

Written Communication Guide

Tips, Tricks, and Style

As the old saying goes, The Pen is mightier than the Sword. The Pen is one of the tools our democracy allows us to wield. In this guide, we provide information on how you can use your Pen to effectively communicate ideas and points of view or to support or oppose legislation or an elected person.

It's valuable to maintain and follow guidelines that foster growth and acceptance because our strength comes from a unified effort. As a member of the Ada County Democrats, please use this guide to positively affect the legislative and leadership environment to improve the lives of people who choose to make Idaho their home.

We start off this guide at the beginning: "What Can Democrats Agree On?" Then there are sections on the basics and philosophy of positive messaging. Please read these sections so we can act as a unified voice. The "Go Ahead—Have Some Style" and "Second Pair of Eyes: Everyone Needs an Editor/Helper" sections provide information on best writing practices and the need for having someone review your writing.

The next sections focus on specific avenues for written communication such as Letters to the Editor, Op-Ed articles, and effective ways to communicate with Idaho legislators, city and county officials, and school boards. There is also information about posting on social media and combating false information. We finish with a "Thank You" and a note on how it is important to thank others who are fighting the good fight. There are also helpful Tips and Tricks sprinkled throughout this guide. We have provided additional links to reputable webpages if you would like to read more information.

Thank you for taking the time to read this guide and help your community.

Tip: Speak your truth, but remember the listener will be more receptive when you're respectful, honest, compassionate, and reasonable.

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What Can Democrats Agree On?

The best way to communicate to other groups is with a unified voice. Democrats are a “big tent party” with a diverse group of people—that is our strength. Our Idaho philosophy is best summed up from the following statement from the [Idaho Democratic Party's](#) Values page.

We, the Idaho Democratic Party, are unified to serve the needs of all Idahoans. Idaho Democrats uphold the protections and responsibilities guaranteed to us by our state and national Constitutions. We fight for everyone to attain those rights and liberties when not fully realized. We stand for excellence in government, respect, compassion, unity, and liberty.

What Are the Ada County Democrats Working Toward?

The Ada County Democratic party is working toward a community where all members have the opportunity to live a life of happiness and worth. Ada County Democrats are dedicated to freedom, quality of life, and the rights given to all citizens under our Idaho and United States of America Constitutions. We value privacy, independence, individuality, choice, dignity, and respect.

We work toward our goals by honestly and accurately educating the public about the policies and legislation that affect their lives. We engage voters to ensure that they know what is on their ballot and when, where, and how to vote. We support and recruit people who want to serve the public. We actively listen to and act on the concerns of our community.

We pursue policy and legislation to fulfill Democratic values that work to ensure equitable and quality education, healthcare and housing for all, fair and sustainable wages, safe working conditions, criminal justice reform and justice before the law, environmental stewardship, and the right for U.S. citizens to vote without hindrance.

We strive for the widest and fairest representation of members in our organization and activities. We embrace all races, genders, abilities, ages, colors, creeds, national origins, religions, ethnic identities, sexual orientations, economic statuses, and philosophical persuasions. We truly believe and work toward a world where all are treated with respect and dignity.

Messaging: The Basics

Keys to effective messaging include the following:

- **Consistency:** Groups who have a consistent voice have more success. We have a lot of decisions and data coming at us from all directions, especially in the digital world. A consistent voice has a chance to break through. It's extremely important to keep sharing your message and values to break through the noise.
- **Tone:** It's difficult to persuade someone with insults, condescension, or verbal abuse. Nobody likes to be shamed and verbally assaulted. However, this doesn't mean that you can't call out the bad actions and actors. We need voices of reason who base their comments on actual facts and kindness.
- **Voice:** We need a diverse group of people lending their voice to support the ideals that Democrats believe in. Your voice can help Idaho be a more inclusive and positive place to live. As Democrats, we are all rowing the boat in the same direction, lending your unique viewpoint and lived experiences to the mix helps our cause.

Trick: Repetition. Repeat...Repeat...It's an effective tool. We have a lot of decisions and data coming at us from all directions, especially in the digital world. A consistent voice has a chance to break through.

