**Advocacy Letters 101**

# **The Purpose of an Advocacy Letter**

Writing a letter can be a great way to advocate on an issue that has a disproportionate impact on people who are blind or partially sighted. Whether the issue you’re advocating on impacts an individual or a community, the same basic steps to self-advocacy apply. For a closer look at the steps to self-advocacy, see Advocacy 101.

The goal of any advocacy initiative, including letter writing, is to remove barriers faced by marginalized groups. Removing barriers promotes equity and allows people to fully engage in their communities and access goods and services without undue obstacles.

The purpose of an advocacy letter is to present the issue and invite the recipient to collaborate with you to find a solution. It is always best to assume that the recipient of your letter is interested in finding a solution to the issue but doesn’t know how to do so. This will help to ensure that you are entering into the letter writing process with a respectful tone and a willingness to work together toward a solution.

# **The Anatomy of an Effective Advocacy Letter**

An effective advocacy letter can be broken down into the following distinct sections:

1. The salutation
2. The introduction
3. The issue
4. The solution
5. The conclusion

# **1. The Salutation**

The salutation of your letter is the opening greeting. Salutations often pair a word of greeting with a person’s name and/or title, such as “Dear James” or “Attention Councilor Leung”.

The salutation is the first thing your recipient will read. It sets the tone for what follows, and it lets your reader know that you’re professional and that you’ve done your homework. For this reason, it’s important to think carefully about your salutation.

If you are writing a letter to an elected official, you should always use a formal greeting. Canada has adopted a formal method by which to address various public officials. The styles of address can be found through [Heritage Canada Styles of Address Page](https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/protocol-guidelines-special-event/styles-address.html).

It is important to note that a salutation often differs from a person’s official title. For instance, the Lieutenant Governor is addressed as His/Her Honor. Consult the styles of address for more information.

If the recipient of your letter is not an elected official, you don’t need to use these formal titles, but you should still identify a senior representative by title. For example, “Attention James Leung, President and Chief Executive Officer.”

# **A Note About Gender Pronouns**

Pronouns are the words that we use in place of a person’s proper name. You may have noticed that people are sharing their pronouns in introductions, email signatures, and on name tags. We share pronouns to avoid assuming someone’s pronouns based on factors like appearance. By sharing our own pronouns, we encourage others to do the same. Using someone’s correct pronouns is an important way of affirming who they are and is a fundamental part of being an ally. Allyship helps to build more welcoming spaces for everyone.

Some common pronouns include she/her, he/him, and they/them. Some people prefer not to use pronouns at all.

Here are a few examples of how pronouns are used:

* My friend Sunita uses she/her pronouns. She will be late for the meeting. I will save her a seat, and I’ll take the chair to her left.
* My friend Sunita uses they/them pronouns. They will be late for the meeting. I will save them a seat, and I’ll take the chair to their left.
* My friend Sunita does not use pronouns. Sunita will be late for the meeting. I’ll save a seat for Sunita, and I’ll take the chair to Sunita’s left.

Not everyone will feel comfortable sharing their pronouns. People may choose not to share their pronouns for a variety of reasons, including:

* They are questioning
* They don’t use pronouns
* They don’t feel comfortable sharing at that moment
* They don’t feel comfortable sharing in that space
* They fear bullying or harassment after sharing.

When addressing a letter to a person whose pronouns you are not sure of, it’s best to avoid gender-specific pronouns or use gender neutral language to avoid misgendering someone. You can address the person with their name, their title, or a combination of their name and title instead of using gendered titles like Mr., Mrs., Ms., Miss, Madam, or Sir. If addressing a letter to a group, you can use neutral language like Committee Members or Councilors instead of gender-specific language like Ladies and Gentlemen.

## **The Anatomy of a Salutation**

* A word of greeting that precedes the name of the recipient
* The recipient’s name
* The recipient’s title, if applicable. This may come before or after the recipient’s name, depending on the person’s title.

