



# Advocacy 101: Tools for Political Engagement

## Overview:

Many of us are concerned citizens with at least one or two good suggestions for elected representatives or those in positions of authority. This workshop introduces some basic and always useful strategies for advocacy. It presents knowledge aimed at enhancing individuals' abilities to advocate for an issue to a policy maker or elected official. These practices are linked to the larger development of active, informed citizenship. In this workshop, participants have the opportunity to engage in group activity learning and practice a form of advocacy on a given topic. These activities also promote communication skills, such as those required to convey viewpoints.

## Category:

Advocacy; citizenship; democracy building; leadership skills, communication skills

## Level:

Suitable for all levels (introductory to advanced)

## Recommended Bonner Sequence:

This activity is excellent to reinforce students' exposure to various strategies for effective civic engagement and citizen involvement. It introduces advocacy as a strategy and skill set that can be learned and applied. Many campuses in the Bonner Program have made advocacy and activism a focus for sophomore or junior year.

expectation	explore	experience	example	expertise

VALUES: social justice, civic engagement

## Type:

Structured activity suitable for workshop (e.g. retreat or training). Activities could be modified for integration into regular meetings and programming.

## Focus or Goals of this Guide:

- Guide people to share ideas and opinions in a way that may be well received by people in positions of authority and organize thoughts and arguments in such a way that are useful to elected officials.
- Provide help with forming and executing organized strategies for change at the political level.
- Provide participants with an opportunity to practice skills and strategies related to advocacy in a simulated setting.

## Materials:

- Pen
- Blank lined paper
- Space that allows small groups to break out for activities

## How to Prepare:

In this activity, you will find role-plays that will help to explain how to effectively write, call, and meet with your representative. Review the examples and/or prepare three potentially controversial issues that will be assigned to each of three groups. Examples could be war, abortion, gun control, or treatment of sweatshop laborers, and so on.

We suggest that you find space where the people in your training can spread out into three groups and discuss their topic, but also enough space to for the group to meet as a whole. Make sure you have enough time so that each group can talk over the issues and how they will present them.

Prepare handouts for each group (and all participants) that give tips for their specific mode of communication. After the activity, you will meet again as a large group, so prepare for a discussion of the different modes of sharing concerns and be ready to write key points of what did or didn't work on a flip chart.

## How to Do/Brief Outline:

The basic summary of this session is a brief introductory activity followed by small group work with scenarios, then presentations and discussion.

The outline has the following parts:

- |                                  |                           |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1) Brainstorm session            | suggested time 15 minutes |
| 2) Introduce the activity        | suggested time 10 minutes |
| 3) Discussion of assigned topics | suggested time 20 minutes |
| 4) Presentations                 | suggested time 40 minutes |
| 5) Large discussion              | suggested time 20 minutes |

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## **Part 1) Brainstorming Session**

Suggested time: 15 minutes

In the large group, ask everyone to think about what advocacy is and invite participants to call out one-by-one their viewpoints. Then have people brainstorm 1) what it means to be a concerned citizen and 2) why they think our “decision-makers” listen. Discuss people’s thoughts.

Here are some helpful thoughts for guiding comments:

- Advocacy is a way in which we influence our decision-makers about something we strongly believe in.
- Our leaders listen because:
  - Our nation is built by the people, for the people
  - Our politicians are elected by registered voters like us
  - The people we elect represent us and our interests

Draw out the connection between citizen participation, including through advocacy, and the principles of democracy.

## **Part 2) Introduce the Activity**

Suggested time: 10 minutes

Give an overview of the rest of the workshop and instructions of what happens next.

Explain that the group is going to break into small groups (3 people is good, but you can vary by size if necessary; keep the small groups between 4-8 people). Assign each group a position on three topics.

For example, state: “Group one will be advocating for a bill that will provide for school vouchers.” Ask them not to change or discuss whether the position is right or not. The more controversial, the more people will see what they will be up against in reality. (Be aware that certain topics may cause an emotional reaction, such as anger or sadness. Explain why it is important to be controversial and that this activity does not need to reflect their actual positions. Also make sure you set some good ground rules for communication with the group.)