Messaging: The Positive Attracts

In general, voters who are likely to vote for Democrats are motivated by positive messaging. Similar to every communication best practice, there are exceptions to the rule. In general, it is better to frame messaging around the ideas that you want to communicate instead of the ideas that you are arguing against. Positive messaging doesn't mean that injustices and failures should be ignored or not discussed. Positive messaging seeks to frame your point of view in a way that informs to provoke positive outcomes. The following three examples highlight how and why it is best to write in a more positive tone.

First, when you reiterate an attack, piece of misinformation, or negative argument someone made against your candidate/issue, you are giving air time (or paper space) to your opponent. For example, let's say that I am a candidate, and an opponent calls me a socialist. In response, I write an op-ed about how my opponent called me a socialist and all the reasons that I am not a socialist. As a result, people who may have never seen the attack in the first place are going to see it in the paper because I wrote about

it! Even if someone did see it, they may be seeing it for a second time and think “hm... I wonder why I keep seeing this.” They may decide to investigate more, or they may decide that they’ve seen it multiple times so it must be true! Or they may decide that you protest too much for it to be completely false! In short, I have given free advertising and further reach to the negative attacks that my opponent has shared.

A second reason to avoid being negative is because you want to frame the candidate/issue. For example, I could write a bunch of negative things about how people who don’t believe in climate change are ridiculous OR I could write about all the scientific evidence that exists proving climate change is real. It is usually more impactful to discuss the talking points that I want discussed, rather than review and refute the talking points of the opposition. Instead of starting the debate with why climate change is real, start by saying it’s real and here’s all my evidence.

Finally, numerous studies have indicated that Democrats are (again, generally) not as responsive/receptive to attacks, negative pieces, mudslinging, and so on. In fact, some studies show that Democrats are less likely to turnout to vote if a Democratic candidate/group is using negative attacks.

There are dozens of studies on negative v. positive messaging and how it impacts politics. As noted by a review of research by Martin Haselmayr, "On balance, there is no evidence supporting common wisdom about negative campaigning representing an effective strategy for maximizing votes" ([Negative campaigning and its consequences: A review and look ahead](#), 2019, p. 364). One thing that can be said after considering the data and observation from the last several years: Negative campaigning, false information, and mudslinging have taken a toll on our Democracy.

Go Ahead—Have Some Style

Do you like a little style, panache, je ne sais quoi? Use it in your writing! There is no reason why you can't have some style in your writing—even when writing with a group. The point of having a wide variety of voices is to showcase a diverse array of people who support our ideals.

"Style involves no inherent right or wrong. It is merely a conventional way of presenting information that is designed to ease communication" (American Psychology Association, 6th edition style guide, p.11).

Effective persuasive writing should be accessible to all readers. Help your readers understand your point of view. Here are some best practices to make your writing clear and concise to help all readers easily comprehend and appreciate your message:

- Use [active voice](#). for nearly all your sentences. Make your subject do the action. Don't hide the "who."
- Use [positive statements rather than negative](#). Notice the negative sentence above? You can use negative statements, but only when it serves the reader well and is clear.
- Keep nearly all sentences under 20 words. If a sentence is best served up long, go ahead, but make sure it is logical, structured well, and is under 35 words.
- Use [plain language](#). If you want people to understand your message quickly and easily—use plain language. This includes using personal pronouns (I, you, they) and using the simplest word. For example, the word "entail" is not commonly used in writing or speech. "Encompass" is a little better but is still complex. Now, the words "require" or "involve" are words that all readers quickly understand, and depending on the one you use, gives a more specific meaning. Use the same, simple word so readers can scan/read your article more quickly and accurately.
- Use [parallel structure](#) in your sentences and lists. Notice how we used the same structure for all these bullet points? We did this to make this list easier to understand. The focus is on what needs to be done—the action is not buried by changing the wording structure of the points. When you want people to quickly and completely understand your ideas, variety is not your friend.
- Be [concise](#). Decide what you want to say and say it with as few words as possible.

