NANA

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ADVOCACY LETTER GUIDE

A step-by-step guide to writing letters to lawmakers and regulators that get read, answered and remembered.

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ADVOCACY

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide is for the people who write to lawmakers and regulators on behalf of an association: executive directors, government-relations staff, general counsel, and chapter leaders with a bill on their desk. It covers choosing one ask, building a letter in five parts, writing to a legislator's office and to a federal docket, using data, avoiding the mistakes NANA's policy team sees most, and following up. Each section ends where its advice stops, so you can skip ahead without losing the thread.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Read sections 1 through 3 once, in order, before you draft anything. Sections 4 through 9 are reference material: open the one that matches the letter on your desk. Each section begins with a sentence that says what you will be able to do by its end. Sections 2 through 8 each carry a checklist or a table you can copy, and the appendix holds two letter templates and a short glossary you can paste into a shared folder today.

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1
WHY THIS GUIDE EXISTS

By the end of this section you will know who wrote this guide, what a letter can and cannot do for an association, and which kinds of letter the rest of the guide covers.

NANA's public policy team reviews dozens of member-drafted letters every year, ahead of Advocacy Day, during open comment periods, and whenever a member organization wants to weigh in on its own. We, Director of Public Policy Simone Radcliffe and Senior Policy Manager Farah Qureshi-Lindgren, wrote this guide from the patterns we see across those reviews: which letters get a substantive reply, which get a form response, and which don't get read past the first paragraph. In 2025 the team read 71 member drafts. Thirty-eight came in ahead of Advocacy Day, 24 were aimed at open dockets, and nine were unprompted.

Where this guide says "I", it is the senior policy manager speaking. I joined NANA's policy team in 2022 from a committee staff job on the Hill, and I review drafts with that vantage point in mind. A committee office gets hundreds of letters a week. The ones that get flagged for follow-up say what they want in the first sentence and back it up with something specific to the district or the docket, and everything else gets logged and filed.

We hold to the same discipline whether the audience is a single Hill office or a federal docket read by career staff. In a proceeding before a federal commission, the letters that change the conversation are not the ones that repeat an argument the commission has already heard. They are the ones that bring a fact nobody else has.

A letter is a small tool with a narrow job. It does not win a vote on its own, and it does not replace a meeting or a phone call. What it does is put one request, one fact and one name on the record, in a form a busy reader can pass to someone else without rewriting it. That is why the best letters are short, and why the worst are long.

This guide covers two kinds of letter. The first goes to a legislator's office: a member of Congress, a state legislator, or a committee. The second goes to a regulator as a comment on a proposed rule, filed in a public docket. The craft overlaps, and the differences matter enough that sections 4 and 5 treat them separately.

2
BEFORE YOU WRITE: KNOW YOUR ASK

By the end of this section you will be able to state your ask in one sentence, name who has the power to grant it, and decide whether a letter is the right tool.

Every effective letter has a single ask, decided before a word is written. That ask might be a vote on a specific bill, a change to a proposed rule before a comment period closes, or a request for a meeting. A letter that raises several concerns at once, however related, gives the reader no clear next step and no easy way to log what was requested.

This is the most common gap NANA's policy team sees in draft letters. In 33 of the 71 drafts reviewed in 2025, the opening paragraph held a well-written page of context and no request.

Of the 47 legislative drafts, 17 became letters that drew a substantive reply from an office, and all 17 put the ask in the first paragraph of the version sent. All 17 also named the bill or hearing date exactly. Writers who know their subject well enough to explain it in detail sometimes assume the ask is implied. It isn't. State it directly, in one sentence, and put that sentence early.

A useful test before drafting: can the ask be written as a single sentence that a staffer could repeat back accurately after one reading? If the answer takes a paragraph, the ask isn't settled yet, and the letter shouldn't be started until it is.

FIVE KINDS OF ASK

Most asks fall into one of five kinds. Each has a different reader who can grant it, and each reads differently on the page. The table below sets out the five, with a sentence of the kind a staffer can act on.

KIND OF ASK	WHO CAN GRANT IT	A SENTENCE THAT STATES IT
Vote	A member of a committee or the full chamber	"Please vote to report the Nonprofit Mail Stability Act out of committee."
Cosponsor	A member who has not yet signed on	"Please add your name as a cosponsor before the markup."
Amend	A bill's sponsor or a committee staffer	"Please add a 24-month phase-in to section 4."
Change a rule	An agency's rulemaking staff	"We support the proposed rule with one change to the definition in subsection (c)."
Meet	A legislator, a staffer or an agency official	"We request 30 minutes with your health staffer in the week of April 14."

Table 1. Five kinds of ask, who can grant each, and a sentence that states it.

Notice that every sentence in the table names the thing being asked about and a time. A reader who finishes the sentence knows what to do and by when. A reader who finishes "We hope the office will give this matter its serious attention" knows nothing.

DECIDE WHETHER A LETTER IS THE RIGHT TOOL

A letter works best when the recipient has a decision in front of them and a staffer with time to read. It works poorly as an introduction to a new subject, and badly as a reaction to the morning's news. If the real need is to be known by an office, ask for a meeting, and use the letter to request it in two paragraphs.

