

How To: Write a Letter to an Elected Official

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In this collaborative article, we begin by discussing why you might want to write a letter to an elected official. Then we identify six general guidelines for writing a persuasive letter. As examples of writing in this genre, we include two letters: one for continued support for the Illinois 4-H program and the other for shutting down the tobacco industry.

So you are beginning to write a letter to one or many representatives of a community, or a certain body of people. This has to be an important representative, not a group of peers; not a group of friends; and not a relative or even a co-worker. You are writing this letter because the issue is not something you can change yourself. Therefore, you write a letter to someone with the power to make a difference. You, of course, want to change the mind of this person or group. You have an opinion to be shared, and you feel very strongly about this subject. So, “How do you do this in the most effective way?” you ask. Well, with the help of Sara’s and Natalie’s letters, we will tell you how to write the most persuasive letter to an elected official. (You can find these letters at the end of this guide.)

You would want to include things like information about the subject that makes it seem like you have researched their project. For example, in the letters from Sara and Natalie, they both knew a lot about the issues at hand, and their knowledge on the topic makes their letters so much more effective. Sara did a great job of showing her knowledge about the different cancer stages. If the official reads your letter, and you have all your facts askew, they

definitely will not take your advice into consideration. On the other hand, if you have all of the details and facts correct, they will be more likely to listen to what you have to say. In Natalie's letter, she talked about the 4-H problem and how research has shown that members of the 4-H are more likely than other youths to have the highest positive youth development trajectory.

Another thing you might want to include in the letter would be personal experiences. In Sara's letter, she gives personal experiences. She talks about how her aunt played such a big role in here life, by taking her and her sister in. She relates personal stories such as when her aunt taught her how to condition her hair or when she was excited about prom. Natalie used her personal experience in the 4-H program by talking about the ways that it has helped her to grow into the young adult she is today. Most likely, if you add personal experiences, the reader will sympathize with you and take more of what you are saying into account. Personalization is the key to persuasion. Along with giving personal stories about the topic, you want to introduce yourself. If the elected official feels closer to you and knows your name, he or she will probably look deeper into your opinion.

In addition, when writing to convey an opinion to a representative of a community, you want to use proper English. Both writers used proper English in their letters and were very effective when it comes to supporting their opinion. They both knew that the readers of their letters would be important people of the community. Since you can't meet them in person, you want to give them the best impression possible through your writing. If you know your audience, you know that these are highly educated people. They are way more likely to read a typed letter than a sloppy letter written in marker on a napkin. That's surely exaggerated, but you get the idea. Do not use slang words or swear words and try to be as professional as possible.

Try to support their opinion but show ways your idea or plan is better than theirs. When writing this letter, you really want to agree with the overall plan of the project instead of directly insulting their ideas and saying they are "wrong." Being as you have a different opinion than the representative to which you are writing, you don't want to be defensive and sharp. You want to first make sure they know that you are on-board with the new plan; you would just like to make a few changes. Natalie does this by acknowledging the budget crisis in Illinois and how there are some programs that are going to be left out in next year's budget. Both letters show concern towards the company/board member to whom they are addressing their letter.

You should also give a concrete plan for them to consider! In Sara's letter to the head of Marlboro, she suggests making the warning labels bigger and more noticeable to the eye. With phrases such as "may result in diseases,

cancers, and or many other health complications.” Natalie’s plan is simple—continue funding for the 4-H. She mentions the advantages of keeping the 4-H program in the budget. The leadership taught to thousands of 6–18 year olds involved in the program is well worth the cost.

Oops! Sara changed her mind and broke the genre rules. We feel she had a good reason; read her letter to find out what she did and why.

Get others to join. By doing this, you will have more of a word at the board level. Making petitions or getting other well-known community leaders to back your decision would be a great idea. If you think about it, if the companies see their competitors supporting it, or other well known community leaders, they would be more likely to consider and join sides with your plan. It is always worth a shot to extend your letters to others in the town; you never know what could happen.

So basically, *How To: “Write a Persuasive Letter to an Elected Official”* goes as follows:

1. Do your research—(need a legitimate reason for why you are arguing)
2. Introduce yourself—(make it personal, make it touch the city officials’ personal lives)
3. Know your audience—(address the letter formally, be polite, make it professional, and use proper grammar)
4. Give a concrete plan—(show how it will affect the community)
5. Get others to join—(get the community to support your opinion)

And finally...

6. Always tell the truth! Give your complete and honest opinion, and explain clearly and simply how you want to better the community.

Natalie’s Letter:

Dear Governor Quinn,

I am writing about the Illinois 4-H Program, which gives youth the chance to explore their interests and develop as leaders. I am asking for your continued support of the organization. For the 6 years I have been a member, I have blossomed.

With 4-H, youth can start getting involved at the age of 6! This involvement includes talking in front of the club, sharing ideas, and participating in group activities such as games and discussions. Kids also find belonging through being a part of something important. Working with others is also a skill that kids learn in 4-H. Teenagers love 4-H too, but it gives younger kids a head start in particular.

