

***Letter to Congress Assignment***

**Abstract**– The homework assignment is to write a letter to your two United States Senators and your congressional district Representative, about an ocean conservation issue or about the more general topic of global warming. Use the Congressional District for which you are currently registered to vote. Alternatively (or in addition) you can write to the President of the United States or other prominent leader (e.g. Cornell's President Garrett). If you are an international student, you have the choice of either writing your own government officials or else you can use the Congressional District for Ithaca to choose the two US Senators and Representative. This homework assignment is worth **50 points** toward your final class grade.

**Purpose of the Assignment**– Some of you probably chose this class because you have a goal of becoming an oceanographer. Others chose this class only because it fulfills a distribution requirement for graduation. Most of you, however, probably chose this class because you have a curiosity and affection for the ocean. In all cases, it might not be clear to you how the knowledge you gain in this class can be put to good practical use. This letter writing assignment is intended to give you a sense of purpose for learning the class material by showing you how your newfound knowledge of the ocean can bring power to your voice when expressing your opinion on matters concerning the ocean.

The knowledge you gain in this introductory oceanography class might seem small in comparison to that of a professor of oceanography, but it will far exceed the knowledge of the average person in this country! Because you will have much more knowledge about the ocean than the average person, your opinion on ocean-related topics will be valuable and certainly worthy of being heard by your Congressional Representatives.

A healthy democracy is derived from an *informed citizenry* that takes the time to learn about an issue and then voices its opinion on how things should best be done regarding the issue. I hope very much that through this letter writing assignment you will come to see that your oceanographic knowledge can, and should, be put to good practical use. I also hope, in a more general sense, that after completing this assignment you will be inspired to continue writing your congressional representatives in the future about any variety of issues you care deeply about.

I personally see this letter writing assignment as a *win-win-win* situation for all involved. You win by being shown how your knowledge empowers you. I win by being inspired when reading your letters and this encourages me to work harder to make my lectures more understandable and more persuasive. Finally, perhaps the members of Congress will actually listen to your letters and be inspired themselves to make some real changes in how this country (or another nation) deals with human impacts to the ocean.

**Details**– This is not meant to be a regular term paper that you might have done in the past where you simply recite accurate ocean facts. The letter should express your very personal views/opinions on the current (and projected) health of the ocean or on the more general topic of global climate change. You are very strongly encouraged to present your own personal views. This might mean that you advocate for increased protection of the

ocean, but it could equally mean that you advocate for a decrease in government regulations and an increase in the extraction of ocean resources to increase jobs and stimulate economic growth.

You will not be graded on the particular stance you take in the letter. You will be graded mainly on the letter's sincerity, and the persuasiveness of the arguments used to support your position. I strongly encourage you to make the letter as personal as possible by injecting past personal experiences with the ocean and/or presenting personal opinions/feelings about ocean conservation matters or matters of global change.

*"This assignment is really meant to be a wide-open invitation for you to freely voice your own thoughts. I am hoping it will give you a chance to express some of your deepest-held feelings about where you think the world is heading and what might be done to improve things. **Pretty much anything you say is acceptable as long as it is said with sincerity and conviction...**"*

**Letter Length** - You will not be graded on the length of the letter, but **about 2 full pages (single spaced)** will probably be required (*and strongly recommended!*) to make a well-founded argument.

**Cover Page** – For the purpose of turning in the assignment, please include a **Cover Page** that has **1)** Your name and NetID at the top of the page, **2)** the names and mailing addresses of the two Senators and the Representative for your State and Congressional District. The body of the letter that is turned in for grading can be addressed to any one of the Senators or the Representative. The letter(s) you send off later in the mail can be duplicated and the salutation for your Senators and Representative can be added to the separate copies of the letter.

#### --- TURNING IN THE LETTER WRITING ASSIGNMENT ---

Your letter must be **uploaded in electronic form** to the Blackboard class site **and also** turned in during class **as a printed hardcopy**.

The printed hardcopy can be submitted during any class meeting up to and including the last lecture of the semester (**Friday, December 1**).

The electronic version must be uploaded to the Blackboard site by midnight on **Friday, December 1**. *Note: Turnitin on Blackboard implements a plagiarism detection search so please write an ordinal letter in your own words.*

**Late Letters** will be accepted with a 2-point penalty assessed *for each day* after December 1. **The late penalty will be computed based on the older of the two dates for the hardcopy submission and the electronic upload to Blackboard.**

Note that Snee Hall is locked after 4pm on Friday and does not reopen until 6am on Monday. Turn in late letters to the instructor's departmental mailbox (Bruce Monger, Snee Hall, Mail Room #2120).

NOTE: A 4-point penalty will be given for any letter emailed in place of a hardcopy submission.

**No letter will be accepted after 4:00 PM on Friday, December 8**

### --- Mailing Your Letters to Congress ---

It is your own choice to place copies of your letter into properly addressed envelopes and then mailing them out to your representatives. My suggestion for helping you decide if you should send your letter off is to ask yourself if you feel strongly about what you wrote. If you feel strongly about what you wrote, then I think you should definitely send it! If you do not feel strongly about what you wrote, then I think you should probably not send it. *Note: You are also welcome to email the letters rather than sending them through the US Mail.*

### **How to Find the Addresses of your Congressional Representatives**

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Here are a few websites with general information about writing letters to your Congressional Representatives:

<http://www.congressmerge.com/onlinedb/communicating.htm>

<http://usgovinfo.about.com/library/weekly/aa020199.htm>

[http://www.thecapitol.net/FAQ/uc2\\_7.htm](http://www.thecapitol.net/FAQ/uc2_7.htm)

Here are a few websites to help you track down the mailing address of your Congressional Representatives:

**Senate:** [http://www.senate.gov/general/contact\\_information/senators\\_cfm.cfm](http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm)

1. If you know the names of your Senators, scroll down the page to find their mailing address.
2. If you do not know the name of your Senators, then use the pull-down menu called: **[Choose A State]**, and then select the appropriate state.