Check three facts before you commit to a letter. Who decides, and by when? Is the decision still open? Has your association already been heard on it, by NANA, by a coalition, or by your own staff? If a coalition letter is already moving, adding your name to it, with one added paragraph on your members, is better than a second letter that covers the same ground.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: THREE CONCERNS BECOME ONE ASK

In March 2025 the Federation of Community Libraries began a draft letter about postal rates. The federation has 1,900 member libraries and 16 staff in Baltimore, and its Executive Director, Lucinda Farrow-Mbatha, started with four concerns: the size of the proposed increase, the lack of a phase-in, the effect on rural branches, and the absence of a discount for educational mailings. Each concern was real, and the draft ran to two and a half pages.

The policy team asked her to rank the four by one test: which change, if the office made it, would matter most to the most libraries? The federation mails 1.1 million pieces a year, about 580 pieces per library, and every one-cent increase per piece costs it $11,000 a year. A phase-in protects every library for several years, so that became the ask. The other three concerns became a single sentence in the closing paragraph, offered as material for a later conversation.

The revised letter was one page. It went to the legislative assistant for the federation's own representative on March 24, 2025, and its ask read: "Please support a 36-month phase-in of any new nonprofit rate, so that our 1,900 member libraries can budget for the change." The assistant called on April 7, 14 days later, and said the phase-in was the one request she could carry to the representative. The other three would have needed a second letter.

CHECKLIST: IS THE ASK SETTLED?

- [ ] The ask fits in one sentence of 30 words or fewer
- [ ] The sentence names a bill, a rule, a date or a meeting, not a topic
- [ ] You know the name and office of the person who can grant it
- [ ] The decision is still open, and you know the date it closes
- [ ] You have checked whether NANA or a coalition has already sent the same request

> “My first draft had four asks. The policy team told me to keep the one that protected the most libraries, and the staffer who called back said that was the only one she could use.
>
> LUCINDA FARROW-MBATHA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FEDERATION OF COMMUNITY LIBRARIES

3
THE FIVE-PART STRUCTURE

By the end of this section you will be able to draft a one-page letter in five parts, in the right order, and check each part against a test.

NANA's policy team recommends five parts, in this order: the ask, the writer's standing to make it, the local or member impact, the supporting evidence, and a specific deadline or next step.

The ask comes first, in the opening paragraph, not the closing one. Standing follows immediately: who the writer is, which association they represent, and why the office should treat the letter as more than one constituent's opinion. Impact turns a national policy question into something concrete: how many organizations, jobs or members live in the district or state the office represents. Evidence stays at one or two data points, enough to back the impact claim without turning the letter into a report. The letter closes with a specific request for what happens next: a vote by a certain date, a meeting, or a comment filed before a named deadline.

Order matters less than completeness. Of the 47 legislative drafts reviewed in 2025, the 17 that drew a substantive reply all had every one of the five parts, though six of them ran the parts in a different order. The ask and the deadline are the two parts most often dropped, and the two that decide whether a letter produces any action at all.

WHAT EACH PART DOES

The table below gives each part a job, a length and a test you can apply with a pencil. The lengths add up to a page of 200 to 300 words, which is the ceiling for a legislative letter.

Table 2. The five parts of a letter, with a job, a length and a test for each.

PART	ITS JOB	LENGTH	THE TEST
1. The ask	Say what you want done	One or two sentences	A staffer can repeat it after one reading
2. Standing	Say who you are and who you speak for	Two or three sentences	The office can see why you, and not a stranger, are writing
3. Impact	Tie the issue to people in the office's district or state	One paragraph	It contains a count, a place and a consequence
4. Evidence	Give one or two facts the office can check	One paragraph	Each figure has a named source
5. Next step	Say what should happen, by when	Two sentences	It names a date or an action, never "at your earliest convenience"

STANDING: SAY WHO YOU SPEAK FOR

Standing is the part writers shorten most, and the part staff use most. A legislative office wants to know whether you live or work in its district, how many members you represent there, and whether your association is a real organization with real people behind it. Give the three facts in this order: your organization's name and size, your location, and your connection to the issue.

"The Society of Volunteer Fire Company Officers represents 5,600 officers of volunteer fire companies, including 410 in Maryland" tells the reader more than "we are a national association of fire officers." The first can be checked, and it sets up the impact paragraph that follows.

IMPACT: A COUNT, A PLACE, A CONSEQUENCE

Impact is where a national question becomes a local one. Write it as a count, a place and a consequence, in that order. "Our 29 member co-ops on the Chesapeake Bay hold federal habitat grants, and a 10 percent cap on indirect costs would leave each of them about $24,000 short on a typical award" does all three in one sentence.