Trick: Read your writing out loud. Our brains automatically fill in missing information—this is one of our human strengths. However, it doesn't help when writing. You can often hear your mistakes when you read your words out loud.

Tip: Do you want to improve your writing? [Khan Academy](#) provides free videos, quizzes, and examples of ways to improve your writing. The University of Arizona also provides some tips and links to more information on their [Writing Clearly & Concisely](#) page.

Second Pair of Eyes: Everyone Needs an Editor/Helper

Having a second opinion is not only a good idea when there is something medically wrong with you, it's a good idea whenever you write.

It's always best to have someone read your writing. You don't have to find a professional editor. Your "editor" could be just another person who likes to read and write, and is good at pointing out grammar/usage/punctuation errors. Another person reading your work can help ensure that your writing is logical and easy to understand. When your writing is clear, concise, and error free, your words hold more credence with the reader.

Editors/helpers: Remember that your name is not on the piece. Try to edit and keep the writer's voice and intent intact. If you get an idea while reading your friend's piece, then that is something you can write about or suggest for a future writing. Unless the writer needs help exploring ideas, then it's best not to cram every point/meaning into one piece—there will always be another opportunity. Your goal is to help make your friend's writing accurate, logical, and reasonable.

Trick: When editing for someone, remember that your name is not on the piece; however, your "client" is the reader. The writing needs to be clear and concise so readers can easily grasp what the writer is saying.

Newspapers: Making Your Voice Heard

There are two traditional avenues that people can use to speak to a larger audience: Letters to the Editor and Editorial Opinions. The following gives information when writing for the local newspapers.

Letters to the Editor (LTE)

Letters to the Editor (LTE) are more likely to be printed but have a lower readership. LTEs tend to have a more casual and heartfelt tone. While many LTEs are angry rants, this is not the best way to communicate the positive, unifying change we are all seeking. However, this does not mean you have to be all sunshine and roses in your LTE. Emphatically and accurately point out harmful legislation or actions—this is the reason why we all need to publicly advocate for positive change that helps all who live in Idaho.

Tip: When you make a statement of fact, look it up. For example, if you are saying, "The Second Amendment says this..." Look at the [Bill of Rights](#) to check that you are correct. We have the world of good information at our fingertips—use it!

The following are specific guidelines for a few Idaho newspapers.

Trick: Keep your LTEs to under 175 words. If you do this, you can submit to all the papers. The more coverage, the merrier!

Idaho Press

- Word limit is 175 words or less.
- One person can submit every 30 days.
- No title, salutation, or signature is required.
- Submissions are not edited.
- Can select to run in Idaho Press, Messenger-Index, Kuna Melba News, or Meridian Press.
- Submit here: [Letter to the Editor / Idaho Press](#)

Idaho Statesman

- Word limit is 200 words or less.
- One person can submit every 30 days.
- In-state writers receive the highest priority.
- Submissions are subject to editing for clarity, length, and taste.
- Submit here: [Letter to the Editor / Idaho Statesman](#)

The Spokesman Review

(Yes, this is a Washington paper, but it covers and circulates in North Idaho too.)

- Word limit is 250 words or less.
- They will reject letters that are not factually correct, racist or written with malice.
- One person can submit every 30 days.
- Submit here: [Letter to the Editor / Spokesman Review](#)

The Lewiston Tribune

- Word limit is 250 words or less.
- They publish all letters with some exceptions, such as libelous statements and foul language.
- Letters may be edited to condense.
- Submit here: [Letter to the Editor / Lewiston Tribune](#)

Op-Eds (or Guest Opinion, Commentary, Blog, etc.)

When you are commenting about a specific issue and you have specific expertise in that area, consider writing an Op-Ed. For example, if you are a teacher and there is a piece of legislation that directly affects your job, you can write an Op-Ed. While these articles are less likely to be printed, they do have a much higher readership.

Tip: Contact the Communications Committee for help with the submission process for these articles.

