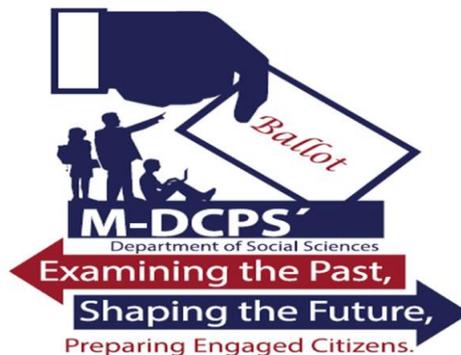


## Supporting the Student's Voice

**A quick guide for teachers to assist students in writing to state and national representatives**



**Miami-Dade County Public Schools  
Division of Academics  
Department of Social Sciences**



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# Background Information for Teachers



## **Current Events, News, Social Media, and Media Literacy and Civic Engagement:**

Instructing students on current issues affecting society can be a difficult and daunting task for teachers. However, it can also be one of the more meaningful and engaging experience for classroom learners as students are typically highly interested in current events. In addition, with news, social media, and other access points to information on current events available in students' hands 24/7, students often come to the learning table with a lot of information. The educator's job, then, becomes more focused on guiding and directing students in the most engaging and fulfilling experience as opposed to the more traditional role of being the provider of information.

That being stated, with the world being a much more interdependent and connected place and said connection occurring at lightning speed provides the field of education with a sense of urgency for teachers to be able to improve students' ability to consume domestic and international news with a very focused and critical eye.

Analyzing and studying current events often leads to a desire on the part of the students to get involved and work towards solutions. This guide provides teachers with quick reference tips about one way students can exercise their right to free speech and have their voices heard- **writing to their state or national legislatures to influence and shape public policy.**

By guiding students and encouraging them to write to their legislatures, teachers will be helping to defeat narrowmindedness, increase student understanding of politics, social structures, economics, local and world affairs, and ultimately enhance democracy.

**ACTIVE  
CITIZENS**

## Provided in this Guide:



1. Lesson form PBS "Current Events Awareness/Media Literacy"
2. From ThoughtCo.: "Tips for Writing Effective Letters to Congress"
3. Links to find your Florida State Legislator.
4. Links to find your Federal Senators and Congressperson.
5. Additional Suggestion for Learning about Current Events

# From PBS: Current Events Awareness / Media Literacy

Raising student awareness of global issues is increasingly important as the countries of the world become more interdependent. At the same time, consuming domestic news with a critical eye is vital to enhancing democracy and defeating narrow-mindedness. Students also need an understanding of the world's economy, politics, social structures and environment in order to make the best decisions about how to live their own lives. More than ever, an appreciation for news and our civic institutions is a key step toward self-empowerment and advancement.



## Learning Activity:

1. To get students to understand the importance of current events and the global community they are all a part of, encourage students to go through the NOW online archive at <http://www.pbs.org/now/thisweek/archive.html>, and pick two programs: one to which they have an existing connection or interest, and one based on a topic completely alien to them. Have students watch the two programs.
2. When the class has finished viewing, engage them by asking:
  - How do you think the people involved feel about what is happening?
  - What if this was happening in your community—would it matter to you? Why?
  - What concerns do you have about what you viewed?
  - What effect could the events in this program have on you directly or indirectly?
3. Distribute the **Current Events Affect Everyone** activity sheet and review the directions. Review the questions on the **Current Events Affect Everyone** handout. Distribute copies of a selected transcript/article (use the Topic Search feature at [http://www.pbs.org/now/topic\\_search/index.html](http://www.pbs.org/now/topic_search/index.html) to search for content by topic). Direct students to follow along and highlight important information in the transcript/article as you read it aloud. Students can use the highlighted information to help them answer the questions on the activity sheet. When reading is completed, provide students with 10 minutes to complete the activity sheet.
4. Discuss the activity sheet. Focus first on the graphic organizer and the various results predicted by students. Conclude the exercise by discussing questions 1-7 and the importance of paying attention to current events.

## Performance Task:

5. To help students learn more about current events, have them work individually, in

pairs, or in small groups to complete one of the **Current Events Projects** outlined on the similarly titled handout. Read over the project guidelines. Remind students to record their opinion poll findings and quotes carefully so that the information they provide from their surveys can be considered a reliable resource. Provide 20-30 minutes of class time for students to formulate their ideas and begin work on the project.

6. When the projects have been completed, allow each student/pair/group to present their work to at least two other students/pairs/groups. When presentations are completed, have students post their projects in a prominent place in the school or community so others can see and learn from them.

