

# Writing Effective Letters \*



\* A letter can be a two line email that only takes a moment, or more.. :)

How can you write an effective letter to a politician to bring about change?

Key tip: Avoid "I'm a keen cyclist and I demand that..."

## Step 1 - Identification

Research shows people are more likely to grant a request from someone who they like, or someone who is like them.

- Describe yourself in terms that are most similar to them, or most likely to sound like a potential voter for their party, or someone they can identify with.  
*I have two young children and I work in the finance industry in Bridge Street and my kids and spouse are worried about me getting home ok since...; or I am a technician who frequently accesses the city and when I drive I find it much easier when bicycle riders are in a cycleway rather than moving around the traffic...*
- Thank / compliment / support something they've done that you like.  
*Thanks for your government's efforts on container deposit legislation/building light rail/more public transport... Maybe add a "because..."*
- If possible, mention any connections you have with them  
*I also grew up in Woopwoop/went to that school/uni, met you once at ....., have a brother in law who likes cricket...*

The aim here is to make the reader more likely to want to help with your ask.

## Step 2 - The ask and justification

The challenge here is to put your ask in terms of how it will benefit them to do it. Think about why they would do it, or why they may care about the issue, or what they could gain?

*Because it will look good for you/party; fits with messages/policy on your department's website; helps you with your government's target of Y; will give you a ribbon cutting opportunity; will get you strong support from our P&C/lobby group and we'll publicise it/support your campaign/efforts on Z.*

It helps to be able to show how your ask fits with their stated policy or position or philosophy or statements. Google makes it fairly easy to research their comments on a topic or search Hansard (the record of Parliament).

- *We saw three lives lost last year including the tragic loss of a young 14 year old boy in Western Sydney. That's three lives too many.* (Duncan about bike safety at <http://www.transport.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/b2b/media/Duncan-Gay-med-rel-Banning-petrol-powered-bikes-to-save-young-lives.pdf>)
- *Transport's current campaign, Tomorrow's Sydney, to keep Sydney moving by getting more people to walk and ride more means that...*

Or, if you have a special insight and you can offer them "helpful advice" on this topic.

*I am an emergency room doctor/police officer and I know how difficult it is to talk to the family of someone who has just been killed, and that it's even harder when their cause of death wasn't the result of one of my decisions, so I'd like to save you some anguish by suggesting you reverse the decision/be prepared to get counselling after/read these guidelines which help.*

### **Step 3 - The action**

Ask a question that requires an answer (avoid the obvious rhetorical, "don't you realise how stupid this policy is?" :). What alternatives have been considered? Why are those options not the best outcome? How do they compare for safety and traffic impact? When/where/why/how...? Perhaps request a meeting to discuss further.

### **Then what?**

What if the letter doesn't work (no or an insufficient response)?

### **Follow up:**

- Write again, particularly if you can say that they haven't answered the question properly.
- Follow up with your local member or a local councillor from the same party to ask for their help to get a more satisfactory response. This is where it is really useful to have copied others on the original letter.
- Ring the person's office and ask to speak with someone about the issue/response/unanswered letter. This can lead to you speaking with an unprepared and unguarded policy advisor which can be MUCH more revealing and useful. (Usually a written reply has been vetted by three layers of over-cautious officers!) Be ready with a few juicy questions, sound friendly and trustworthy to encourage candidness and make sure you take notes to remember everything important after it's all over. However, probably try and avoid "I'm just trying to write this all down, can you slow down." But rather, "let me just check if I've understood that correctly..." if needed.

### **Treat the letter and response not as the end-game, but your strong opening move.**

Remember, every letter costs time and money to deal with, and adds weight to the issue, especially if it is an effectively written letter and has others copied in. Keep going, and get others to do likewise. (Organise a letter writing party!) Don't be a pest, but be persistent and helpful (remember the "what's in it for them" - eg. "sorry to call you yet again, but I know SO many people for whom this is an important issue, I think it is worthwhile trying to do what I can to help you get the best possible outcome").

### **Tips:**

- Be polite and constructive in tone (unless really necessary)
- Copy in other allies or sub-targets (local member, councillor, newspaper, lobby group like NRMA), especially if you might be able to use their help to follow up after.
- Give your street address, especially if it is in a marginal electorate, but at least give your full name and email address.

An excellent book if you would like to know more about writing letters:

<https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/books/general-books/writing-language/The-Book-of-Letters-Peter-Breen-9781865086699>

Information on contacting Ministers & Members of

Parliament: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/common.nsf/key/ContactYourMember>

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