



Advice for Educators: Written Forms of Advocacy

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Advocacy involves a constituent communicating a position about an issue to a decision-maker through either spoken or written communication. Talking to a decision-maker on the telephone, in person during a private meeting, or in person at a public forum are examples of spoken forms of advocacy. Similarly, letters, faxes, or email to decision-makers are examples of written forms of advocacy. The advent of social media has modernized written advocacy and now includes electronic messages on Facebook and Twitter. The purpose of this article is to provide educators with information about written forms of advocacy and guidelines to follow when writing decision-makers. This article focuses primarily on older types of written advocacy: letters, faxes, and email. Other articles will address Facebook, Twitter, and spoken forms of advocacy in greater depth.

Forms of Written Communication

Early in the process, advocates decide which form of written communication is best to use. Questions such as the following four can guide the choice:

How long is the message? Longer messages that require more detail are better expressed in a letter, fax, or email. Facebook and email work well for the mid-range messages, while Twitter is ideal for those that can be conveyed in 280 characters or fewer. In general, social media works well for shorter messages.

How quickly does the message need to arrive? Sending an email or a tweet will deliver the message instantly; however, advocates must remember that decision-makers may not read the messages they receive every day. Another quick way to communicate is to send a fax, although government offices now are phasing out fax machines in favor of email. Letters are slower and are not guaranteed unless certified or registered. Because of heightened security measures, it may take a letter as long as 10 weeks to reach a decision-maker's office. If advocates desire quick delivery of a letter, then the letter can be sent via priority mail flat rate (USPS), which is more costly than regular mailing rates. Using certified or registered mail, so someone has to sign for the letter, can help to emphasize the importance of the letter, but costs more.

Is the message private or public? If advocates want to send a decision-maker a private message, then a letter or fax is a fairly secure method, although both can now be easily converted to an electronic format and distributed widely. Likewise, advocates sometimes forget that email sent privately can be distributed electronically to others with relative ease. By

posting messages on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, advocates accept the public nature and wide distribution of their comments. In fact, they hope their messages will be shared by many people.

Is a response to the message requested? Advocates should not expect a response to the message. Decision-makers lack the financial and human resources to respond to the large number of messages they receive from constituents. Furthermore, technological snafus may prevent some electronic messages from reaching their intended audience, and staff members may delete messages accidentally. If advocates want a response, then they should follow up with a telephone call or an in-person visit.

Writing Style

As advocates craft their message, they should follow accepted writing styles and conventions as listed here:

- Edit for grammar and spelling errors.
- Write in an active way, using action verbs and avoiding passive voice.
- Maintain an honest, positive, and professional tone that eschews exaggeration, which erodes trust and generates skepticism.
- Organize information so that the message's logical flow is obvious.
- Use lay terms instead of jargon, acronyms, and academic language to make information more comprehensible to the reader.
- Communicate only when there is something important to say.
- Limit the message in letters, faxes, and email to no more than one page by including brief, concise information for readers who are pressed for time.
- Display the information in letters and faxes in a visually appealing format. If writing on behalf of an organization, use approved stationery with a letterhead.

Parts of a Letter, Fax, or Email

Written communications to decision-makers generally include 10 parts. Advocates may modify the parts to fit the particular type of communication, depending on whether it is a letter, fax, email, or social media posting. In certain situations, writers omit some of the 10 parts. For example, they probably do not post personal contact information on Facebook or Twitter. A sample letter is included at the end of this article. The 10 parts of a letter, fax, or email include:

1. ***Salutation:*** The communication begins with a proper salutation, such as "Dear Representative Smith." Using a salutation that includes the exact position of "Senator," "Representative," "Governor," and the like conveys a sense of respect. In all

communications, advocates express themselves in the most positive and professional way.

2. **Identification:** Advocates identify themselves as constituents and as educators. In general, decision-makers pay more attention to voters in their own districts. If the advocate is not a constituent, then a short statement explaining why the decision-maker should listen to the person is warranted. Indicating one's professional status as an educator adds credibility to the message. Writing as a private citizen requires no prior permission from one's institution; however, advocating on behalf of one's institution does.
3. **Bill or Issue:** Advocates clearly identify the bill or issue of concern. Citing the name and number of the bill and including only one bill or issue in each communication provides clarity to the position being advocated.
4. **Position:** Advocates state their position in support of or opposition to the bill or issue and present their point of view in a clear and concise way. The communication leaves no doubt where the advocate stands.
5. **Support:** Advocates use qualitative and quantitative data to substantiate their position. They use current data to justify the reasons that a new policy should be implemented or why an existing policy should continue. Numerical data provide a level of objectivity to the advocate's position. Likewise, advocates share personal stories, short vignettes, and quotes to explain how the issue affects them, their school, or their community. Real-life stories from daily life are a persuasive tool because they make the issue more vivid on an emotional level to the decision-maker. Both numerical data and personal stories capture the impact of the issue on advocates' lives.
6. **Additional Information:** Advocates provide additional information, such as links to relevant websites, in case the decision-maker wants to learn more.
7. **Desired Action and Response:** Advocates state what they want the decision-maker to do, such as taking a specific position and voting a particular way. Advocates may ask the decision-maker to co-sponsor a bill and champion the issue before larger decision-making groups. At some point, advocates formally ask for a response or a commitment.
8. **Thanks:** Advocates thank decision-makers for considering the issue and for their service to the larger community. When appropriate, advocates offer genuine praise for a job well done.
9. **Signature:** Advocates sign when writing a personal communication. If a group of people or a board collectively write the communication, then the chair or the designated leader provides the signature.
10. **Contact Information:** Advocates list their contact information, including their name, address, telephone number, and email address. This information increases the chance that a lost communication will be returned or redirected to the appropriate destination.

Contact information also makes it easier for decision-makers to respond to the communication.

References

The information in this handout is a synthesis of ideas published in the following documents.

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Sample Letter

Dear Representative Washington,

My name is Valerie Voter, and I am a constituent in your district. I have taught fifth graders at Forest Park Elementary School in Exemplary Independent School District for the past 10 years. I am advocating today as a private citizen.

I am writing in support of H.B. 21 “Finance for Tomorrow’s Schools,” the school finance bill that is making its way through the State House of Representatives. The bill provides \$1.5 billion to public schools and simplifies some of the complex ways that money is allocated to school districts across the state.

My school does an excellent job teaching the children in our community; however, our class sizes have increased steadily over the years. Ten years ago when I started teaching at my school, I had 15 students in my class. Currently, I have 30 children. When teachers retire or leave the district, new teachers are not hired to replace them. A child in my class came to me the other day after school and asked for help with his math homework. I was able to work with him for only a few minutes because I needed to direct my attention to the other children who needed assistance. I remember a few years ago when I had smaller classes and more time to give to each student during the regular school day.

Here is a link to a website maintained by the State Education Agency that shows the increase in the class sizes over the past 15 years and the effects of these increases on student learning [insert webpage link here].

I ask you to vote in favor of H.B. 21 to increase the amount of funds available to schools so that my district can hire more teachers and reduce class sizes. Your vote in favor of this bill will be a sign of support for teachers and children in our state.

Thank you for the good work you are doing as my State Representative. If you have questions, please contact me, and I shall be happy to talk with you.

Sincerely,
[Valerie Voter's signature here]

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