

Chapter 10

Top Ten Tips for Writing a Letter, Fax, or E-mail

Writing to Members of Congress is one of the easiest and most effective ways for rehabilitation nurses and patients to communicate with policymakers on issues of interest and priority. Written communication can be done by e-mail or by sending a letter to the Congressional office by fax. Such written correspondence, if done correctly, can result in garnering support for ARN's public policy priorities.

When writing to policymakers, be sure to use personal stationery or your personal e-mail account, as your employer might not share your views on the topic. For all forms of communication, be sure to include your full name, return mailing address, e-mail address, and phone number. If you are a federal or state employee, you must use personal e-mail and your personal computer.

Be sure to keep a hard copy of what you send, as sometimes faxes, e-mails, or letters are lost and you may need to send a second copy to ensure a response.

1. **Always be polite.** When addressing correspondence to any government official, be sure to use the proper forms of address (see the end of this document). Even if you are angry, frustrated or disappointed, be sure to use a polite tone and appropriate language; be sure not to be threatening, confrontational, or rude. The most effective way to communicate with your Members of Congress is the way you communicate with your colleagues, neighbors, family, and friends – clearly, concisely, and with respect and honesty.
2. **Be clear about who you are and why you are writing.** In the opening sentence, make your request clear and identify yourself as a registered voter, constituent, and a nurse. If you know the member or staff aide, say so at the beginning of your message; this may alert the staffer to give your message special attention. If you are in a leadership position and have clearance to write in that capacity, be sure to use your title and indicate how many people you represent.
3. **Be concise and informed.** If possible, try to keep your letter to a single page. You do not need to be an expert on the issue, but you should be familiar with the basic facts (e.g., name of the legislation and the associated bill number, and why it should be supported or opposed). If you are requesting that the policymaker cosponsor a particular measure or are writing to express disappointment at a particular vote, check the list of cosponsors and the vote record first at <http://thomas.loc.gov/> to ensure that your information is up-to-date and accurate.
4. **Personalize your message.** Remember, you are an expert in what rehabilitation services people with physical disability or chronic illness need; and, as such, you have many experiences to share. Tell your own story, and explain the relevance to the issue at hand. Although form letters and postcards are “counted,” they often do not elicit a response from a Congressional office. Personal stories and illustrations of local impact are more easily

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remembered by policymakers and their staff than statistics and generic examples. Moreover, personal stories are often what spur policymakers into action—not statistics. The reality is that our policymakers often legislate by anecdote. Your own words are best and can influence the legislator’s response or vote. If you are using a template letter (like those provided at www.rehabnurse.org), please take a few moments to personalize it with your own experience. Also, if you can, include relevant state or local information to explain how the issue affects your community and/or practice.

5. **Be honest, accurate and clear.** If you are including statistics or other scientific information, be sure to verify your sources and have them handy in case the Congressional offices follow up and request additional information. Also, be sure not to exaggerate the situation you are discussing; do not oversell the policy solution you are advocating, or overstate the consequences if the policymaker does not do what you request. Make sure you do not use any “lingo” or “slang” (e.g. do not use acronyms in your letter like “HRSA,” unless you first write out what it means – the Health Resources and Services Administration).
 6. **Be modest in your request.** Although you may wish to address multiple issues, be sure not to “kitchen-sink” in your communication. It is best to focus on only one or two issues that are of top priority to you. Your communication will be clearer, and policymakers or staffers will be more receptive, because you have not bombarded them with too many requests.
 7. **Be of assistance and serve as a resource.** Policymakers and their staffers are overworked and overwhelmed, so offer them your assistance; they will appreciate your input and help. If you have an article of interest or relevance, be sure to include it with your correspondence, or refer to it, and indicate that you would be happy to provide it, should they be interested.
 8. **Express appreciation.** Too many times we forget to say thank you. If in response to earlier correspondence you receive a letter informing you that the member shares your views or took the action you requested, write back expressing your thanks for the response and support. Or, if you learn that the policymaker recently cosponsored a bill you support or voted the way you hoped, send a letter expressing your pleasure at his/her action. At the close of your correspondence, be sure to acknowledge and thank the member for his or her attention to your concerns.
 9. **Ask for a response.** Because policymakers and their staffers work for you, you have every right to (politely) ask for a response, and hold them accountable if your communication goes unanswered. In fact, entire systems, processes, and staff exist in Congressional offices to respond to constituent input. It is important to note, however, that because of the volume of constituent input, it could be weeks or month before you receive a response. Make clear at the close of your correspondence that you are requesting a written response regarding the policymaker’s views on the issue or legislation you addressed.
 10. **Be sure to follow up.** If you do not receive a response in a timely fashion (in excess of a month for most offices, a little bit longer for senators from large states like California and
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Texas), be sure to follow up. Contact the office by phone or with another letter (fax is best) with your original attached, and indicate you have not received a response, and you are requesting one. If you receive an unsatisfactory response to your correspondence, you should write or call again to express appreciation for the response and politely, yet firmly, communicate that the response was not what you anticipated or requested. Reiterate your concerns and address any points the policymaker has made on the issue in the correspondence.

Other Tips

Keep in touch with the offices of your Members of Congress to establish a relationship and make yourself available as a local resource on nursing and physical rehabilitation issues. There are times when you and an elected official will have to “agree to disagree” but over time, you also may find that the policymaker may be supportive and helpful on other matters.

Specific Tips About “Snail Mail”

As a result of anthrax attacks in fall 2001, the U.S. Postal Service mail is handled differently by Congress. Most incoming mail is irradiated to ensure it is safe for handling. This process takes quite a while and often damages the contents. Therefore, for time sensitive communication, sending written correspondence by e-mail or fax is advised – or make a quick phone call (see Chapter 11). Also, enclosing items such as photographs, originals of articles, or other documents is not recommended; it is best to save these items for hand delivery when you have a meeting in the office – either in the local office or in Washington, D.C.

Specific Tips About E-mail

Each Congressional office maintains a different policy about how e-mail from constituents is handled. Most Members of Congress have a public e-mail address. To access the e-mail addresses, visit the individual Member’s Web page (www.house.gov or www.senate.gov). Many Congressional offices provide a generic, automatic acknowledgement that your e-mail has been received but then will follow-up with either a specific e-mail response to your issue or a letter via regular U.S. Postal Service. A handful of offices still do not respond individually to e-mail but count the input and inform the policymaker how many people have written about the particular topic and what position they are advocating. Some Congressional offices have instituted computer-based “algorithms” to ensure that e-mail messages they receive are from legitimate constituents. Typically, all this entails is a requirement that the constituent answer an easy math equation (e.g., what is two plus two?), or to copy a word or phrase from one place on the screen to another. This helps them weed out any computer-generated or “spam” messages, and allows constituent communications to get through. It is best to contact your Members’ offices to learn about their individual policies about constituent correspondence. You can call the Capitol Switch Board at 202/224-3121 to be transferred to your Members’ offices, or look in the “blue pages” of your local phone book, and your Members of Congress should be listed under the Government section.