## **Examples**

* Dear James Leung
* Dear James Leung, President and CEO
* Attention Councilor Leung
* Dear Committee Members

# **2. The Introduction**

The first line(s) of your letter should explain who you are and why you are writing the letter. This is the bridge between your salutation and the body of your letter, and it gives your reader a snapshot of you and the issue.

If you are a private citizen or individual advocate, and you are writing the letter on your own behalf, you should share your name and who you are in relation to the recipient. For example, you may want to share that you are a blind or partially sighted citizen of a given community, a blind or partially sighted voter in a given constituency, or a blind or partially sighted patron of a business.

If you are writing on behalf of another person or a group of people, this should also be stated in the introduction. You should share your name, explain who you are writing on behalf of, and who the person or group of people is in relation to the recipient. For example, you may want to explain that you are writing on behalf of a blind or partially sighted citizen of a given community, a group of blind or partially sighted voters in a given constituency, or a group of blind or partially sighted patrons of a business.

Next, you’ll want to provide a snapshot of the issue that you’re writing about. Your explanation of the issue should be clear and concise. You’ll have plenty of space to expand on the issue in the next section of the letter. In this section, your goal is to state the issue in as few words or sentences as you can while still communicating the core of the issue.

## **A Note About Anger**

It is important to avoid expressing anger in your introduction or in any other part of your letter. While anger is a natural response to encountering barriers, your letter should have a professional, respectful tone that will open the door for collaborative problem solving. Remember that your advocacy efforts may have a real impact on the lives of your neighbors, friends, and community, and it is important that you make every effort to achieve a successful outcome.

## **The Anatomy of an Introduction**

* State your name
* State your role, if applicable
* Explain who you are advocating on behalf of, if applicable
* Explain who you are in relation to the recipient, or who the person or group you’re advocating on behalf of is in relation to the recipient
* Provide a snapshot of the issue
* Avoid expressing anger

## **Examples**

* My name is Ravi Patel, and I’m a blind resident of Milton. I’m writing to share my concerns about the accessibility barriers posed by sidewalk patios in the downtown area.
* My name is Melissa Jenkins, and I am an advocacy volunteer with CNIB. I’m writing on behalf of a group of blind and partially sighted residents of Milton. We would like to share our concerns about the accessibility barriers posed by sidewalk patios in the downtown area.

# **3. The Issue**

In the next part of your letter, you’ll provide more detail about the issue that you presented in your introduction. Your main goal in this section of the letter is to explain the issue in a way that is easy to understand. In order for barriers to be removed, those with the power to create change must be able to understand the issue and how it impacts their voters, constituents, customers, etc.

While explaining the issue may sound straightforward, remember that the person or organization to whom you’re writing may be hearing about the issue for the first time. When you present the issue, it is essential that you choose words that will be understood by your audience.

Let’s look at an example.

Statement 1: I’m blind, and your store is impossible for me to navigate because the floor markings are inaccessible.

Statement 2: I’m blind, and I use a white cane to navigate. While I know that all customers in your store are supposed to follow the arrows on the floor, I am not able to see the arrows, nor can I feel them with my cane when I swipe it along the floor. As a result, I am not able to shop independently in your store.

While statement 1 may be readily understood by those of us within the CNIB community, those outside of the CNIB community may not be familiar with what is accessible or inaccessible for people who are blind or partially sighted. The term “inaccessible” is jargon. While it has meaning for those of us in the CNIB community, the public may need a much clearer explanation of a barrier.

Let’s look at another example.

Statement 1: I’m blind and I use Voiceover. Your website is impossible to navigate with Voiceover.

Statement 2: I’m blind, and I use a screen reader to shop online. I attempted to purchase a pair of shoes on your website, but my screen reader cannot interact with some features of your website, such as the price list and the button that allows shoppers to add items to their cart.

Again, while statement 1 may be readily understood by those of us within the CNIB community, those outside of the CNIB community may not be familiar with what Voiceover is and how it works. The term “Voiceover” is jargon. The public may not even know that such tools exist, let alone how they interact with different features of websites.