Idaho Press

- The word count is 600 words or less.
- You will need to provide a headshot and a short tagline.
- People who are industry leaders, specific expertise/training in a field, and those who have timely and relevant life experiences receive the highest priority.
- You can choose to send to the Idaho Press, Messenger-Index (Emmett area), Kuna Melba News, and the Meridian Press.

Idaho Statesman

- Word count is 600 words or less.
- A headshot and short taglines are preferred but not required.
- People from Idaho who have unique knowledge or expertise on a subject and/or rebuttals of recent Statesman editorials are given the highest priority.
- Submissions are subject to editing for clarity, length, and taste.

KBOI

- This is a conservative opinion/news outlet.
- There are no specific guidelines but aim for 600 words or less.
- A headshot and short tagline are preferred but not required.

Idaho Business Review

- Any submission must discuss a business or business-related issue.
- There are no specific guidelines but aim for 600 words or less.
- A headshot and short tagline are preferred but not required.

Communicating with Your Legislators

Some say that it's no use to contact legislators in this super-majority environment we political minorities find ourselves in here in Idaho. That is not true. There have been many times when the many voices who rose to oppose triumphed. When a bill is bad for Idaho citizens, it doesn't matter what political side of the spectrum you fall in, you need to speak up. When a bill is good for Idaho, speak up.

In the past few years, we all have witnessed how a few loud, unreasonable voices can damage our democracy. For ourselves and for future generations, reasonable people need to speak up.

In our representative democracy, we have the opportunity and responsibility to contact those who represent us in the legislature (both in Idaho and federal legislators). We are very fortunate to have some Democratic leadership who accurately and honestly share what is going on in our statehouse and who listen to their constituents. However, with the single-party rule currently in the statehouse, there are many representatives and senators who are working to limit the rights of citizens, for example, legislation meant to suppress voting rights and voter initiatives.

Tip: Testifying in person or remotely is one of the best ways to communicate with the legislature, the governor, the public, and news organizations. The amount of testimony can help positive legislation and stop bad legislation. To learn how to testify at the legislature, click this link: <https://legislature.idaho.gov/resources/committeetestimony/>

The best way to influence legislators is through direct communication through email and/or a phone call. Using your Pen and Voice gives your legislators an understanding of what is important to you and how legislation positively or negatively affects your life. The following are the most effective general guidelines to follow when contacting your state or federal legislators:

- Know who your representatives are and contact them with your concerns. (The Idaho legislature website has a quick tool called [Who is my legislator?](#) that you

can use to easily find your representatives.) However, contacting a legislator that is not representing your district can still make a big difference.

- Get in a polite, but firm mindset. When you are disagreeing with a legislator, they are more likely to listen if you are respectful.
- State who you are, where you live, and what you want in the first two sentences.
- Keep your message brief and specific. During the legislative session, legislators get thousands of emails, calls, and other communications.
- Know the bill number and name. When giving your feedback, mention this first, for example, "I oppose SB 1110...."
- Personalize your message. For example, share (as briefly as possible) your personal experience and why/how this piece of legislation affects your life—positively or negatively. Personal stories can be very persuasive and memorable.
- Suggest a course of action or offer assistance. Nobody likes to hear a laundry list of complaints without a reasonable path on moving forward. For example, ask your legislator to vote for a piece of legislation that would make a positive impact for you and the rest of the state.
- Never threaten a legislator or make promises. Emotions can run high because legislation has such an effect on our lives. Threats and promises have the effect of turning people's ears off and putting them on the defense, which is not the mindset for progress.
- Contact the governor when you want to support a veto of damaging legislation.

Trick: Some legislators only skim their email. If this is the case for the legislator you are writing to, use ALL CAPS in a subject line or first sentence and limit your words to six. For example, STOP SB1110—WE VOTERS MATTER. Don't spend your time and energy writing a beautifully written email highlighting all the reasons why and how the legislation hurts you. BE LOUD AND CLEAR—with under six words in the subject or main line. In the body of the message, politely say you live in their district (or Idaho if you are writing to a committee) and quickly sum up your thoughts on the matter.

