

**Objectives**

1. Become actively involved in an environmental issue or problem.
2. Become informed about an environmental issue or problem and convey your opinion in a letter to an elected official.

*Safety considerations:* There are no safety considerations for this exercise.

**Introduction**

It is important in a democracy that citizens help keep legislators informed. This is especially true with regard to environmental issues. In order to be true representatives of the people, legislators need to know what their constituents think. As a citizen, you can help obtain good legislation on state and national levels by communicating with your elected representatives at the proper time. Too many people never have any contact with those who represent them in government, whose vote will determine the quality of the air or water. At any given time there is debate at both local and national levels on environmental issues whose outcome will affect you. In this exercise you will have the opportunity to influence the outcome of the debate.

**Procedures**

During the exercise you will do the following:

1. Research an environmental issue. The issue may be either local or national in scope. It is important, however, that you determine where the issue will be resolved (e.g., the state capitol or the U.S. House of Representatives).
2. Compose and send a letter to an elected official who is involved in the debate. For political reasons, the official should be the one who represents you; however, you may also wish to write to one who does not represent you.

**Directions**

In drafting your letter it will be helpful if you follow the steps outlined. A personal letter is usually the most effective way of contacting your legislator, whether at the local or national level.

1. Address it properly: know your legislator's full name and its correct spelling. For specific addresses see individual lists. Examples:

<i>U.S. Senator</i> The Honorable (full name) United States Senator Address *** Dear Senator (last name):	<i>U.S. Representative</i> The Honorable (full name) United States Representative Address *** Dear Congressman/woman (last name):
<i>State Senator</i> The Honorable (full name) State Senator State Capitol (Your State Capitol) *** Dear Senator (last name):	<i>State Representative</i> The Honorable (full name) State Representative State Capitol (Your State Capitol) *** Dear Representative (last name):

2. *Always include your name and address on the letter itself (printed or typed).* A letter cannot be answered if there is no return address or the signature is not legible.
3. *Use your own words.* Avoid form letters and petitions. They tend to be identified as organized pressure campaigns and are often answered with form replies. However, a petition does let the legislator know that the issue is of concern to a large number of people (addresses with zip codes should be given for each signature). One thoughtful, factual, well-reasoned letter carries more weight than 100 form letters or printed postcards.
4. *Time for the arrival of the letter.* Try to write to your legislator, and the chairperson of the committee dealing with a bill, while a bill is in committee and there is still time to take effective action. Sometimes a bill is out of committee, or has been passed, before a helpful, informative letter arrives that could have made a difference in the way the bill was written or in the final decision.

5. *Know what you are writing about.* Identify the bill or issue of concern to you. Thousands of bills and resolutions are introduced in each session. If you write about a bill, try to give the bill number or describe it by popular title, such as "Land-Use Bill" or "Air Pollution Control Bill."
6. *Be reasonably brief.* Many issues are complex, but a single page presenting your opinions, facts, arguments, or proposals as clearly as possible is preferred and welcomed by most legislators.
7. *Give reasons for your position.* Explain how the issue would affect you, your family, your business or profession, the community, or your state. If you have specialized knowledge, *share it with your legislator.* Concrete, expert arguments for or against a bill can be used by the legislator in determining the final outcome of a bill.
8. *Be constructive.* If a bill deals with a problem you admit exists but you believe the bill is the wrong approach, explain what you believe to be the right approach.
9. *Groups and individuals should determine their priority concerns* and contact the legislator on those specific issues rather than on every issue. The "pen pal" who writes every few days on every conceivable subject tends to become a nuisance rather than an effective voice of concern.
10. *You may not always receive a long, detailed response* to your letter. Legislators are very busy and usually cannot respond with long, personal replies to each correspondent.
11. *Write a letter of appreciation* when you feel a legislator has done a good job. Legislators are human, too, and seldom receive "thank you" letters of encouragement.

Remember, on any one issue, even a few letters to one legislator can have an important impact. Sometimes a single letter from a new perspective or with a clear-cut, persuasive argument can be the decisive factor in a legislator's action.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Section \_\_\_\_\_

## Influencing Public Officials Data Sheet

1. As a class project, identify a local environmental issue early in the semester or term and follow the actions of environmental groups addressing that issue. What strategies and tactics are used, and with what effects?
2. What means other than letter writing do you feel would be effective in influencing elected officials?
3. Describe the different ways in which you could participate in politics. Why do you think people are or are not participants? What factors do you feel influence participation or lack of participation in the political system?