Lessons

Subject:
Writing a letter to elected officials

Goal:
For students to write letters to elected officials

Objectives:
The students will be able to:

• recall the origins of the first amendment right to petition government
• identify issues of concern at the local, state, or national level
• consider possible solutions to issues at the local, state, or national level
• advocate specific policies to address issues that have been identified
• identify appropriate decision makers to petition at the local, state, or national level
• develop reasoned arguments to support policy recommendations
• present viewpoints in writing to elected officials
• recognize the advantages and disadvantages of using letters to elected officials as a means of influencing public policy
• consider additional ways to influence policy and opinions
• develop skills for acquiring and using information
• develop skills for promoting interests

Materials:
Copies of “How to Write a Letter to an Elected Official.” and “Tips for Persuasive Writing.”

Procedure:

1. Ask students to list the five fundamental freedoms protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Students should identify: Religion, Speech, Press, Assembly, and Petition.

2. Display the text of the First Amendment in front of the class with the following passages underlined or highlighted: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”
3. Explain to students that the class will be focusing on the right to petition. Have students read the underlined sections of the First Amendment. Make sure that students understand the terms “redress” and “grievances.” Ask students to describe the right to petition in their own words.

4. Explain to students that the right to petition government for a redress of grievances was considered by the founders to be an essential right in a democracy. The right originated in 1215 with the Magna Carta as a right of nobles to petition the king. The 1689 Declaration of Rights extended the right of petition to all subjects of the king. In the Declaration of Independence, the colonists complained that King George III and Parliament had ignored their petitions. When the Bill of Rights was drafted, petition was listed alongside freedom of religion, press, speech, and assembly, clearly reflecting the importance that Congress placed on this right.

5. When we hear the word, “petition,” the most common definition that comes to mind is a list of signatures that people gather in support of a particular cause. These petitions are usually delivered to government officials or other decision makers to demonstrate that a particular idea has the support of many people. The right of petition actually protects a wide range of political activities. Ask students to think broadly about different ways that people in a democracy can ask their government to solve a problem. Answers might include: bringing a case to court, lobbying elected officials, writing letters to elected officials, and organizing or participating in demonstrations and protests. Ask students if they have ever engaged in these activities.

6. Explain to students that they will be practicing their right to petition by writing letters to an elected official. Ask students to brainstorm a list of problems that they are concerned about. If necessary, or if time permits, have students follow local and national news for several days or weeks to identify problems.

7. Once the class has developed a list of problems, ask each student to select the problem that is most important to him or her.

8. Have students conduct research about the problems they have selected. Basic questions that students should be able to answer include: What impact does this problem have on the community or the country? What is currently being done to address this problem? Are there existing laws or policies that need to be changed? Are there bills or proposals currently under consideration to fix the problem?

9. After conducting research, students should be able to develop a specific proposal. In other words, what exactly do they think the government should do about the problem they have identified? (Reminder: Private efforts by citizens to address problems are an important part of civil society, but for the purposes of this exercise, students should focus on identifying things that government can or should do to address the problem.)

10. Students must now identify the elected official who has the greatest influence over their particular issue. Ask students to categorize their problem as primarily a local, state, or national issue. If necessary, review the concept of federalism, and identify the responsibilities of the local, state, and national governments. Students can visit the following Web site to identify their elected officials at all levels simply by entering their zip code: http://www.congress.org. Students should pick the official who they think will be able to take action on this issue.

11. Distribute copies of “How to Write a Letter to an Elected Official” and “Tips for Persuasive Writing.” Review some of the pointers and then ask students to draft a letter to the elected official they have selected. If necessary, review proper formatting for a formal letter or provide students with a template.
12. After all students have drafted their letters, have students exchange letters. Ask students to read their peer’s letter as though they were the elected official to whom the letter is addressed. Ask them to evaluate the letter and offer constructive criticism: Is the letter clearly written? Do they understand what the author is asking for? Do they find the author’s arguments convincing? Don’t forget to look for spelling and grammatical mistakes!

