

# Effective Letter-Writing

**So you're upset with the government's record on protecting woodlands. Or maybe they've just caved in again to yet another sprawling development proposal. You want to do something to help change their ways, but the enormity of the task makes success look hopeless. What can you do?**

One of the most effective weapons, readily available and proven by the test of time, is a letter to the politician most responsible (the mayor and council at the municipal level, the chair/warden at the regional/county level, and the minister at the provincial/federal levels). Such letter-writing can become a fine art and a valuable advocacy tool, but many of us are unsure how to begin.

Do letters really work? Yes! If politicians receive dozens of letters on one side of an issue, they have a measure of residents' opinions and a basis for appropriate action. Often you may want to write to a politician as part of an organized campaign, to demonstrate the strength of numbers holding your view.

Educate yourself and your group members as much as possible about the issue, but do not let yourself be intimidated into keeping quiet. After all, an activist's job is to speak out! If you feel strongly that wildlife habitat should be preserved or that air quality needs to be improved, feel free to make your voice heard. The most important role of politicians is to set government goals, decide on their priorities, and then instruct, cajole, pester and bully the bureaucracy into accomplishing them. To do that, they often need your help for direction and moral support (and less frequently, for technical expertise). If you are uncertain about the technical issues, ask leading questions instead of making statements. In any case, be sure to include questions so that the recipient will have to respond.

Although the contents may vary according to the situation, in general your letters should be relatively short, forceful and to the point. Be as specific as possible without being tedious, and if you have the talent to be witty, a little humour never hurts.

Some other tips include the following:

- Try linking your particular cause to other government actions, policy statements, etc.
- Local examples are particularly effective ("Old Uncle Walt's farm would not have been sold to developers if only we had had this legislation in place").

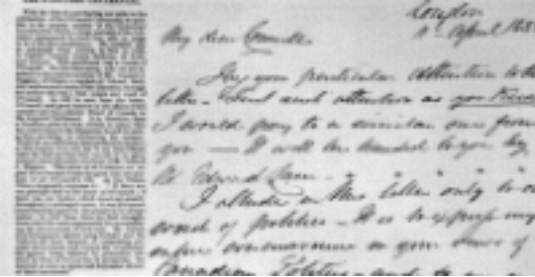


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- Be specific about what you want done. If you are unsure about exactly what action is needed, you could ask what options the official has examined to deal with this problem and what the advantages and disadvantages are to each one.
- Be prepared to wait at least a few weeks, and in some cases months, for a response.
- Be prepared to write a follow-up letter. Most responses are of three varieties – affirmative, agreeing with your stance (seldom); zero, ignoring all your questions and





saying absolutely nothing (tried fairly frequently); and baffle-gab, swamping you with technical details and excuses (would probably be tried more often, but too much work).

- For your follow-up letter, go back to your original letter, and pull out all the questions that were not answered. Point out any inconsistencies between information in the response and other sources of information you may have. Also point out any inconsistencies that may arise in the reply letter itself. Refute their arguments where possible and point out the desirability of your goals.
- Be prepared to write a second and even third follow-up letter! The second reply you receive likely won't satisfy you

either. Persistence often pays off, so consider this just the starting formality. Take the opportunity to point out some of the weak arguments that politicians make when they are not paying close attention. Or restate your questions in a different way if they still have not been addressed.

- Copy your letters to other interested parties. Send copies to the leaders or relevant critics of the provincial opposition parties – it keeps them informed and provides them with ammunition to pursue your issue in the Legislature. If you are dealing with an issue of local interest, copy your letter to the local media. And if you are dealing with an issue of interest to a conservation group, send a copy to them as well.
- Always apply the three R's: Be Right, Reasonable and Repetitive.

This fact sheet was excerpted from Ontario Nature's book *A Smart Future for Ontario: How to Create Greenways and Curb Urban Sprawl in Your Community*, by Linda Pim and Joel Ormoy. Copies of *A Smart Future* can be ordered from Ontario Nature or downloaded for free at [www.ontarionature.org](http://www.ontarionature.org).

Ontario Nature protects and restores nature through research, education and conservation action. Ontario Nature champions woodlands, wetlands and wildlife, and preserves essential habitat through its own system of nature reserves. It is a charitable organization representing 25,000 members and over 140 member groups across the province, connecting individuals and communities to nature.

If you wish to support Ontario Nature or learn more about current conservation issues in Ontario visit: [www.ontarionature.org](http://www.ontarionature.org)



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