4-H members also learn to appreciate and understand what it means to serve the community and help others. A Tuft University Research study shows that 4-H youth are 3.5 times more likely to have a higher contribution trajectory than other youth. Many 4-H conferences incorporate a service project in them. The Greene County 4-H Federation raises money in various ways (such as a hot chocolate stand) to buy blankets for the elderly. This service differs from other ways of volunteering because it is a social event. Kids and teenagers get involved with friends and see the fun side of helping others and humbling themselves.

4-H taught me so much about myself. Through numerous committees and volunteer projects, I realized that I wanted to have a career doing essentially the same thing. Planning events and 4-H involvement in general led me to my current college major: Business Marketing. I found my passion in 4-H and am now pursuing it.

Keeping the 4-H program in the budget is an investment in our youth... just like college. The same Tuft Research Study mentioned above shows that in longitudinal studies, 4-H youth are 1.5 times more likely than other youth to have the highest positive youth development trajectory.

I really just want you to know how much the organization means to me and what it does for a couple hundred thousand 6–18 year olds. All I can ask is that 4-H remains a valued part of the budget in the State of Illinois.

Sincerely,

Natalie Edwards

Sara's Letter

Dear Mr. Gifford (President and Chief Executive Officer of Phillip Morris USA—the company that produces Marlboro),

I would first like to introduce myself. My name is Sara Civitello, and I'm a student at Illinois State University. The story I'm about to share with you is probably a story you hear way too often. The story is about my Aunt Kathy. She, like many of the people who smoke cigarettes (her favorite were Marlboro red—hence the reason I am writing to you), developed lung cancer at the young age of forty-nine. Her life, along with my family, was destroyed because of the effects of smoking. Please take a few minutes to read her story below.

On April 22, 2010, I got a call while I was at work. The call was from my mom; she said someone is coming to pick you up. Immediately I was confused. She knew I was at work and didn't get off until eight. It was only a little past six o'clock. The next few words she said will haunt me for the rest of my life: "Sara, Aunt Kathy is dead."

My Aunt Kathy was always a part of my life. Ever since I can remember, she's been there teaching me the basics of life. For instance, when I was four, she taught me how to condition my hair. I remember her explaining that if you left the conditioner in while you washed your body, your hair would be extremely soft. To this day I still use that technique.

I moved in with my Aunt Kathy the summer of 2009. My parents lost their house, and my sister and I had nowhere to live. Aunt Kathy took us in. That whole summer my sister, my aunt, and I fought. It was always about stupid things like whose turn it was to do the dishes or my sister and I making our bed. Now that I look back at it, I wish I just cleaned up after myself. I wish I just cleaned up after everyone.

On October 7, 2009, after going to the doctor for abdominal pain, my aunt was diagnosed with stage three lung cancer. The stages of cancer represent how much the cancer has spread. Stage one means the cancer is localized to one part of the body. Stage two means the cancer is locally advanced. Stage three, the stage my aunt had at this point in time, means the cancer is also locally advanced. And the last stage, stage four, means the cancer has metastasized, or spread to other organs or throughout the body. She had a tumor on her lung that was hitting a nerve, causing her abdominal pain. Although she had stage three cancer, my aunt and her doctor were both very optimistic that with treatment she could have a full recovery.

My aunt went to every doctor's appointment, every radiation and chemotherapy treatment, and although her body was in horrible pain, she stayed hopeful. After almost two months of treatment, my aunt returned to her doctor to see how much the tumor shrunk. What they found though was not what either of them expected; the cancer spread. It spread to her spine, neck, and rib-bones. My aunt, at this point, had stage-four cancer.

In a few short months, my aunt was unable to work. Her days consisted of sleeping or attempting to sleep—since she was in so much pain that it made it hard to do very much of anything. She could barely eat, and when she did, her throat burned from the chemotherapy. She, someone who has always had curves, was so thin that she couldn't find jeans that wouldn't fall off of her. Her face was always ghost-white, and she couldn't take a walk without becoming extremely exhausted.

One day after coming back from school, my parents told me that my aunt was in the hospital. Her entire right foot turned purple. It was dying. The reason, to this day, is unknown. My aunt was in the hospital from that point until the day she died.

My senior prom, something my aunt had been waiting for since I can remember, was a couple days after she went into the hospital. My sister and I knew seeing us in our dresses before going to prom meant a lot to her, and for that reason we and our whole group of about ten people went to the hospital in prom dresses and tuxedos to take pictures. I remember that day she seemed so happy. She had a glow about her like she did before she found out she had cancer. She was smiling and yelling at everyone like she always used to do. I remember thinking, maybe she's getting better?