13. After all changes and corrections have been made, send the letters to the elected officials.

Review and Evaluation:

1. Ask students if they feel that letter writing is an effective way to participate in a democracy. Do they think that their letters will influence the people who read them? How much weight do they think elected officials give to written correspondence? (Members of Congress get thousands of letters, so they may not read every single letter they receive, but they do get summaries of what their constituents are writing about.)

2. Letter writing to elected officials is just one way that citizens can influence decisions. Ideally, letter writing is a part of a coordinated effort to spur government to take action. Democratic governments are supposed to be responsive to the people, but sometimes they move very slowly. This can be frustrating, but it is important to never give up. Even if you manage to convince one elected official, you may need to convince other people and other elected officials to support your proposal. What are some ways that citizens can do this?

3. Point out that students can also exercise other First Amendment rights. They can write letters to their local newspapers and television stations about the issue to get media attention; they can organize a protest or demonstration; or they can hold a rally and invite people to give speeches about the issue.

4. Ultimately, if students find that an elected official is unresponsive to their concerns, they can work to remove the official from office. That is what democracy is all about! Once again, students have a range of options: they can vote for another candidate, volunteer on an election campaign, or even run for office themselves.
How to Write a Letter to an Elected Official

Writing a letter to an elected official is an important way for citizens to communicate with their government. Remember, your representatives work for you. It is their job to represent your interests. But they won’t know how you want them to act unless you tell them. Here are a few simple guidelines to keep in mind when writing a letter to an elected official.

• Make sure that the official you are writing to is in a position to do something about your concern. For example, do not write a letter to your U.S. senator about the pothole in front of your house!

• Start by introducing yourself, and remember that elected officials care the most about what their constituents think.

• Be brief and to the point. State your concern, offer your proposed solution, and then offer two or three arguments to support your position.

• Know your facts. If there is a particular proposal that is being considered, be sure to address it by its bill number or name. If you want your representative to vote for or against a specific bill, make that clear.

• Be polite. Your representative works for you, but nobody likes to be bossed around. Always offer constructive criticism.

• Make sure you use the proper title and salutation. Letters to members of the United States Congress should be addressed as follows:

To a Senator:
The Honorable (full name) (Rm. #) (name of) Senate Office Building United States Senate Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator (last name):

To a Representative:
The Honorable (full name) (Rm. #) (name of) House Office Building United States House of Representatives Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative (last name):

You can find contact information for all of your elected officials simply by entering your zip code on the following Web site: http://www.congress.org.

• Be sure to include your return address so that your elected official can respond to your comments and concerns.

• After writing your letter, try to convince other people to send letters as well. There is strength in numbers, especially in a democracy! If an elected official gets a lot of letters about the same issue, then he or she is more likely to act.
Tips for Persuasive Writing

Writing persuasively is a valuable skill that takes practice. Regardless of whether you are writing an essay for English class, a letter to your Senator, or a letter to the editor, the following tips will help you to organize your thoughts and ideas.

- Your piece should express your point of view and back it up with a series of supporting arguments. Your main idea or thesis should be clearly stated at the very beginning.

- One useful strategy is to acknowledge and refute your opposition’s viewpoints. But be careful not to criticize without offering alternative ideas or suggestions.

- Base your appeal on reason, shared values, or emotion.
  Reasoned arguments rely primarily on facts and logic. If you can persuade your audience that you have reliable information through research or direct experience, you can lead them through a series of logical arguments to reach the same conclusion that you have reached.
  Arguments based on shared values rely on finding common ground with your audience. Convince them that you share their goals. Then, show that your way is the best way to achieve these goals.
  Arguments that rely on emotion attempt to influence people by evoking their sympathetic feelings. Anecdotes about personal experiences are often an effective way to help someone see things from a different perspective.

- Decide upon a strategy, and then make a list of your most persuasive facts, ideas, or experiences. Choose two or three of your most convincing arguments for your piece and prioritize them. Conclude with your most powerful argument.

- Always keep your audience in mind. Who are you trying to convince? Which arguments will they find most persuasive?