

Leave Behind Materials

There's an old saying in Washington: "You're only as effective as the paper you leave behind." Translated into beyond-the-beltway-speak, this means that a successful lobbyist (professional or amateur) must write and leave behind documents that are clear, concise, and memorable. This best practices guide provides some recommendations about how to write advocacy documents that get read and not discarded.

If Washington, D.C. is America's largest theme park, then words and ideas are the price of admission. Thus, an advocate who hopes to succeed in this roller-coaster environment must have three essential skills:

- First, you must be charming enough to make it past the appointment secretaries and other "gatekeepers" who are trained to say "no" to meeting requests. (See the guide: *Face-to-Face Meetings*.)
- Second, once you're actually on the merry-go-round (once you've finagled a meeting), you must make your case succinctly and persuasively.
- Third, you must leave behind a single sheet document that summarizes your oral arguments.

Here are some general suggestions about leave-behind materials:

- **Write to a college level, translate technical terms, spell out acronyms.** Capitol Hill staffers—many of whom are in their twenties—run the intellectual gamut from insanely smart to brilliant. So, don't misjudge youth for inexperience. These staff assistants are extremely well educated, highly skilled, and super ambitious. To reach them, write to a college level (but avoid jargon), translate technical terms, and spell out acronyms.
- **Always be 100 percent honest.** When it comes right down to it, an advocate really only has one thing to sell: their credibility. Because your audience is (at a minimum) insanely smart, they will discover (and take glee in pointing out) any flaws in your logic and red-flag anything that you say/write which appears to be "stretching" the truth. It is a staffer's job to "protect the boss" by seeing all sides of an issue. If you craft every argument



ABOUT US

Cornerstone Government Affairs is a full-service, bipartisan public affairs firm founded in 2002. We represent a diverse group of clients, from myriad industries and sectors, and maintain expertise in a wide range of issue areas including agriculture, defense, education, energy, health, homeland security, international affairs, tax policy, telecommunications, and transportation and infrastructure.

ABOUT THESE BEST PRACTICES GUIDES

To help our land-grant clients become more effective citizen advocates, we have prepared a series of Best Practices in Government Relations Guides. These can be found at: www.land-grant.org/guides.html

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with its rebuttal in mind, you will soon discover the vulnerabilities in your case. Yes, you can be forceful, but go out of your way to state your arguments fairly and factually.

- **Stick to a few provable points and use third-party data.** The kitchen-sink school of lobbying will get you nowhere on Capitol Hill. One to three good arguments are enough. And, include proof points (data or evidence) that support your messages. Also, independent (third-party) facts and analyses can greatly improve the believability of any advocacy document. Use such information whenever it's available.
- **Every lobbying contact must have an “ask.”** When drafting a leave behind document, start and end with the “ask.” Senators, representatives, and congressional staff are unbelievably busy, and with the possible exception of a constituent’s initial request for a “get acquainted” visit, these folks won’t even take a meeting without knowing in advance what you want. Every meeting and every leave behind document must have a clear and unambiguous ask.

Moving from the general to the specific, we recommend the following:

- **The KISS principle redefined: Keep It to a Single Sheet.** Even a generation ago—when people still consumed words in big juicy bites—the prevailing wisdom on Capitol Hill was that a “good” argument could fit on a single sheet of letter-size paper. “Bad” arguments, it was said, required much longer prose and legal-size paper! Now, with communications measured in 140 characters rather than words, brevity is ever more treasured. So, keep your leave behind to a single sheet and don’t cheat by switching to itty-bitty type!
- **Count your words and proofread carefully.** Compose every document—including email messages—in a word processor and keep them to 500 words or (preferably) less. Double check your grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
- **Use bullets and short sentences/paragraphs.** “Chunky” prose is used by professional writers for a reason: long blocks of text are difficult to read. Once you’ve composed your document, go back through it and make your sentences and paragraphs shorter and sweeter. “Clear, crisp, and easy to read” should become your daily affirmation.
- **Employ charts, graphs, photos, and illustrations.** Especially in this day and age, a picture truly is worth a thousand

words... and charts and graphs are priceless. If you can convey a message through a photo, illustration, or graph rather than a paragraph of prose, then do just that!

Frequently Asked Questions About Leave Behind Documents

Should the writer always be identified? Anonymous documents have very little impact on Capitol Hill and, for that reason, the sponsoring organization should always be clearly identified. Also, it is very useful to include a contact (and his/her telephone and email) who can field follow-up inquiries.

How do I give them something they might actually use? If your leave behind resonates in a particular House or Senate office, they may want to make use of your words and/or charts and graphs. Be ready to provide those electronically in a format (Microsoft Word for text and .jpgs for illustrations) that can be readily incorporated into their own work products.

Is it okay to create different versions of a document for different audiences? Yes, you can (and we suggest that you do) customize your leave behinds as much as practical. This can be as simple as creating one version for Republicans and another for Democrats or as elaborate as a different document for each Member you meet. (See the best practices guides: *Congressional Communications* and *Strong Stalk Networks* for detailed recommendations.)

What kinds of arguments are most persuasive? Congress is a mirror of America. The issues of greatest public concern at any given time are also likely to be the same matters on the congressional front-burner. So, frame your arguments with current events in mind and know what your senators and representatives care most passionately about. (See the guide: *Political Intelligence* for some specific suggestions.)

Are certain arguments useless/ineffective? Congress is like a confederation of 535 independent small businesses. So, local arguments work well whereas broad national generalizations are often non-starters. Saying something as simplistic as “this proposal will be good for the economy” is (as you might surmise) useless, whereas arguing that “this proposal will create 400 new jobs in your district over the next two years” is persuasive.

