

Student Advocacy and Activism Assignment  
Compiled by Holly Riley, University of Montana, Fall 2022

There is no question that we live in a society that, in a wholly unprecedented way, moves at a pace that is impossible to keep up with. Look at a calendar or journal from the past few years and think about all the social or political issues you felt passionate about. The sheer volume of cultural crises that happen in our society can lead to things like information overload and executive function shutdown. Problems can seem so big or so volatile that they take up most of our energy with simply *processing*, and it's hard to get to the point of *doing* anything.

This assignment/exercise guides you through the steps of writing a letter to a legislator about a specific issue or action. This is one act of many that you can make a part of your ongoing advocacy practice and community engagement. It's also an act that is sometimes difficult to do for the first time, but gets significantly easier the more you do it!

If you don't plan on going into academia or a research-related field, the research assignments for this course may sometimes feel irrelevant to the rest of your life or career. This activity is one way to take the skills you've learned in this course (finding sources, writing quickly and effectively, synthesizing information) and apply them in a way that (hopefully) benefits your values and community, whatever that looks like for you.

Additional Considerations

Smaller = more effective. When writing letters to legislators, consider the number of constituents each legislator serves versus the impact they may have on policy. For example, you can (and should, if you want to!) write letters to your Supreme Court Justices; however, this is an appointed group of nine people that serves over 300 million Americans. Alternately, there are 50 state senators in Montana, elected by and representing a population of just over a million people.

*Time* is a way to make reparations, to advocate, and to donate resources when you don't have any money. The cry comes out to "donate!" when sociopolitical crisis happens, but that's often inaccessible to many college students who have inconsistent, unstable, or limited income. What you *do* have, in many cases, is time. There are causes that need money, and there are causes that need time; most need both. Don't underestimate the value of your time, and give it when you can.

A few categories of social issues to consider when you're determining what to write about:

Climate Change	Housing Security
Disability, Equity, and Access	Food Security
Racial Equity	LGBTQ+ Rights
Education	Public and Reproductive Health

Montana Legislator Roster (contains emails, phone numbers, and addresses):

<https://leg.mt.gov/legislator-information/>

## Assignment Guidelines

For this assignment, you will use the below template and resources to write a letter to a local, regional, or national legislator about an issue you care about. You can use some of the sample text below to help structure your letter, but you should use your own words whenever possible and customize it to your own tone and experiences.

It should be clear in your letter what the issue is, as well as what you are specifically asking the legislator to *do*. You may wish to run this by me during class time when we are working on this project.

Prior to class on \_\_\_\_\_, you should read the below assignment and instructions in its entirety and begin thinking about potential causes, actions, and legislators that could be a good fit for a letter. We will spend approximately 30 minutes in class on \_\_\_\_\_ working on your letters and going over resources for how to find additional information you might need. Your completed letter is due via Moodle on \_\_\_\_\_; you can either upload the digital letter, or a photo of the handwritten one, if you choose to go that route.

\*Note that I am not requiring proof of having *sent* this letter for full assignment credit, though I certainly encourage you to do so!

This framework lends much credit to the APA's sample email, which can be found [here](#).

### Part 1: Opening Material

Generally, you should open your letter with "Dear" followed by the legislator's full name and/or title, and then leave a space (line break) between the opening and your first sentence.

"Dear Senator \_\_\_\_\_,"

"As a university student who uses [X resources],

"As a member of the LGBTQ+ community,

"As a university student at [institution] pursuing [degree(s)],

"As an indigenous/Black/Latinx/AAPI/BIPOC student at [institution],

"As a student and community member in [region/city] who cares deeply about [cause],

I am writing to urge you to [support/oppose] the \_\_\_\_ [insert piece of legislation here].'

Occasionally, this might not be a piece of legislation, but instead could be an issue of funding, endorsing a specific candidate, or something else. The most important thing is a *specific* call to action! So, for example, if you care about climate change, you wouldn't want to write something like "I am writing to urge you to support climate change initiatives"—that's too general—but instead write "I am writing to ask you to vote for/support the \_\_\_\_ [SPECIFIC bill or fund]."

## Part 2: Information about the piece of legislation and its impacts

This [bill/act/piece of legislation]...

“would directly harm [community/group of people/animal population/environmental resource] by \_\_\_\_\_”

“would prevent \_\_\_\_\_ from accessing [resource]”

“would benefit \_\_\_\_\_ by providing access to \_\_\_\_\_”

“is [important/critical] to [ensure/protect] the [health/safety/equity/etc.] of [group/population]”

“strengthens the goals of \_\_\_\_\_ by [doing X]”

“is in direct opposition to [a previously stated campaign platform of the legislator or their party]”

You can write multiple sentences in this section, but no need to go on for paragraphs.