After the above is done, explain that you want the three groups to take their topic and figure out how best to advocate for their issue. To help them, each group will be provided with a handout of suggested tips and tools for that mode. One group will prepare a letter

campaign, one will prepare a phone campaign and the third group will organize a meeting with the representative. Hand out copies of the tips for each group. Tell them that they will be preparing a presentation to show the whole group and ask how and why they used the tips (or did not use the tips).

- The letter writing campaign group should talk over how to present their issue and then write a sample letter.
- The phone campaign group should figure out how to coordinate and execute a useful operation. They should assign coordinators and callers and create a sample script or notes.
- The group preparing to meet the congressperson should write down sample notes of what their plan is, their key arguments and how many would attend the meeting. They should be prepared to talk about how they'd go about getting an appointment and what they would say when they actually got in the office.

Handouts with extensive tips for each activity are located at the end of the training.

### **Part 3) Discussion of Assigned Topics**

Suggested time: 20 minutes

Break everyone into three assigned groups. Let them talk over how to prepare and present their issue.

As the facilitator, make yourself available to assist with any questions and make sure the groups are on track. Go around and check in, but be careful not to do the work for participants. Still, add helpful hints when needed.

### **Part 4) Presentation**

Suggested time: 40 minutes

Each group will present their sample material and/or presentation and explain how and why they came to their plan. Have participants also explain how they used the tips handouts. Every group should have a spokesperson that will do most of the presenting, though others are free to join in. Ask everyone to be specific and to read the sampled material. Let everyone share and discuss with the whole group. If things do get emotional and disagreements erupt, don't get anxious. Respectfully put people back on track.

### **Part 5) Large Discussion**

Suggested time: 20 minutes

When all is done bring everyone back together. Debrief. Have people call out what did or did not work for each group. Write down each on a flip chart and try to give each a little attention, maybe by asking, "why do you think it didn't work" or "what made you feel good about your argument?" This is a great chance for everyone to make suggestions comfortably.

**Wrap up:**

Bring everything to a close and figure out how you want participants to end the workshop. Share any particularly important suggestions.

# Letter Writing Campaign: Tips for Best Results

Truth be told, you only need a pen and paper to be an effective advocate. Seems too easy, but Congressional staff members will tell you, 10-20 handwritten letters can draw attention to an issue otherwise overlooked or ignored. Just imagine what another 10-20, or 1,000 or 2,000, could do. Here are some tips to help you with your letters:

- Always start with the proper title: Honorable or Representative/Senator.
- Begin your letter by thanking him/her for a recent speech or vote that you found effective or inspiring.
- Make sure your letter is timed well. For example, you don't want to ask a Representative to make a change to a current bill when it is about to be voted on. Make sure that there is adequate time for the representative to consider his / her options for responding to your letter.
- Be specific about the legislative proposal or the issue you are writing about and explain what you want them to do.
- Stick to one or two key issues. Too many issues will dilute your focus.
- Add a personal touch, and be sure to share concerns and personal experiences. Facts can only go so far in an argument and personality in a letter shows you really care.
- Put your address on the letter as well as on the envelope. Most congressional offices respond to mail from their districts or areas.
- Be concise without being curt, try to be as brief and courteous as you can.

When getting others to help:

- Make sure you have all the facts right.
- Write a sample letter for peers to mimic, modify and personalize.
- Have congressional office addresses handy for people to use.
- Take your campaign everywhere you go.
- If the congressperson takes your suggestion(s), write a thank you note. Maintain a connection with him / her and influence other letter writers to do the same.

## Phone Calling Campaign: Tips for Best Results

Telephone calls are fast, easy, and highly personalized ways to express your concerns. Phone campaigns can also be highly effective, and given the speed with which things move in politics, phone calls might be the best option. Many lobbyists will tell you that 10 phone calls is background noise, 30 calls are enough to raise awareness, but 100 phone calls by constituents is an emergency.