If you cannot produce a count for the office's own district or state, say so and offer the national count with a promise to follow up with the local one. That is more honest than inventing a local number, and a staffer will usually ask for the local figure by return email. Have it ready.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: A COMPLETE LETTER

The letter below is the one the Federation of Regional Trail Stewards sent on December 2, 2025. Executive Director Grace Lindqvist wrote it in Portland for her representative's office, in 208 words, using the five parts in order. The legislative assistant answered on December 9, and the office added its name as a cosponsor of the volunteer mileage rate parity bill on December 18, 2025. Every paragraph can be read alone, which matters to a staffer who reads only the first line of each.

Dear Ms. Tran,

I ask your office to cosponsor the volunteer mileage rate parity bill before the committee markup on January 28, 2026.

The Federation of Regional Trail Stewards represents 180 trail-maintenance organizations in Oregon and Washington. I am its Executive Director, and our office is in Portland. Eleven of our member organizations are based in your district.

Our volunteers are the people who clear the trails. In the 2025 season, 2,300 of them drove an average of 1,100 miles each to trailheads and work sites, a total of 2,530,000 miles, at their own expense. The charitable mileage rate is set in statute and has not kept pace with what those trips cost. Our smallest member organizations have started to lose volunteers who can no longer afford the drive.

Our member survey of 164 organizations, completed in November 2025, found that 39 had cut at least one scheduled work day because too few volunteers could reach the site. We can send the survey instrument and the underlying counts on request.

Please cosponsor the bill before the markup. I will call your scheduler on December 8 to arrange 30 minutes with your staff in the week of December 15.

Sincerely,

Grace Lindqvist
Executive Director, Federation of Regional Trail Stewards

The request is in the first sentence, the standing in the second paragraph, and the impact in the third. One survey stands in for the evidence, and the close names both a date and a next action. A staffer can lift the first sentence into a memo without changing a word.

CHECKLIST: DRAFT IN THIS ORDER

- [ ] Write the ask first, then the next step, then fill in the middle
- [ ] Give your standing in numbers: members, location, district connection
- [ ] Write the impact as a count, a place and a consequence
- [ ] Choose the one or two figures that carry the argument and cut the rest
- [ ] Read only the first sentence of each paragraph and check that they tell the story

4
WRITING TO A LEGISLATOR'S OFFICE

By the end of this section you will be able to address a letter to the right person, keep it to a page, and decide when to attach something and when to hold it back.

A letter to a congressional office is addressed to a specific staffer where possible, not "To Whom It May Concern." Find the committee or subcommittee that handles the bill, and the members who sit on it. Address the letter to one of them when your own representative does not sit on the committee. Advocacy Day participants receive a schedule that groups their meetings by state delegation and then by district, which shows how an office sorts its visitors; sort your letters the same way, by the district each office represents.

Keep a legislative letter to one page. Of the 47 legislative drafts reviewed in 2025, 33 ran one page and 14 ran two. Offices gave a substantive reply to 15 of the one-page letters and two of the two-page letters. Attach a one-page leave-behind at most: none of the nine letters that attached a report of more than five pages drew a reply.

FINDING THE RIGHT PERSON

Most offices divide issues among a few legislative staffers: a legislative assistant for health, one for taxes and nonprofits, one for transportation and mail. The office's website lists them, and so does the directory that Advocacy Day participants receive. Call the front desk and ask who handles your issue. It takes two minutes and removes the most common reason a letter goes to the wrong desk.

If the bill is in committee, send two letters: one to the committee member who represents you, and one to the committee's staff for your issue, with the first copied. A committee staffer writes the markup memo. A district office staffer decides which constituent letters reach the member's attention.

MAIL, EMAIL AND WEB FORMS

Mail to congressional offices is screened before delivery, which adds days and sometimes weeks. Email and an office's own web form arrive the same day, and many offices log those first. Send by email or web form for

anything with a date inside the next month. Send a paper copy only if the office asks for one, or if you are attaching a document that matters.

Put the subject of the letter in the subject line, with the bill number if there is one: "Cosponsor request: volunteer mileage rate parity, markup January 28." A staffer who sorts 200 messages a day reads subject lines first.

LETTERS BEFORE AND AFTER A VISIT

Advocacy Day is the best moment to deliver a letter in person. In 2024, 210 members held 96 meetings on the Hill in one day, and each office received a leave-behind from the delegation that met with it. The letters that did the most work were not the ones handed over at the door. Of the 17 letters that drew a substantive reply in 2025, 11 were follow-ups sent within three days of a meeting, which thanked the staffer for a specific point and repeated the one ask.

Mid-Atlantic chapter members who work in government relations take a version of this habit all year. Emeka Nwosu-Hart, Vice President, Government Relations at the Coalition of Family Farm Lenders, co-chairs the chapter's government-relations working group. The group trades first paragraphs by email before any member sends a letter.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: TWO LETTERS, ONE BILL

After Advocacy Day on April 16, 2025, and the introduction of the Nonprofit Mail Stability Act on April 22, the Federation of Community Libraries sent two letters on April 28. The first went to its own representative's legislative assistant and asked for a cosponsorship. The second went to a staffer for the committee that would hear the bill, and asked for a meeting.

