

From Letter-Writing Campaigns to Legislative Changes

One day at work, a coworker showed me a letter that another City Councillor had received. It read...

Dear Councillor _____,

I voted for you in the last election...

It went on to describe their main advocacy asks. By the way, “I voted for you in the last election” is a great way to start a letter to your elected official **but only if it’s true**. In this case, the individual who signed that letter could not have voted for that City Councillor in the last election, as the Councillor was acclaimed and their name never showed up on a ballot. Right off the bat, a generally strong letter was off to a weak start. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

Letter-writing is about balance, particularly the balance between personalization and consistent messaging. Advocacy campaigns often produce letters that are well-written and well-researched, but they have to be general enough to get addressed to any elected official at a certain level. The nuances specific to a single recipient of the letter get lost, which is exactly what happened in our example above. It’s short-sighted

to think that “personalizing a letter” just means writing the name of the specific elected official in the salutation.

At the same time, if everyone were to draft their own letter without any consistent messaging, there would be no clear asks at all. Politicians who receive a dozen letters that each speak about a different issue and different solution are inclined to do nothing (and rightly so, since there is no clear and consistent course of action). We amplify our voices when we are consistent.

Pre-written letters are a great start. It’s best to ask for a plain text version of a pre-written letter so you can add to the letter, edit it, or even narrow its focus. After being on the receiving end of letter-writing campaigns, there are five qualities that have repeatedly stood out to me.

Before we begin, a caveat – these do not apply to **massive** letter-writing campaigns. I’m talking about the ones that have huge letter-writing parties that result in hundreds of letters being mailed to a single politician, like a Minister of Health. Those are a whole separate game. Most of the time, these letters are not meant to be read individually and responded to personally. They’re a show of numbers. Further below, we’ll talk about how to avoid the “Oh I’ve seen letters like this before, let’s put it in that same pile” response. For massive letter-writing campaigns, that response is not a loss. It’s the goal.

Let's dive in!

Correctness

The devil is in the details. Make sure that you're addressing your letter to the correct representative. This includes checking that you reside in their riding or district, as well as ensuring that the requests within the letter are actually within the jurisdictional power of the representative. The federal, provincial, and local levels of governments are each responsible for different issues. Healthcare is mostly under provincial jurisdiction, but it is funded federally and there are some issues that are currently at the federal level, including national pharmacare. If you're not sure if you're directing your letter to the right person, ask around or even reach out to the office of that elected official to ask if they can point you in the right direction or confirm that their office *is* the right direction.

Try to learn a little bit about your representative as well – what issues have they stood up for? How long have they been in office? What have been the priorities of their party? This can help you select a foundation on which to lay out your concern and request. Knowing these things can help with the next quality – connection.

Connection

Maybe you've met this elected official before, voted for them, or seen them support a cause you believe in. That's a fantastic starting point. If that's not the case, starting out with a little bit about yourself grabs attention, because it's unique. It requires more careful reading and avoids the potential case where a politician or their staff think "Oh I've seen letters like this before, let's put it in that same pile" without fully reading it. Most representatives want to know about their constituents – Have they lived in the area for a long time or have they recently moved there (is the area attracting new residents)? Are they involved in the community? What are the issues that matter to them?

Letters to your representatives can and should be written at any time, but there are some ways you can use the timing to maximize this connection factor. If you're writing a letter after a recent election, congratulate your representative. If it's during a campaign season or shortly before an election, sympathize with the busyness and stress they are under (it's a lot!). If it's around the holidays, wish them well. If it's shortly after you met them, even better.

Hello _____,

Congratulations on your recent re-election! I just wanted to introduce (or re-introduce) myself (we briefly met during the election when you were door-knocking). I'm a resident of [insert constituency name] and a 2nd Year Pharmacy student...

Sometimes, I encounter things that people think are a good idea to include in letters, when they're really not. Around election time, it may feel tempting to write something to the effect of "I will remember your response when I'm at the voting booth!" or any other ultimatums related to voting for that candidate. In an election year, candidates already realize that *anything* they respond or do not respond will be remembered at a voting booth. It goes without saying. But on top of this, it can be interpreted as hostile, which fails to set a foundation for positive interactions after the election.

The other thing I've seen is constituents assuming that if they've met once a few years ago then their representative must remember them. Let me start out by saying – politicians have some of the best memories when it comes to people, but even the sharpest memory cannot remember the thousands of people whose paths they cross once or twice. Always give a bit of background if you'll be referencing a previous encounter. In other words, don't say "When I spoke with you two elections ago, you said..." Even with a phenomenal memory, chances are that there are staff reading the letter who may not have been there for that initial interaction.

Consistency

We briefly discussed how our voices are amplified if consistent messaging is used. This doesn't mean we need to send identical letters, but it means we should align our asks and ensure that our requests of government are consistent. It also includes having consistent facts and reasoning for these key advocacy points. If there is a specific slogan used in the advocacy campaign, use that. But besides specific slogans, consider making the language yours. This is also important because it helps the letter flow. If you're starting out with that "connection" piece discussed above and then switch straight into pre-written wording that differs from your writing style, it can feel strange. A pre-written letter stating...

Scientific studies evaluating the impact of a full scope of practice for pharmacists show that expanding the current role of the pharmacist improves patient care, such as by managing chronic conditions, reducing drug-related problems, and reducing readmissions to hospital, thereby lowering health-care costs.

... can be restated to fit the letter better without compromising its core messaging ...

As you know, it's so important to do all we can to reduce ER visits and prevent patients' conditions from escalating. This is an area where pharmacists can play a huge role, through their roles in community practice on the frontlines of our healthcare system.

Clarity

I can't count the number of times I've carefully read letters yet still didn't understand what the constituent wanted. I don't mean to say that their asks were unclear, but rather that the "next steps" were unclear. Your letter should clearly state what you want your representative to do. If you'd like them to vote a certain way on an upcoming bill, let them know that. If you'd like to set up a meeting or phone call, write that in the letter. If you'd like a response, make that clear. These "next steps" keep the conversation going and prevent the letter from being a one-time manifesto that soon gets forgotten.

Speaking of manifestos, your letter should be clear and focused. You may feel like ranting, and it's okay to start out with something raw; but over the course of some edits, the rant should turn into a rational correspondence before you send it.

Continuity

We want our letters to have a lasting impact. The only way that happens is if our letters are not just single, stand-alone letters. Actual action comes through repeated follow-up. I know of a few, rare politicians who actually take it upon themselves to follow-up with their constituents and check-in on their concerns. In most cases, the follow-up must come from you. If you don't receive a response, follow-up, while understanding that the letter may have been missed, forgotten, lost, or simply awaiting a time to be fully read and addressed. But even if you do receive a response, or better

yet, a meeting, follow-up in a few months to discuss whether any progress has been made since then. Ask what your role can be in effecting that progress. Send a “thank you” to follow-up after a meeting and especially after a vote where your representative has clearly answered your advocacy asks. After all, advocacy is a marathon, not a sprint, and to run a marathon, you need continuity.

One of the most familiar advocacy activities is letter-writing, but if we want these letters to bring about practical, legislative change, we need to ensure their correctness, connection, consistency, clarity, and continuity.