Here are some tips for making those phone calls:

- Call your congressional member at his/her office.
- Identify yourself and where you are from (school, group name, hometown, etc...)
- Ask to speak with the member of congress or the legislative aide handling the issue of concern. (If neither is available, leave a message with your name, address, and phone number)
- Keep your comments brief. Be sure to make specific requests of your representative.
- Have your argument well researched and be ready to send background information to the office.

When generating many calls to a congressperson, ask your callers to leave a message with the receptionist. Overloading the legislative aide with too many calls will be problematic when trying to build a positive relationship with the staff. Have a few callers contact the aide to let them know that there is an issue.

Here are some tips for organizing an effective phone tree network:

- Choose a main coordinator to maintain and activate the phone tree. This person will pass along the job to several key people, who will continue to pass it along.
- Make a list of current phone numbers of your callers and the offices they will be calling.
- Select a few key people to be responsible for calling up to ten people.
- Give these key people names and numbers to be called.
- Be sure to pass along a short and concise message. Since the message will go through the tree, it needs to be clear enough for everyone to write down and repeat it to the congressional office.
- Keep your phone tree current and working. After the phone tree has been activated, the last persons on the tree should call the coordinator to verify that the messages have made it through the network.

# Meeting With Your Congressperson: Tips for Best Results

Meeting face-to-face with your member of congress is one of the most effective ways to influence their opinions. Often elected officials are strongly swayed by the opinions of constituents. It also shows a sign of commitment and concern for your issue.

Here are some tips on visiting an elected representative:

- Call your representative's appointment secretary to schedule a meeting time. Tell the scheduler what topic(s) you want to cover and be sure to mention how many people you are expecting to attend the visit. Some congressional offices are small. If you're bringing a large group, the office staff may need to prepare an alternative meeting space. Small groups are okay, in many ways preferable; you do not need a crowd.
- Organize a diverse group from your congressional district to attend. Consider what may help persuade your representative. For example: invite a member of a prominent community organization or religious, racial, union, etc... group.
- You don't have to be an expert of policy, but you do have to be prepared. You should be familiar with the main points of the legislation you are addressing without engaging the congressional staff in a heated debate. Prepare main points that reflect your key positions.
- Ask for your member of congress to take a specific action. As an active citizen, you may be tempted to bring many issues into your visit, but you will be more effective if you focus on one or two main issues.
- You may meet with a legislative aide instead of your representative. This is still very good. Aides are well informed and can offer critical advice that will help shape the congressperson's position on a range of things. They are influential and can be help you with your cause.
- You may only have a few minutes with the elected official or his/her staff. Keep it short and stick to your points. If you do get more time, you can discuss additional points about the issue and hear his/her views and opinions.
- After your visit, stay in touch with the office by sending a thank-you note. This is your opportunity to build a relationship with your representative. Follow-up in a timely manner with any requested materials and information. If the official commits to take specific action, keep an eye on it.



## Sample Letter

September 7, 2003

Representative Bentsen  
US House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Honorable Bentsen,

Thank you for supporting the recent House legislation to increase the minimum wage by \$1 over two years. As you know, the debate is not over yet. In this critical time, I urge you to cosponsor the Hunger Relief Act (HR 3192) and continue to support an increase in the minimum wage of at least \$1 over the next two years.

One in ten households in the US cannot afford the food their families need. In my work at Shepherd's Table in southwest Houston, I have met many hard working families whose full time job does not make ends meet. Improvements in the Food stamp Program and a higher minimum wage would help these families make work pay and put food on their tables.

Your leadership on these issues is very important. I look forward to working with you to help end hunger in our world.

Sincerely,

Mary McCurry  
123 Stella Link  
Houston, TX 77012

## **Important Contact Information:**

Representatives  
US House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Senators  
US Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Capitol Switchboard: (202) 224-3121

President  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20500  
White House Comment Line: (202) 456-1111