Calling Your Legislator

In addition to emailing your legislator, take 5 minutes to call them. Some legislators do not read their emails, and sometimes there are too many emails to quickly recap. When in session, the legislators have a staffer who prepares a report of calls detailing the opposition or support for certain bills.

Before you call, write out what you want to say. The message needs to be short and sweet. Writing it first will help to make sure your message is received loud and clear. The person on the other end of the line needs to be able to quickly sum up what you are saying—help that person so they can help your voice be heard.

Trick: An orchestrated call on the same day by many people can have a greater effect for action. Define a message, choose a day, then have hundreds of people call.

Contacting a Committee and/or the Entire Senate and/or House

As bills move through the legislative pipeline, some are so damaging that we need to act by voicing our opposition. You can contact either the Committee who is voting for the bill to proceed or the entire Senate and/or House (depending on which chamber is voting for the bill).

In a perfect world, a bill would be introduced by the sponsor to the committee that oversees that type of legislation. For example, the Education Committee would hear bills that pertain to education. Members of the committee vote to decide whether the bill should advance to the floor for debate. Once the bill has been advanced, a public hearing should be held and arguments by both sides should be heard (Senate or House, depending on where the bill originates). Then the bill would move to either the Senate or the House for a vote. This is the ideal, but there are dozens of variations to this process that are allowed.

Tip: Contact the governor as well. Remember the governor has the power to veto.

Knowing Who to Contact When and What About

Most legislators have newsletters, make sure to sign up so you can receive them in your inbox. You can sign up to receive any legislator's newsletter, not just your legislators. Follow your district's Facebook page, for example [Ada County District 16](#). Sign up for the [newsletter from IDLCC](#) (Idaho Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee). The *Idaho Press* has an excellent blog: [Eye on Boise](#). Boise State Public radio has a [Legislative Update newsletter](#).

The official Idaho Legislature website also has current information:

- There are 14 standing committees for the House, and 10 for the Senate. There are joint committees and special committees. To see all of the current committees, click this link: <https://legislature.idaho.gov/committees/>
- For current legislative sessions, go to <https://legislature.idaho.gov/sessioninfo/> and select the session year. You can look up legislation by number or subject and see the ongoing weekly bill status.

Contacting Your City, County, ACHD, or School Board Officials

City and county officials work toward making a better community by ensuring public spaces are clean and cared for, laws and city codes are adhered to, budgets are managed, services are provided, and so much more. ACHD works to ensure that roads are developed and maintained. School Board trustees ensure that schools are functioning and children are being taught a thoughtful, accurate, and planned curriculum. Some are volunteers and some are paid for their work. These officials and trustees serve our community so our community can work in an organized, safe, and reasonable fashion.

We need people willing to step up to serve our community. We also need members of the community to understand and appreciate what is going on in our local city and county governments to make sure that we are indeed functioning in an organized, safe, and reasonable fashion.

If you are willing to serve in office, contact the Ada County Democrats. We'll work with you to create a successful campaign.

If you want to be an informed and active member of your city and county, do the following:

Tip: As with any request, take the time to understand the issue, be concise, be polite, and offer a reasonable solution.

- Read your local newspaper. Watch your local news.
- Go to or listen to a meeting. City and county government and school boards have many open meetings where the public can listen to and testify at. On all city, county, and school websites are links to what each organization is working on, agendas to meetings, instructions on how to participate, and much more.
- Contact officials via email and take the time to personalize it. When you have a problem that falls under your city or county government purview, send them an email that briefly summarizes the issue and how it affects you. If possible, provide a reasonable solution.

"When you get the same form letter over and over again, it becomes less meaningful. It's more impactful if you take the time to personalize it." – Diana Lachiondo, community leader and former Ada County Commissioner

- Testify at a meeting. If there is an issue that you support or don't support, provide written or spoken testimony at the meeting where the issue is discussed. This action holds a lot of power and is recorded into the official record. Have a copy of your spoken testimony to give to the clerk so it can be recorded just as you testified.

I Feel the Need to Post: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Etc.