The first letter named the 11 member libraries in the representative's district and the 6,400 patrons they serve. The second letter did not mention the district at all. It described the federation's 1.1 million pieces a year, the phase-in request, and one proposed amendment. The committee staffer held a phone meeting with Lucinda Farrow-Mbatha on May 12, 14 days after the letter went out. The policy team calls this pattern "one ask, one reader", and section 8 follows the first letter to its outcome.

> “The cheapest hour of our month is the one where six of us read each other's opening paragraphs. If a colleague can't tell what you want from the first two sentences, a staffer won't either.
>
> EMEKA NWOSU-HART, VICE PRESIDENT, GOVERNMENT RELATIONS, COALITION OF FAMILY FARM LENDERS

CHECKLIST: BEFORE YOU ADDRESS THE ENVELOPE

- [ ] You have the staffer's name from the office directory or a call to the front desk
- [ ] The subject line names the issue, the bill and the date
- [ ] The letter is one page and the leave-behind is one page or less
- [ ] You know whether the office wants mail, email or its web form
- [ ] A copy goes to the committee staffer if the bill is in committee

5
WRITING TO A REGULATORY DOCKET

By the end of this section you will be able to file a comment that an agency's rulemaking staff can use: it names the docket, takes a position on a provision, and brings a fact the record does not yet hold.

A comment filed to a federal docket follows different rules than a letter to a Hill office. The docket number belongs in the subject line and the first sentence, not buried in the body. Comments are public record, read by the agency's rulemaking staff rather than a single caseworker, and weighed in aggregate. An agency preparing a final rule reads across every comment filed and looks for arguments and data it has not already seen. It cares less about how many people signed.

That changes what "supporting evidence" means for a docket comment. Specific, sourced data on how a proposed rule would affect an identifiable group of members carries more weight than an expression of general opposition or support. A comment that repeats another commenter's argument in different words adds nothing to the record. One that introduces a new fact, a new affected group, or a new unintended consequence is what agency staff are looking for.

Comment letters should also state plainly whether the writer supports, opposes, or supports with changes a specific provision of the proposed rule, rather than describing concerns in general terms and leaving the agency to infer a position.

HOW A DOCKET COMMENT DIFFERS FROM A HILL LETTER

The two letters share a spine, and they differ in nearly every detail. The table sets the differences side by side, so that you can check a draft against the right column.

	LETTER TO A LEGISLATOR'S OFFICE	COMMENT TO A REGULATORY DOCKET
Reader	One staffer, then a legislator	Career rulemaking staff, then a reviewing team
First line	The ask	The docket number, your position and the deadline
Length	One page	As long as the evidence needs; most useful comments run two to four pages
What counts	Local connection and standing	New facts and named provisions
Visibility	Private unless the office releases it	Public record
Reply	Form acknowledgment after a median of 16 days; a data request in five of 47 letters in 2025	No acknowledgment; the final rule responds in aggregate, and staff called 3 of the 24 commenters NANA reviewed in 2025

Table 3. A Hill letter and a docket comment, compared.

ANATOMY OF A USEFUL COMMENT

A docket comment has five parts that look like the five parts of a letter, with the roles shifted. Begin with a caption block: the agency, the docket number, the title of the proposed rule and the date of your comment. Follow with a position statement of one to three sentences: which provisions you support, which you oppose, and which you support with changes.

Then give the provision-by-provision argument, one short heading per provision. Under each heading, give the effect on your members, the evidence, and the specific change you ask for, in revised text where you can. A comment that offers replacement wording gives the agency something it can adopt.

Close with a short statement of who you are and how the agency can reach you. A final paragraph that restates the argument adds nothing. If you want the agency to read one thing again, put it in the position statement.

WORKING BACK FROM THE DEADLINE

A comment period is a fixed span, and a good comment takes longer to produce than most associations expect. The schedule below works backward from a 60-day period that opens January 6 and closes March 7, a

typical length for a significant rule. Adjust the dates to your own notice, and read the deadline from the notice itself, never from a colleague's email.

DATE	STEP	OWNER
January 6	Notice published; record the docket number and deadline	Government-relations lead
January 13	Ask settled: provisions to support, oppose or change	Executive director and counsel
January 27	Member data gathered and sourced	Research or member-services staff
February 10	First draft to NANA's policy team for review	Writer
February 24	Final draft to the signer; counsel reads once	Executive director
March 3	Comment filed; confirmation saved to the file	Government-relations lead
March 7	Deadline; four days of margin used only for a failed upload	None

Table 4. A comment schedule worked back from a March 7 deadline.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: SUPPORTS WITH CHANGES

The proposed lobbying disclosure rule would count grassroots "call to action" emails as lobbying contacts. I lead NANA's work on the file, and I helped the Society of Volunteer Fire Company Officers draft its comment, which it filed on December 12, 2025. The Society, based in Frederick, Maryland, has 5,600 members and nine staff, and it sends four alert emails a year asking members to call their legislators.

