washington, D.C. 20510*

*Dear Senator (last name):*

To your representative:
The Honorable (full name)
(room #) (name) House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative (last name):

Contacting The U.S. Supreme Court

The justices of the U.S. Supreme Court do not have email addresses, but they do read letters from citizens. You can mail letters using the address found on the SupremeCourt.gov website.

Key Things To Remember

Here are some key things you should always and never do when writing to your elected representatives.

Be courteous and respectful without "gushing." Clearly and simply state the purpose of your letter. If it's about a certain bill, identify it correctly. Say who you are. Anonymous letters go nowhere. Even in email, include your correct name, address, phone number and email address. If you don’t include at least your name and address, you will not get a response. State any professional credentials or personal experience you may have, especially those pertaining to the subject of your letter. Keep your letter short — one page is best. Use specific examples or evidence to support your position. State what it is you want to be done or recommend a course of action. Thank the member for taking the time to read your letter.

What Not To Do

Just because they represent the voters does not mean that members of Congress are subject to abuse or belittlement. As impassioned as you may be about an issue, your letter will be more effective if it's written from a calm, logical perspective. If you’re angry about something, write your letter then edit the next day to ensure you’re conveying a courteous, professional tone. Also, make sure to avoid these pitfalls.

Do not use vulgarity, profanity or threats. The first two are just plain rude, and the third one can get you a visit from the Secret Service. Simply stated, don’t let your passion get in the way of making your point.
Do not fail to include your name and address, even in email letters. Many representatives prioritize comments from their constituents and a letter in the mail may be the only way you receive a response.

Do not demand a response. You may not get one no matter what, and a demand is simply another rude gesture that does little for your case.

Do not use boilerplate text. Many grassroots organizations will send out a prepared text to people interested in their issue, but try not to simply copy and paste this into your letter. Use it as a guide to help you make the point, and write the letter in your own words with your personal perspective. Getting thousands of letters that say the exact same thing can diminish the impact.
Quiz

1 Which option accurately represents the relationship between the article’s central ideas?

(A) Letters to Congress need to stand out because members of Congress get hundreds of letters a day; the first step to writing an effective letter is choosing whether to write to a senator or a representative.

(B) Letters to Congress need to stand out because members of Congress get hundreds of letters a day; the most effective way to communicate with lawmakers continues to be face-to-face meetings.

(C) Effective letters to Congress can influence the decisions of lawmakers so it is important to make them stand out; the first step to making a letter stand out is to make sure it has the appropriate name and address.

(D) Effective letters to Congress can influence the decisions of lawmakers so it is important to make them stand out; the most effective way to do this is by drafting a letter that is specific, reasonable and polite.

2 Read the two details from the article.

*Be factual and not emotional. Provide specific rather than general information about how the topic affects you and others. If a certain bill is involved, cite the correct title or number whenever possible.*

*State any professional credentials or personal experience you may have, especially those pertaining to the subject of your letter. Keep your letter short — one page is best. Use specific examples or evidence to support your position.*

Select the option that BEST describes how these details develop a central idea of the article.

(A) Both details demonstrate the misconception that lawmakers do not want to hear about the letter writers’ personal lives or experiences.

(B) Both details contribute to the understanding that effective letters focus on a single issue about which the writer feels very passionately.

(C) Both details reflect the perspective that emotional or irrational language will cause members of Congress to discard a letter without reading it.

(D) Both details highlight the view that including certain information can help establish your credibility and make your letter be taken seriously.
3 Read the two selections from the article.

It's usually best to send letters to the representative from your local congressional district or the senators from your state. Your vote helps elect them — or not — and that fact alone carries a lot of weight.

Just because they represent the voters does not mean that members of Congress are subject to abuse or belittlement.

How do these two selections contribute to the effectiveness of the author's exposition?

(A) They appeal to the reader's sense of justice by stating a point about letter writing and adding a detail to help them empathize with lawmakers.

(B) They establish the relationship between lawmakers and their constituents by using a specific piece of evidence to illustrate that point.

(C) They juxtapose the idea that local lawmakers will respect constituents' opinions with the idea that letter writers should respect them in return.

(D) They present ways that letter writers can appeal to lawmakers using both logical reasoning and emotional arguments regarding the issues.

4 Read the last four paragraphs in the article.

What is the MOST LIKELY reason the author includes these paragraphs in the conclusion of the article?

(A) to emphasize the likelihood that the reader will forget to use polite phrasing when writing about a controversial issue

(B) to encourage the reader to read and revise their letter to make sure it avoids errors that may detract from its message

(C) to elaborate on the pitfalls and risks of being investigated by the government if a letter writer makes demands or threats

(D) to explore the types of organizations that may take advantage of constituents' passion for certain hot-button issues