1. Possible follow-ups: Students could....

- Write letters to local media. Use this link to find local newspapers and broadcasting stations:  
<http://www.shgresources.com/resources/newspapers/>
- Create a one-page proposal for addressing a current problem highlighting either a solution or a plan for increased exposure
- Conceive a new non-profit or for-profit organization dedicated to solving a local or national problem. Students should consider the organization's name, mission statement, and means of effecting change and funding itself. Examples of such institutions can be found at  
<http://www.pbs.org/enterprisingideas>

Produce an audio or video podcast or radio program of editorials addressing the need for more attention or solutions to the issue.

## Tips for Writing Effective Letters to Congress

**Real letters are still the best way to be heard by lawmakers**

by [Robert Longley](#)

Updated February 13, 2018

People who think members of the [U.S. Congress](#) pay little or no attention to constituent mail are just plain wrong. Concise, well thought out personal letters are one of the most effective ways Americans have of influencing the lawmakers they elect.

Members of Congress get hundreds of letters and emails every day, so you will want your letter stand out. Whether you choose to use the [U.S. Postal Service](#) or email, here are some tips that will help you write a letter to Congress that has an impact.

### Think Locally

It's usually best to send letters to the representative from your local congressional district or the senators from your state. Your vote helps elect them—or not—and that fact alone carries a lot of weight. It also helps personalize your letter. Sending the same "cookie-cutter" message to every member of Congress may grab attention but rarely much consideration.

It's also a good idea to think about the effectiveness of all of your communication options. For instance, a face-to-face meeting at an event, town hall, or the representative's local office can often leave the biggest impression.

That is not always an option though. Your next best bet for expressing your opinion is a formal letter, then a phone call to their office. While email is

convenient and quick, it may not have the same influence as the other, more traditional, routes.

## **Finding Your Legislator's Address**

There are a few ways that you can find the addresses of all of your representatives in Congress.

The U.S. Senate is easy because each state has two Senators. [Senate.gov](http://Senate.gov) has an easy to navigate directory of all current Senators. You will find links to their website, their email and phone number, as well as the address to their office in Washington D.C.

The House of Representatives is a little trickier because you need to search for the person representing your particular district within the state.

The easiest way to do so is to type in your zip code under "Find Your Representative" at [House.gov](http://House.gov). This will narrow down your options but you may need to refine it based on your physical address because zip codes and Congressional districts do not coincide.

In both houses of Congress, the representative's official website will also have all the contact information you need. This includes the locations of their local offices.

## **Keep Your Letter Simple**

Your letter will be more effective if you address a single topic or issue rather than a variety of issues you may feel passionate about. Typed, one-page letters are best. Many [Political Action Committees \(PACs\)](#) recommend a three-paragraph letter structured like this:

1. Say why you are writing and who you are. List your "credentials" and state that you are a constituent. It also doesn't hurt to mention if you voted for or donated to them. If you want a response, you must include your name and address, even when using email.
2. Provide more detail. Be factual and not emotional. Provide specific rather than general information about how the topic affects you and

others. If a certain bill is involved, cite the correct title or number whenever possible.

3. Close by requesting the action you want to be taken. It might be a vote for or against a bill, a change in general policy, or some other action, but be specific.

The best letters are courteous, to the point, and include specific supporting examples.

## Identifying Legislation

Members of Congress have a lot of items on their agendas, so it's best to be as specific as possible regarding your issue. When writing about a particular bill or piece of legislation, include the official number so they know exactly what you're referring to (it also helps your credibility).

If you need help in finding the number of a bill, use the [Thomas Legislative Information System](#). Cite these [legislation](#) identifiers:

House Bills: "**H.R.**\_\_\_\_"

House Resolutions: "**H.RES.**\_\_\_\_"

House Joint Resolutions: "**H.J.RES.**\_\_\_\_"

Senate Bills: "**S.**\_\_\_\_"

Senate Resolutions: "**S.RES.**\_\_\_\_"

Senate Joint Resolutions: "**S.J.RES.**\_\_\_\_"

## Addressing Members of Congress

There is also a formal way to address members of Congress. Use these headers to begin your letter, filling in the appropriate name and addresses for your Congressperson. Also, it's best to include the header in an email message.

To Your [Senator](#):

The Honorable (full name)  
(room #) (name) Senate Office Building  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator (last name):

To Your Representative:

The Honorable (full name)  
(room #) (name) House Office Building  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative (last name):

## Contact the U.S. Supreme Court

The Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court do not have email addresses, but they do read letters from citizens. You can mail letters using the address found on [the SupremeCourt.gov website](#).