Under the proposal, each of those 5,600 members who received a message could count as a lobbying contact. That makes 22,400 messages a year, from an association with nine staff and no registered lobbyist. The Society's comment opened with its position, "supports with changes the definition of a lobbying contact in subsection (c)", and stated the change it asked for: exclude messages sent to the writer's own members that ask them to contact their own representatives.

The comment ran to three pages. It attached no petition and no list of signers, because the argument was one fact the record did not yet hold: how many messages a nine-person association sends. On January 9, 2026, a program analyst called the Society to ask how it had counted its alerts. The fact, and not the volume of opposition, is what the agency staff wanted to talk about.

CHECKLIST: BEFORE YOU FILE A DOCKET COMMENT

- [ ] The docket number appears in the subject line and the first sentence
- [ ] You have checked the deadline against the current notice, not an old email
- [ ] Each provision you address has its own heading and a stated position
- [ ] At least one fact in the comment is new to the record, and has a named source
- [ ] You offer replacement wording for each change you ask for
- [ ] The filing confirmation is saved with the final text

“Agencies get piles of comments that say a proposal is bad. They get very few that say what it costs, for whom, with a count. The comments I have seen quoted back in a final rule were the ones that handed the agency a sentence it could adopt.

EMEKA NWOSU-HART, VICE PRESIDENT, GOVERNMENT RELATIONS, COALITION OF FAMILY FARM LENDERS

6
USING DATA WITHOUT LOSING THE READER

By the end of this section you will be able to choose the single figure that carries a letter, source it, and test whether a second figure helps or hurts.

A single well-chosen figure does more work than a page of statistics. NANA's own testimony and comment letters lead with one number, such as a membership count, a share of an affected industry or a dollar figure. It is stated plainly in the paragraph where it matters, not collected in a table at the end.

Avoid stacking data points that make the same point twice. If a letter already states that a rule affects a defined set of member organizations, a second figure on indirect effects on the same group reads as padding. Cut it, or move it to a second, independent argument.

Name the source. A number attributed to an association's own survey, a federal data series or a peer-reviewed study carries more weight than an unattributed statistic, even when the two numbers match.

WHICH FIGURE TO LEAD WITH

Choose the figure that answers the reader's first question, which is almost always "how many people does this touch?" For a legislative letter, that is a count of members or organizations in the office's district or state. For a docket comment, it is a count of the affected group, followed by a dollar effect on a typical member.

If two figures compete, lead with the one the reader can check against something they already know. A staffer knows how many counties are in the district. A staffer does not know how many co-ops hold a federal grant, so that number needs a source beside it.

CITE THE SOURCE IN THE SENTENCE

Put the source in the same sentence as the number: "In our November 2025 survey of 164 member organizations, 39 had cut at least one scheduled work day." The reader sees the claim, the source and the date at once, and has no reason to turn to a footnote. If the source is large, such as a survey, offer to send it. If it is small, such as your own member list, say how you counted.

Show your arithmetic when a number is derived. "Twenty-nine co-ops, each short about $24,000, is $696,000" lets a reader repeat your calculation in ten seconds, and a number a reader can repeat is a number a reader trusts.

WEAK FIGURES AND STRONG ONES

The table below sets out four common weak figures from draft letters, each with the version the policy team suggested. The pattern is the same in all four: replace a round claim with a count, a place and a source.

WEAK	WHY IT FAILS	REWRITE
"Many of our members would be affected."	No count, so a reader cannot size it	"All 48 member co-ops of the Chesapeake Watermen's Cooperative Association would be affected."
"The cost would be significant."	No dollar figure	"A 10 percent cap would cut a $300,000 grant's indirect funding from $54,000 to $30,000."
"Studies show volunteers are declining."	No source	"Our November 2025 survey of 164 organizations found 39 had cut work days."
"Millions of pieces of mail."	Too vague to check	"We mail 1.1 million pieces a year, about 580 per member library."

Table 5. Four weak figures and their rewrites.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: THE CAP ON INDIRECT COSTS

In 2025 the Chesapeake Watermen's Cooperative Association, a group of 48 fishing co-ops with three staff in Annapolis, drafted a comment on the proposed 10 percent cap on indirect costs for nonprofit grantees. Executive Director Obadiah Fenwick began with the association's general view that small co-ops would be hurt. The policy team asked for one case the agency could check.

Fenwick pulled the books of one co-op with a federal habitat grant. The award had $300,000 in direct costs. At the co-op's negotiated indirect rate of 18 percent, indirect funding was $54,000. A 10 percent cap would reduce it to $30,000, a loss of $24,000, equal to 8 percent of the direct costs. Twenty-nine of the association's 48 co-ops held at least one federal grant, so the association's estimate was 29 times $24,000, or $696,000 in indirect funding lost across the membership on a typical award.

The comment led with the case, stated the multiplication, and offered the co-op's award letter on request. It did not use the word "devastating" anywhere. The association filed it on September 12, 2025, and a program analyst called Fenwick on October 1 to ask for the award letter.

> “
> I did not have a research department. I had one grant and a calculator. It turned out the agency had never seen a case from a three-person shop, and that was the entire value of our comment.

