

THE WRITE STUFF: THE IMPORTANCE OF LETTER WRITING

Do not underestimate the power of a personal letter. Many people tend to drift toward the ease of launching a petition. Politicians recognize this ease so you need thousands to make an impact. These tactics are effective for those who don'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. Interestingly, the Minister may 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 to 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. When your letter arrives at its destination, if it addresses specific facts on an issue, it will pass into the bowels of the bureaucracy for response.

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.

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.

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 may be annoying enough for you to be taken seriously.

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. A phone call or two on any issue tells them they've got a hot issue.

You may get a personal reply and it could sound very informed. Their facts may be just newspeak from the Ministry. Once you've got your Member of Parliament working on the issue, 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 to 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.

Adapted from Ron Reid's 1980 article entitled "Game of Letters" published by Ontario Nature in Seasons magazine (now called ON Nature).

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