While it might be fun or cathartic to rant, call out, and shame those who you believe are ignorant or stupid, but stop and ask yourself: Is this effective communication? Am I improving on someone's day or making it worse? Am I going to change anyone's mind with this post?

Some long-held tips still ring true today: keep your word count on the lower end (under 15 words generally), engage with other users by commenting (keep positive, nobody likes a troll), try to generate original content, and consistently post on all platforms. While these are great general tips, as a group we want to rise above the fray and promote positive messaging and sharing. Sharing accurate, vetted information and spreading positive inspiration in a non-judgmental way can help to unify and break away from the "Us vs. Them" narrative that has been dividing us here in Idaho and our country.

Tip: When something makes you angry enough to want to act, make sure to read accurate information from vetted sources to try to understand the issue better. Sometimes what first makes us angry on second reflection we may find that we overreacted. Again, let's work to rise above the fray and persevere with reasonable and logical arguments.

In a blog post from Buffer.com in association with [BuzzSumo](#), they looked at "[What 777,367,063 Facebook Posts Tell us About Successful Content in 2019](#)" meant. The following are their key takeaways from this research:

- "Video performs better than all other types of Facebook posts."
- "The most common reactions to top Facebook video posts are LOVE and HAHA."
- "Inspirational, funny, and practical content generates the most engagement."

Here are some suggestions to relate this data for our purposes:

- The inspirational: Watch this [video from the Honorable John Lewis](#). It's both funny and inspirational.
- The funny: In the spirit of generational understanding, this video of [Dan Levy teaching his father Eugene Levy youth slang](#) might be fun to post.
- The practical: Repost or create action items that clearly and accurately state what an issue is and how to help resolve the issue. For example, if there is a bill that is working its way through the legislature that is going to negatively affect voting rights, state the name of the bill, the reason it is detrimental to our fundamental voting rights (include a brief personal story or reflection), and give what action is needed. By doing this, you help people act in positive ways. You give them a blueprint of what needs to be done and why.

Fighting the Good Fight: Tips for Combating False Information

Unfortunately, in our state there is a large portion of the population who listen to and respect false information from questionable resources and political officials who are in politics for self-service rather than service to others. It is going to take time, patience, and empathy to combat misinformation. We will need to dig deep into our empathy reserves to help win this fight.

House impeachment manager Jamie Raskin aptly quoted Voltaire at Trump's second impeachment trial, "Anyone who can make you believe absurdities can make you

commit atrocities." We must work together to prevent this from happening again...and again.

The Democratic National Committee (DNC) has some [tips for combating disinformation](#). The following are some highlights from their list. These tips are also valuable for educating young voters who are starting their voyage as responsible, engaged citizens.

Tip: Try to hold patience and empathy in your heart. This will not only help your blood pressure but may have a more positive effect on your friend or family member who believes in falsities.

- "Information you seek out directly will usually be of higher quality than what you absorb passively on social media." Some good resources to find quality news are [NewsGuard](#) and [Media Bias/Fact Check](#).
- "Scrutinize the information you read before you share, especially if it confirms what you already believe to be true." You can use reputable fact-checker websites like [Snopes](#), [AP Fact Check](#), [PolitiFact](#), [FactCheck.org](#), and [Lead Stories](#) to "try to inject truth into the debate without attacking the sharer (they may be a victim of false content themselves)."
- "Educate yourself." The DNC page has a list of excellent resources and links that provide reputable information such as this video from NBC [Factory of Lies](#) and this article from the Knight Foundation "[Disinformation, 'Fake News' and Influence Campaigns on Twitter](#)."

Thank You!

Thank you for your interest and, hopefully, action using The Pen and Your Voice to promote democratic values.

One final note, reach out and thank the people who are fighting the good fight on our behalf. Writing a thank you note to someone who is working hard and receiving little thanks (and probably tons of hate mail) is a kindness that uplifts and keeps people empowered to push forward.

As Diana Lachiondo, community leader and former Ada County Commissioner says, "As an elected official, when I received some really nice, thoughtful cards, this bolstered me when times were tough."