OBADIAH FENWICK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CHESAPEAKE WATERMEN'S COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION

7

COMMON MISTAKES NANA'S POLICY TEAM SEES

By the end of this section you will be able to recognize the five most frequent faults in draft letters and apply the fix for each.

The most frequent issue is no clearly stated ask, discussed above. Four more problems follow: a letter addressed to the wrong committee or subcommittee; a docket comment filed after its deadline, often because the writer worked from an outdated notice; identical text sent from several signers within the same association, which reads as a form campaign rather than independent input; and a closing paragraph that restates the letter's argument instead of stating what the recipient should do next.

A smaller but recurring issue is letters that thank the recipient for "their continued support" of a position the office hasn't actually taken. It reads as presumptuous rather than as a compliment, and it undercuts an otherwise well-argued letter. Avoid technical jargon specific to their own sector without a one-sentence definition; a term that reads as plain English to an association's own staff can be unfamiliar to a Hill staffer covering a dozen unrelated issue areas.

HOW OFTEN EACH FAULT APPEARS

The team keeps a tally of the faults it finds in first drafts. The table below shows the tally for the 71 drafts reviewed in 2025. A draft can have more than one fault, so the percentages add to more than 100.

Table 6. Faults found in 71 first drafts reviewed by NANA's policy team in 2025.

FAULT	DRAFTS	SHARE	THE FIX
No ask in the first paragraph	33	46%	Move the ask up; cut the background
Closing restates the argument instead of naming a next step	29	41%	Replace it with a date and an action
Identical text from several signers	14	20%	Keep the template, personalize the impact paragraph
Wrong committee or subcommittee	11	15%	Call the committee clerk before you address it
Deadline missed or taken from an outdated notice	8	11%	Read the deadline from the current notice and record it

THE CLOSING THAT RESTATES THE ARGUMENT

The second most common fault is also the easiest to fix. A writer who has made the case in four paragraphs often ends by saying it again, politely. The reader, who has already read the case, reaches the end and finds no instruction.

Here is a typical closing from a 2025 draft: "In summary, the proposed rule would harm small associations, and we urge you to consider the interests of nonprofits across the country." Here is the revised version: "Please cosponsor the bill before the January 28 markup. I will call your scheduler on December 8 to arrange 30 minutes with your staff." The first closing asks for sympathy. The second asks for two things that a staffer can put on a calendar.

THE FORM LETTER PROBLEM

Identical text from several signers is the fault with the longest consequences. A staffer who receives eight copies of the same letter from eight people at the same association logs one input, not eight, and may conclude that the association is manufacturing support. We recommend a shared template with a fixed ask and fixed evidence, plus a personal impact paragraph that each signer writes from their own work.

A good personal paragraph names a person, a place and a number. "At our Wilmington office, three of our eleven staff drive 40 miles each way to reach a county we serve" is a paragraph no one else could have sent. It also takes about ten minutes to write, which is why it can be required.

PRESUMPTION, JARGON AND THE THANK-YOU

Thanking an office for a position it has not taken invites a reply that corrects you, or no reply. Thank an office for something it did: a vote, a hearing, a meeting. If the office has not acted, thank the staffer for their time, and nothing more.

Jargon fails quietly. A staffer who reads "our volunteer-retention metric declined in the rural cohort" does not stop to ask, and does not call back. Say what happened in the words you would use to a neighbor: "Of 164 trail organizations, 39 cancelled work days because volunteers could not afford the drive." Define any term of art once, in a clause, and never rely on an acronym the reader has to look up.

CHECKLIST: READ YOUR DRAFT AS THE RECIPIENT

- [ ] Remove any thanks for support the office has not shown
- [ ] Replace each term of art with plain words or define it once
- [ ] Read the closing aloud and ask whether a calendar entry could come from it
- [ ] Check the committee name against the bill's current referral
- [ ] If several people will sign, give each a personal impact paragraph

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SENDING, FOLLOWING UP, AND WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

By the end of this section you will be able to send a letter by the right channel, follow up on a schedule, and keep a record that survives staff turnover.

A legislative letter addressed to a specific staffer, sent by mail or through the office's own web form, drew a form acknowledgment after a median of 16 days in 2025. Five of the 47 legislative letters that year led to a request for more information. A follow-up call two to three weeks after sending, referencing the letter by date and subject, is appropriate: nine of the 17 substantive replies followed a call placed 14 to 22 days after the letter went out.

A docket comment becomes part of the public record once the comment period closes and is not usually acknowledged individually. NANA's policy team tracks the dockets it comments on and notifies members when a final rule is published, so members who filed comments learn when the rule is final and whether their input shaped it.

Members preparing their own letter, whether for Advocacy Day or an open comment period, can send a draft to NANA's policy team for review before sending. The team's first note was the first rule in this guide in 33 of the 71 reviews in 2025: put the ask in the first paragraph.

A FOLLOW-UP SCHEDULE

Follow-up works when it is dull and regular. The schedule below is the one the policy team suggests for a legislative letter. Adjust it when a markup or a vote date compresses the calendar.