## Part 3: Personal stories (optional, but useful) and data

If you have a personal connection to the cause, or an especially moving story to share (and are comfortable doing so), this is the place to do it! These make your letter to be more likely to be read by the legislator.

Examples of topics you could talk about include:

- Ways specific resources have benefited you as a student or community member
- Stories of how family, friends, or yourself have struggled due to legislation surrounding this issue
- If the legislation relates to environment, you can talk about how you have watched the climate of the region change/how it has impacted your life
- How this legislation personally impacts, will impact, or has impacted your health and safety

This is also a place where you can share data related to your issue. This is where your skills as a scholar/researcher are important! Opt for peer-reviewed sources and studies, similar to what you would use for an academic paper. Anything from a government website (.gov) may also be particularly useful in making a case to a legislator.

If you're writing an email or other electronic letter, you may be able to link sources directly into the text—in Word or Google docs, highlight your text and press ctrl+k (PC) or command+k (Mac) to embed a link. Some online submission forms do not allow this, so be sure to double-check.

If you're writing a handwritten letter or can't directly link sources, you can also use the in-text citation style you're most familiar with, and/or simply give the article information in your writing.

This could look like this (with or without the link):

“A [recent dataset compiled by the Missoula Organization of Realtors](#) shows that our city’s housing affordability has decreased significantly in the past three years and only 48 new affordable housing units were built between 2020-2021.”

Or this:

“A recent dataset (Missoula Organization of Realtors, 2022) shows that our city’s housing affordability has decreased significantly in the past three years and only 48 new affordable housing units were built between 2020-2021.”

Data like this is great to pair with personal stories and your own “lived experience” data. For example:

“A [recent dataset compiled by the Missoula Organization of Realtors](#) shows that our city’s housing affordability has decreased significantly in the past three years and only 48 new affordable housing units were built between 2020-2021. As a fourth-year college student in Missoula, I have personally experienced these housing difficulties: my rent increased by over 100% (from \$400 in 2018 to \$895 today for a shared house near campus) and I have had to take on multiple jobs while being a full-time student just to afford to live here. Several of my friends have had to drop out of school or move to part-time so that they could work enough to afford their housing.”

#### Part 4: Closing and Formatting

This can be short and sweet. Some examples:

“Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.”

[\(Source\)](#)

“Thank you for your consideration, and please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss this issue further.” [\(Source\)](#)

“I ask you to support (bill name) to improve the provision of health care to the citizens of (state/jurisdiction). Please contact me with any additional questions you may have.”

[\(Source\)](#)

“Please let me know if you or your staff would like any additional information on this important legislation, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.” [\(Source\)](#)

You can close with “Sincerely”, “Respectfully Yours”, “Thank You”, or anything similar, followed by your name and (optional) title.

Double-check your letter for any grammar or spelling errors, and make sure you’ve included the date, your name, and (ideally) your local address and other contact information. You may receive a response from the legislator’s office sent to any of the contact addresses you include, so be sure to consider that when listing a shared residential address.

## Part 5: Send it, time it, schedule it!

Once you've identified your cause and legislator and written your letter, sending it is (often) the quickest and simplest step! Google "[legislator name]" + "contact" and you should be able to quickly find an email address, physical address, or submission form where you can submit your letter.

If you're feeling resistance or apprehension about pressing "send" (I do all the time!), consider "body doubling" (asking a friend to do it with you or just be in the room) or using the "schedule send" function in Outlook so that it actually goes out later.

Once you've gotten through every part of the process, take a moment to try to gauge how long this all actually took you. 30 minutes? An hour? Three hours? Much like writing a literature review, annotating a bibliography, or any other new-but-mentally-difficult task we learn, this is something that gets *much* faster the more you do it. If you have it in you, repeat this process again sometime soon and time yourself!

Consider the impacts if every college student wrote a letter to a legislator twice a month. Consider whether this fits into your values and is something you'd like to make a regular practice. If it does, take a look at your calendar for the next few months and block off a time to do this again. Perhaps this is an activity/practice that feels really valuable to you, or maybe it doesn't. Either way, making it through this exercise is a good way to dip your toe into the waters of a certain type of advocacy and consider the ways it could be a part of your life in the long term.