**House of Representatives:** <http://www.house.gov/Welcome.shtml>

1. If you know the name of your Representative, go to the following webpage and click on the appropriate name: <http://www.house.gov/house/MemberWWW.shtml>
2. If you do not know the name of your Representative, go to the upper left corner of <http://www.house.gov/Welcome.shtml> and type in the zip code for the address where you are registered to vote: <http://www.house.gov/writerep/> *Note: you need to know your 5-digit ZIP Code And the 4-digit ZIP Code Extension. To find the full ZIP Code, (5 + 4)- Digits, go to:* <http://zip4.usps.com/zip4/welcome.jsp> *and type the address for which you are registered to vote.*

### **Finding Pending Legislation:**

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While not required, you might want to write to your Congressional Representatives about specific pending legislation. In this way, you could write a letter that is directed at encouraging your Representatives to vote/support a certain way on a specific bill.

The Library of Congress's *Thomas* web site is excellent recourse for finding pending bills in congress.

1. Go to: <http://thomas.loc.gov>
2. Type keywords (e.g., ocean) into the "Search Bill Text" Box.

Another Excellent Resource: <http://bit.ly/iwfd0> See the Demo First : <http://bit.ly/k5pKix>

## **Suggestion for Writing a Good Letter:**

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Here are my suggestions for writing a letter to your congressional representative. These are certainly just suggestions. If you think they would "cramp your style", then by all means throw them out and follow your own style.

*Expressing your true self is paramount to writing a good letter.*

*I have also found, from past experience, that writing about a specific personal experience makes for a much stronger letter.*

Okay, enough said. Here are my suggestions:

Try not to sound like you are *lecturing* to the representative or talking down to them. You should, however, impress upon them that you are *well informed* on an issue. To convince them that you are informed on the issue, you should include in your letter, some of the material that you learned in class. For example, you should not just say that you care about the environment. Nor should you just say that you care about the health of a particular state's coastal waters. If, for example, you were from Texas, and wanted to write about a local issue, you might say that you care about the dead zone extending westward from the Mississippi river delta over much of the southeast coast of Texas. You might continue by saying that you know this is caused by hypoxic conditions which results from eutrophication of coastal waters resulting from agricultural runoff along the entire Mississippi watershed. Point out that you are writing them because you feel this is a national issue and not simply a state issue, since it concerns the contribution by all states that have tributaries feeding into the Mississippi river. You might want to continue the letter by expressing your "personal concerns" about the damage these conditions inflict on ecosystems in Texas waters and on the commercial fisheries in the Gulf Region. You can ask that they pursue legislative efforts that would resolve this issues in a timely manner.

The easiest way to avoid sounding like you are lecturing to your representative is by expressing your own personal opinion on a matter. Let them freely and quietly make up their own mind. Making your letter sound less like a lecture, or like a term paper, will probably only require small additions to some sentences. For example, changing this sentence: "*The ocean works this way or that way*" to: "*I have come to learn that the ocean works this way or that way*", can make a big difference in the tone of the letter.

In my opinion, *subtly* can be pretty persuasive and can get you a long ways in a debate. However, I have many friends who have "*attitude*" and they certainly do not like to mince their words when expressing important issues. So, please feel free to throw subtly out the window, and let things rip in your letter, if that's your style!

*Note that your letter does not have to deal with local coastal issues. It could be a global/international issue (e.g., global warming or global fishery) or another distant local issue (e.g., aquarium fishery in developing countries or whale hunting in the Arctic).*

I think it would be very important to let your representatives know your personal outlook on the environment in general terms, what it means to you to balance economic and environmental concerns and what you want for the more distant future.

It might also be nice to merge what you learned in class with concepts you have learned in classes for your major. For example, I have read letters from Applied Economic Management majors who talk about the need to incentivize human behavior to do the right thing – for example a fossil carbon energy tax to slow an individual's use of fossil carbon energy. But this just one example – *bring your own ideas and insights derived from the other classes you have taken at Cornell.*

Finally, I think it could be nice to end your letter by asking your representative to write back and explain how they plan to address your concerns/issues brought to their attention in your letter. They work for you and they have an obligation to let you know what they are doing for you.

### **Contact A Congressional Staffer (Optional)**

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For an even greater impact, send a copy of your letter to the attention of the congressional staffer covering the issue. These staffers - called *Legislative Assistants* - are the Member's eyes and ears on their assigned issue areas. Finding the staffer destined to read your letter is easy: call the Capitol switchboard (open 24 hours a day!) at (202) 224-3121, ask for your Member's office, and ask the person who answers the phone for the name of the staffer handling the issue area or bill number and also the staffer's mailing address. Once you get that name of the staffer, address your letter like this:

Member of Congress  
c/o Name of Staffer  
Staffer's Office Building/Number  
Washington, DC 20515