DAY	ACTION	WHAT TO SAY
0	Send the letter by email or web form	The ask, the date it is needed by
3	Confirm receipt with the staffer	"I wanted to be sure the letter on [bill] reached you."
14	Call about a meeting	Refer to the letter by date and subject; offer two times
21	Send a short note with one new fact	A count, a news item or a date change
35	Last follow-up	Ask who else in the office should have the letter

Table 7. A follow-up schedule for a legislative letter, counted from the day it is sent.

A WORKED EXAMPLE: FROM LETTER TO DATA REQUEST

This is the first of the two April 28 letters from section 4, the one to the representative's legislative assistant. The office sent a form acknowledgment on May 13, 15 days later. Lucinda Farrow-Mbatha called the assistant on May 20, 22 days after sending, a week later than the schedule above suggests, and referred to the letter by date and subject.

The assistant asked for the federation's annual mail volume, broken out by library size. The federation sent a one-page table on May 28: 1.1 million pieces across 1,900 libraries, with the smallest 400 libraries sending an average of 210 pieces each. The assistant used the table in an internal memo. By the end of June 2025 the office had not signed on as a cosponsor, and it asked the federation to come back when the committee set a markup date.

A letter does not pass a bill. This one did get the federation a data request, a named contact, and a place in the next round. Those are the realistic returns on a good letter, and they are worth having.

WHAT TO DO AFTER A VOTE OR A FINAL RULE

Write once more after the decision, whichever way it goes. If the office voted with you, thank the member and the staffer for the vote, and say what it means for your members in a number: "The phase-in protects 1,900 libraries." If the office voted against, thank the staffer for their time and say that you will continue to share data as it comes in.

When a final rule is published, read its summary of public comments before you respond. Agencies describe the arguments they found most useful, and

a plain note of thanks to the program staff, with the one fact you would add, begins the next round.

KEEP A FILE

Keep one folder per letter. It holds the final text, the send date, the channel, the name of the staffer, any reply, and the follow-up calendar. Moira Kavanagh-Pratt, General Counsel at the Society of Rural Hospital Administrators and an instructor in NANA's lobbying disclosure compliance course, advises the same habit for a different reason.

> “Keep the letter, the date and who signed it. If anyone ever asks you to explain a letter, the file should do it for you. It also means a new executive director can pick up the thread in an afternoon.
>
> MOIRA KAVANAGH-PRATT, GENERAL COUNSEL, SOCIETY OF RURAL HOSPITAL ADMINISTRATORS

A QUICK PRE-SEND CHECKLIST

Before sending any letter, this guide recommends a short final read-through against the following:

- [ ] The ask is stated as a single sentence in the first paragraph, not implied or held for the close.
- [ ] The writer's standing (organization, membership size, and connection to the recipient's district or docket) appears in the second paragraph.
- [ ] Any bill number, docket number, or hearing date is named exactly, checked against the current, not an outdated, notice.
- [ ] Supporting data is limited to one or two figures, each attributed to a named source.
- [ ] The closing paragraph states a specific next step and, for a docket comment, the filing deadline.
- [ ] The letter runs to one page, with any attachment limited to a single-page leave-behind.

A letter that passes every item on this list is not guaranteed a reply, but 15 of the 17 letters that drew a substantive reply in 2025 passed every item on it, and the other two ran to two pages. One of us reviews this checklist with new policy staff during their own onboarding, treating it as the baseline every outgoing letter should clear before NANA's own name goes on it.

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A SHORT FAQ

By the end of this section you will have answers to the questions members ask the policy team most often before they send a letter.

Should a member CC NANA's policy team on a legislative letter? Yes, whenever the letter references NANA's own position or data, so the team can track which offices have already heard from members directly.

Who should sign the letter? The person who can speak to the issue with authority: usually the executive director, or the board chair for a governance question. A letter signed by three people does not carry more weight than one signed by the right person. If a coalition letter has many signers, list them by organization with member counts.

Can we write on letterhead and send by email? Yes. Attach a PDF on letterhead, and put the full text of the letter in the body of the email too, so that a staffer reading on a phone does not have to open a file. Name the file for the subject, such as "Federation-mileage-rate-letter.pdf."

Our association is a 501(c)(3). Can we write? A charity may lobby within limits, and comment on regulations is often treated differently from lobbying on legislation. Confirm your limits with counsel before you send, and read NANA's Tax-Exempt Status Brief for the basics. The policy team does not give legal advice, and will say so.

Is it better to write before or after a bill is introduced? Write when the decision is open and a staffer can still act on it. Before introduction, ask for a meeting about the idea. After introduction, ask for a cosponsorship, an amendment or a hearing.

How long should we wait for an answer? Wait the 14 days in the follow-up schedule before you call. If a vote or markup is within two weeks, call the day you send, and say why.

What if the proposed rule has more than one provision we care about? Comment on each provision under its own heading, and state a position on every one. Do not pad the comment with provisions you have no view on.