## Key Things to Remember

Here are some key things you should always and never do when writing to your elected representatives.

1. Be courteous and respectful without "gushing."
2. Clearly and simply state the purpose of your letter. If it's about a certain bill, identify it correctly.
3. Say who you are. Anonymous letters go nowhere. Even in email, include your correct name, address, phone number and email address. If you don't include at least your name and address, you will not get a response.
4. State any professional credentials or personal experience you may have, especially those pertaining to the subject of your letter.

5. Keep your letter short—one page is best.
6. Use specific examples or evidence to support your position.
7. State what it is you want to be done or recommend a course of action.
8. Thank the member for taking the time to read your letter.

## What Not to Do

Just because they represent the voters does not mean that [members of Congress](#) are subject to abuse or belittlement. As impassioned as you may be about an issue, your letter will be more effective if it's written from a calm, logical perspective. If you're angry about something, write your letter then edit the next day to ensure you're conveying a courteous, professional tone. Also, make sure to avoid these pitfalls.

**Do not** use vulgarity, profanity, or threats. The first two are just plain rude and the third one can get you a visit from the Secret Service. Simply stated, don't let your passion get in the way of making your point.

**Do not** fail to include your name and address, even in email letters. Many representatives prioritize comments from their constituents and a letter in the mail may be the only way you receive a response.

**Do not** demand a response. You may not get one no matter what and a demand is simply another rude gesture that does little for your case.

**Do not** use boilerplate text. Many [grassroots organizations](#) will send out a prepared text to people interested in their issue, but try not to simply copy and paste this into your letter. Use it as a guide to help you make the point and write the letter in your own words with your personal perspective. Getting thousands of letters that say the exact same thing can diminish the impact.

CITE

# Find Your Senator/Representative



- Florida's Senators in the U.S. Senate:  
[https://www.senate.gov/general/contact\\_information/senators\\_cfm.cfm?State=FL](https://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm?State=FL)
- Florida's Representative in the U.S. House of Representatives:  
<https://www.house.gov/representatives>
- Your Florida State Senator (Florida Senate):  
<https://www.flsenate.gov/Senators/Find>
- Your Florida State Representative (Florida House of Representatives):  
<http://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Representatives/representatives.aspx>



## Additional Suggestions for Learning Current Events

1. From the New York Times: <https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/07/50-ways-to-teach-current-events/>
2. From the New York Times Spotlight on Learning: <https://www.nytimes.com/spotlight/learning-current-events>
3. From Education World: [http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_lesson/lesson/lesson072.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/lesson/lesson072.shtml)
4. From Lesson Planet: <https://www.lessonplanet.com/teachers/current-event-project>

## **Anti-Discrimination Policy Federal and State Laws**

The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida adheres to a policy of nondiscrimination in employment and educational programs/activities and strives affirmatively to provide equal opportunity for all as required by:

**Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964** - prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin.

**Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as amended** - prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, or national origin.

**Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972** - prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender.

**Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA) as amended** - prohibits discrimination on the basis of age with respect to individuals who are at least 40.

**The Equal Pay Act of 1963 as amended** - prohibits gender discrimination in payment of wages to women and men performing substantially equal work in the same establishment.

**Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973** - prohibits discrimination against the disabled.

**Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)** - prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in employment, public service, public accommodations and telecommunications.

**The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA)** - requires covered employers to provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave to "eligible" employees for certain family and medical reasons.

**The Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978** - prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions.

**Florida Educational Equity Act (FEEA)** - prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, gender, national origin, marital status, or handicap against a student or employee.

**Florida Civil Rights Act of 1992** - secures for all individuals within the state freedom from discrimination because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, handicap, or marital status.

**Title II of the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008 (GINA)** - Prohibits discrimination against employees or applicants because of genetic information.

*Veterans are provided re-employment rights in accordance with P.L. 93-508 (Federal Law) and Section 295.07 (Florida Statutes), which stipulate categorical preferences for employment.*

**In Addition: School Board Policies 1362, 3362, 4362, and 5517** - Prohibit harassment and/or discrimination against students, employees, or applicants on the basis of sex, race, color, ethnic or national origin, religion, marital status, disability, genetic information, age, political beliefs, sexual orientation, gender, gender identification, social and family background, linguistic preference, pregnancy, and any other legally prohibited basis. Retaliation for engaging in a protected activity is also prohibited.  
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