Three days later she had a stroke. The stroke paralyzed the whole left side of her body. I remember going to see her in the hospital a couple hours after she had her stroke. She had to use the bathroom but was unable to walk or even sit up by herself. Her only son, Joey, had to pick her up and place a bed pan

While writing my letter and then rereading it later, I noticed an instability. The intensity of my aunt's story just didn't match this crossed-out area in which I provided alternatives. And though I realized this, I didn't go with my gut feeling to change it. In my high school English classes, we were taught to follow the rules regarding writing. And that if you didn't, you were wrong. For that reason, I thought, "I'm supposed to provide alternatives, so that's what I have to do even if it doesn't exactly fit what I'm writing about." So I did. I turned in my paper with these alternatives. To my surprise, my college English professor returned my paper with a suggestion to "break" the genre by not including alternatives and instead "stick it to him." The thing about college writing and writing in general is that there are no set rules. Genres are there to give writers a starting point. But while writing, one genre might actually turn into a new genre, such as my letter. For that reason, I write a more appropriate conclusion that you can find at the end of the letter.

under her so she could go to the bathroom. I kept thinking, this is so wrong. A son should never have to help his mother go to the bathroom. She was also unable to talk. It was as if she was an infant again. I never knew how much a stroke could do to you; I never knew how much cancer could do to you. Two days later she died. At the time she died, the cancer had spread from her lungs to her bones to her adrenal glands, her kidneys, and her liver.

Everyone I talk to says she held on to see us go to prom. They tell me that my sister and I meant the world to her and that she thought of us like her own daughters. And although we fought and sometimes I couldn't stand her, I wish there was someone in heaven telling her how much she meant to me.

My aunt smoked cigarettes for thirty-five years. She, like many other members of my family, started smoking at a very young age and because of the addictive substances (nicotine) in cigarettes, was unable to quit. I never want another family member to experience that. I wish no one ever has to experience what my aunt experienced. ~~And although the best possible solution for preventing that experience is to shut down the cigarette industry as a whole, I understand that that is unrealistic and for that reason changes need to be made.~~

~~As a business major, I understand the situation you're in. Your goals, similar to mine, are not to kill people with the products you sell, but instead, you and your co-workers are trying to competitively make profits and maintain jobs in this economic crisis. For that reason, I am not writing to you to attempt to convince you to stop producing cigarettes. Instead, I suggest making people more aware of the side-effects of smoking, so they are fully aware of what they are getting themselves into.~~

~~Cigarette labels are a way of informing consumers of the side-effects of smoking. Currently cigarette labels include warnings such as "Smoking by pregnant women may result in fetal injury, premature birth, and low birth weight" and, "Cigarette smoke contains carbon monoxide." Although there are warnings, the United States has the smallest, least prominent warnings placed on their cigarette packages. The warnings typically are in small print and have colors and fonts that closely resemble the rest of the package—integrated so they don't stand out on the package.~~

~~Instead of camouflaging warnings, you should make the warnings more noticeable. By making the warnings more noticeable, consumers would be more likely to read them. And hopefully after reading that something could harm or possibly kill you, less people will smoke. Including messages that are straightforward such as, "May result in diseases, cancers, and or many other health complications" would also be desirable. By doing so, you would be properly informing consumers of the risk of smoking, without being shady by using words that a common person wouldn't know the meaning of. As a result your company wouldn't be at blame for the side-effects of doing so.~~

~~Thank you again for taking time out of your life to read my aunt's story. I hope the suggestions I gave you will help your company improve the warnings on cigarette packages and overall improve your company.~~

Thank you again,
Sara Civitello

Sara's new ending:

My aunt smoked cigarettes for thirty-five years. She, like many other members of my family, started smoking at a very young age and because of the addictive substances (nicotine) in cigarettes, was unable to quit. I never want another family member to experience that. I wish no one would ever have to experience what my aunt experienced. And the only way to ensure that is to shut down the industry as a whole.

You're probably thinking, "Wow she's honestly asking me to quit my job, and attempt to shut down the industry that provides for my family?" It may sound like an impossible request, but think about this. What if this story wasn't about my aunt? What if this happened to someone you loved? Some one such as a close friend, a parent, or even a child? How could you live with yourself knowing that you contributed to killing someone close to you just to make a few bucks?

At Illinois State, I'm studying your field of work, business. From what I've learned, a president of a company is very valuable and could easily find a new job. One person can certainly make a difference, especially with your resources. Do the right thing and stop the killing of innocent people.



John Wons is an aspiring Public Relations major. He enjoys free writing and song writing in his spare time. He loves working out and attending ISU sporting events. He is very grateful for his family, who motivates him to do well in school while also being his biggest supporters. He wouldn't be the person he is today without the help of his friends and family members. He hopes someday to write a book.



Kelly Boyce is from the small town of Poplar Grove, Illinois. She is an undergraduate student at ISU studying Kinesiology and hopes to someday work for a university as an Athletic Trainer. After graduating from Illinois State, she plans to earn a Cosmetology degree, and pursue a part-time job as a hair stylist during her free time.



Sara Civitello is currently a sophomore at Illinois State University. Sara is studying accounting and plans to become a Certified Public Accountant (CPA). Sara was on the Dean's List her first semester at ISU, placing her in the top 10% of her class at the College of Business.



Laken Onderisin is currently a sophomore at ISU from Lockport, Illinois. She is studying to pursue a career in nursing and is a member of the Illinois State competitive cheerleading team. GO REDBIRDS!



Blake Rosensteel is from Bloomington, IL and attended Tri-Valley High School in Downs, IL. He played basketball and baseball, and for Senior Class Awards, was voted "Most likely to come up with a smart comment for everything."