

A graphic of a spiral-bound notebook cover with the word "Notebook" written diagonally across it.







Notebook

Resources for the Adult Educator

A Membership Publication of ProLiteracy

FALL 2017

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ProLiteracy

Writing a Letter to Your Lawmakers

Purpose

To guide students through the process of writing a letter to their local senator or member of the House of Representatives.

Rationale

It's more important than ever that students stay involved in the civics process and make their opinion heard. Earlier this year ProLiteracy sponsored a Letters for Literacy campaign to speak out against cuts to adult education spending in the proposed fiscal 2018 budget (see sidebar; by the time this issue is published, the budget may already be set). Students can choose an issue of importance to them and write a letter to voice their opinions to a local lawmaker. This activity is appropriate for any motivated adult class that may not be familiar with writing a letter to local lawmakers. Within the ESOL setting, it is best suited for intermediate or advanced classes.

This activity would fit in well with a class focused on EL/civics, although it could also be an interesting lesson for any class.

The Basic Activity

1. **Think about an issue that's important to your class.** It could be at a national or local level. To help decide on a topic, consider what students have discussed as important to them. The topic you write about will flow more naturally if it is something important to students. At this point, you can decide if the class will collectively decide on a focus for letter writing or if you will choose a topic that you think is of interest to everyone for the letters.
2. **Ask students how to let a local lawmaker know their opinion on a specific issue.** Brainstorm ideas, but focus on writing a letter that can be emailed or sent via regular mail.
3. **Let students know that a good letter to a local lawmaker usually follows a specific style.** Be ready to show students a copy of the letter on page 11 of this issue. Point out the different parts of the letter, including their own address, the representative's address, and the body paragraphs. Point out that the first paragraph talks about why they are contacting the representative. The second and third paragraphs provide more details. The letter ends with a signature. You can point out that this sample letter is to a representative from Congress, but you may also write to other lawmakers, including your state's U.S. senators.



Writing

More Information

Letters for Literacy

Earlier this year, ProLiteracy sponsored a Letters for Literacy campaign, which encouraged students and tutors to write to their local representatives to support continued funding for adult literacy programs.

The campaign included information on proposed cuts to adult education, letter templates for both students and tutors/volunteers, a link to find the local representative's name and contact information, and a link to facts about adult literacy. The campaign also encouraged programs to share their letters via social media using the phrase #LettersforLiteracy. Although the campaign was focused on the budget, the following links may still have useful information to teach about writing to a local lawmaker.

Letters for Literacy General Link

<https://www.proliteracy.org/Letters-for-Literacy>

Make sure to read the information at the bottom of this page about the seven impacts of low adult basic skills.

Letter template links

<https://www.proliteracy.org/Get-Involved/Letters-for-Literacy/Letter-Templates>

Adult literacy facts

<http://tinyurl.com/yczoh6vj>

More Information

The following links provide more ideas and tips for writing letters to lawmakers

Writing to Your Legislators

<http://www.nea.org/home/19657.htm>

This link from the National Education Association shares some helpful tips. The reading may be too difficult for some classes, but you as the instructor can keep the tips in mind when helping students create their letters.

Sample Letter

<http://www.niacrc.org/modules/showdocument.aspx?documentid=272>

This shows a sample letter to send to a legislator. It's shared by the North Los Angeles County Regional Center.

Effective Communication With a Legislator

<https://www.flsenate.gov/About/EffectiveCommunication>

The Florida Senate shares helpful suggestions for letter writing that can apply to anyone in any state.

Refugee Children Write Letters to Local Lawmakers

<http://tinyurl.com/y8unyv7b>

This February story from Salt Lake City, Utah, tells how some refugee children wrote letters to local lawmakers to speak out about immigration and family separation. The short story and two-minute related video could be effective to show to your class. The students in the story/video are in their teens.

4. **Discuss with students what to focus on in your their letters.** Ideally, you will have some idea of the topic before your class reaches this point.
5. **Show students how to find the name of a local congressperson.** For example, if you are writing a letter to your local representative in the House of Representatives, you can use the website <http://www.house.gov/htbin/findrep> and search that person's name by your zip code. A full list of senators, and their contact information, is available at <https://www.senate.gov/senators/contact/>. You can remind students that each state has two senators and that states have various representatives, but there is always one specific to your local area.

If the topic of your letter is even more local, you may want to research who the right person in local government is and their contact information.

You'll want to decide ahead of time if you plan to send a letter to this person by mail or email.

5. **Work with students to create their letter.** Depending on your class level, you may want to help them create a generic letter where they sign their name or add one or two original sentences toward the end. Use the letter on page 11 as a model. Write the generic letter together as a class on the board or typed up and projected onto a screen. At this point students don't have to do anything except help you create the letter text. However, some students may start to copy what you write.
6. **Work with students to type their letters.** Decide if you will email the letters or print and mail them. If you use email, prepare to guide students through the standardized email form that many lawmakers' websites use.



SAMPLE LETTER

Jane Perez
Adult Day School
6522 Learning Way
Rockville, California 94225

Sept. 20, 2017

The Honorable Jim Miller
U.S. House of Representatives
1620 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Rep. Miller:

As a student of an adult literacy program, I am writing to you today to ask for your support for adult literacy and students like myself across the country who want to gain basic skills and live improved, more fulfilling lives.

Research shows that 36 million adults, or 1 in 6, have low literacy skills. Lower-skilled adults are more likely to be unemployed or out of the labor force than they are to be employed. Children of parents with lower literacy levels start school at a disadvantage. This inequality can continue well into a child's education, and into the later years of their lives.

I am in an adult education class right now, and it has helped me improve my life. I am finding a better job, and I could not do that without the right classes.

Thank you for your time and considering my request for your support.

Sincerely,

Jane Perez

Jane Perez