Can a letter from one small association matter? Yes, when it brings a fact the office does not have. The Chesapeake Watermen's Cooperative

Association has three staff, and its one-case comment on the indirect-cost cap in section 6 drew a call from a program analyst.

What if we get a reply that disagrees with us? Answer it. Thank the staffer, correct any fact that is wrong, and ask what evidence would change the analysis. A disagreement in writing is a better starting point than silence.

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WHERE TO GO NEXT

By the end of this section you will know which NANA programs build on what this guide covers.

NANA's Learning catalog includes two courses we teach. Writing a Federal Comment Letter is on-demand and goes through the anatomy of a comment, the provision-by-provision argument and the schedule in section 5, with exercises and written feedback. Take it before the next proposed rule affects your members, not after the notice appears. Grassroots Advocacy Campaigns covers the shared-template method in section 7: how to organize a campaign in which each member writes in their own voice.

Moira Kavanagh-Pratt teaches Lobbying Disclosure Compliance, an on-demand course for staff who need to know what counts as a lobbying contact and what records to keep. Advocacy 101 is the place to start if no one on your staff has written to a legislator before.

Advocacy Day in Washington, DC, on April 15, 2026, is the best occasion to deliver a letter in person. We review member drafts in the weeks before, and the Mid-Atlantic chapter, chaired by Marcus Idowu, hosts the event each April. In 2025 we returned all 71 drafts with comments within a week of receiving them.

Mid-Atlantic members can also join the chapter's peer working group for government-relations staff, which works alongside the chapter's briefing with NANA's public policy team on March 19, 2026. The group is where the habit of trading first paragraphs comes from. NANA's advocacy pages list every open policy issue, with its status and the date of its last update, so that you can see which files have a deadline close at hand.

> “A letter in your folder turns a courtesy meeting into a working one, because the staffer has something to point at while you talk.
>
> MARCUS IDOWU, CHAPTER CHAIR, MID-ATLANTIC, SOCIETY OF ACCESSIBLE DESIGN PROFESSIONALS

APPENDIX: TWO LETTER TEMPLATES AND A SHORT GLOSSARY

This appendix holds a template for a letter to a legislator's office, a template for a docket comment, and the glossary of terms this guide has used.

TEMPLATE A: LETTER TO A LEGISLATOR'S OFFICE

Paste this into a shared folder, fill in the brackets, and cut it to a page. Keep each paragraph to the length shown.

Dear [Title and name of staffer],

[Paragraph 1, one or two sentences: the ask. Name the bill, the action and the date. Example: I ask your office to cosponsor [bill name] before the committee markup on [date].]

[Paragraph 2, two or three sentences: your standing. Your organization, its size, where it is based, and its connection to the office's district.]

[Paragraph 3, one paragraph: the impact. A count, a place and a consequence.]

[Paragraph 4, one paragraph: the evidence. One or two figures, each with a named source and a date. Offer the underlying data.]

[Paragraph 5, two sentences: the next step. What you ask the office to do, by when, and what you will do to follow up, with a date.]

Sincerely,

[Name]
[Title, organization]
[Telephone and email]

TEMPLATE B: DOCKET COMMENT

Use this skeleton for a comment to a federal docket. Replace each bracket with specifics, and keep the caption block exactly as the agency's notice gives it.

Agency: [Name of agency]
Docket number: [Number from the notice]
Title of the proposed rule: [Title from the notice]
Date of comment: [Date]
Comment deadline: [Date from the current notice]

Position. [Organization] supports, opposes, or supports with changes the following provisions: [list by section]. [One sentence on why.]

Provision [section]. [Position.] [Effect on members, with a count.] [Evidence and source.] [Requested change, with replacement text.]

Provision [section]. [Repeat for each provision you address.]

About [organization]. [Members, location, and how to reach you.]

LETTER LOG

Keep one row per letter and review it at the start of each quarter. The sample row is fictional.

Table 8. A letter log, with a sample row.

DATE SENT	RECIPIENT AND OFFICE	ASK	CHANNEL	REPLY	NEXT STEP
April 28, 2025	Legislative assistant, representative's office	Cosponsor the Nonprofit Mail Stability Act	Email and web form	Form acknowledgment May 13	Call May 20; send volume table May 28

GLOSSARY

- **Ask**: the single action a letter requests, such as a vote, a cosponsorship, a rule change or a meeting
- **Caption block**: the lines at the top of a docket comment that give the agency, the docket number, the rule title and the date

- **Cosponsor**: a legislator who adds their name to a bill that another legislator introduced
- **Docket**: the public file for a proposed rule, in which every comment is recorded
- **Leave-behind**: a one-page summary left with an office after a visit
- **Markup**: a committee session in which members debate and amend a bill before voting on whether to send it on
- **Notice of proposed rulemaking**: the public announcement of a rule an agency is considering, with its text and the comment deadline
- **Referral**: the assignment of a bill to a committee or subcommittee
- **Standing**: the facts that show why the writer has a stake in the issue and speaks for others who do
- **Staffer**: a member of a legislator's or committee's staff; the person who actually reads most letters



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