When you are presenting the issue, it is also important to include any pertinent dates, times, or names relating to your issue. For example, if you’ve previously contacted the organization about the issue, you should include the name of the person you contacted and the date on which you contacted them, as well as a summary of any response that you received. If you were denied access to a space that is open to the public, or if you received discriminatory treatment, you should note the date(s), time(s), and who was involved. If you encountered a barrier in the built environment, you should state the location of the barrier and the date(s) and time(s) that the barrier was encountered, if applicable.

Remember that you are providing detail to paint a picture of the issue for your recipient. Stick to the facts. Avoid accusations, criticism, and speculation.

## **A Note About Persistence**

The path to a resolution is rarely straightforward. The recipient of your letter may not have the ability or interest to champion the issue that you’re advocating on. For this reason, it is important to enter any advocacy pursuit with an understanding that you’ll need to be persistent.

For those who have the power to create change, especially elected officials, there are many competing causes that require their attention at any given time. The person may not have enough resources to prioritize all of them. This doesn’t mean that your issue is not important or that you should give up. Someone who doesn’t have the resources to address your issue now may have the resources later. Someone who is disinterested now may become interested if they gain a clearer understanding of the issue. You’ll need to convince them that addressing the issue will benefit everyone, including them.

### **The Anatomy of the Issue**

* Provide a concise explanation of the issue
* Use language that can be easily understood by the public
* Be specific. Include pertinent dates, times, locations, or hazards. If you spoke with someone about the issue, include the person’s name and what was said in the conversation.
* Explain why the issue creates a barrier.

## **Example**

I am blind, and I use a white cane to navigate. I am unable to safely access the front entrance of your establishment because there is no connecting sidewalk between the main sidewalk and your front entrance. As a result, I must navigate through the busy parking lot to reach the front entrance, which puts my safety at risk. I met with James Leung, your regional manager, on April 3 to discuss my concerns. I followed up with James by email on May 29 and did not receive a response. Despite my communications with James, no changes have been made that would allow a safe path of travel between the main sidewalk and the front door of your establishment. This accessibility barrier puts everyone at risk, especially people who are blind or partially sighted.

# **4. The Solution**

When engaging in any type of advocacy, it’s important to come prepared with potential solutions. Presenting issues without considering solutions is complaining. While you don’t need to have all the answers, showing a willingness to collaborate and problem solve together will create a tone of cooperation and will make others more open to working with you now and in the future.

Let’s look at an example.

Statement 1: Your menu is not accessible to blind people because it’s only available in print.

Statement 2: Your menu is not accessible to blind people because it’s only available in print. The availability of alternate formats, such as large print, braille, and a digital option, would make your menu more accessible to everyone.

While the first sentence in both statement 1 and 2 is true, the presentation of solutions in statement 2 opens the door for problem solving.

It’s important to propose solutions that are specific and realistic. A specific solution is one that is clearly explained. A realistic solution is one which can be achieved, in practical terms. While our goal as part of the CNIB community is to remove barriers for people who are blind or partially sighted, change doesn’t happen overnight. Small wins lead to big progress.

Let’s look at an example.

Statement 1: You need to make your taxi company more accessible for people who are blind or partially sighted.

Statement 2: Your taxi company can be made more accessible and inclusive for people who are blind or partially sighted by including driver training about the legal rights of guide dog handlers.

While both statements are focused on the same solution—making the taxi company more accessible for people who are blind or partially sighted—statement 1 is not specific enough. It tells the recipient that change is needed, but it doesn’t clearly explain how that change can be achieved.

Let’s look at another example.

Statement 1: Your taxi company can be made more accessible and inclusive for people who are blind or partially sighted by mandating that all new employees must be dog lovers.

Statement 2: Your taxi company can be made more accessible and inclusive for people who are blind or partially sighted by including driver training about the legal rights of guide dog handlers.

Again, while both statements seek to achieve the same thing, statement 1 is not realistic. It is not a solution that the recipient would be able to implement.

Some advocates suggest proposing three possible solutions, with the first one being the ideal solution and the remaining two solutions being either less ideal or impractical. The number of solutions that you propose will depend on the specifics of the issue that you’re advocating on.

Let’s look at an example.

Solution 1: Request that a staff member contact you by phone to assist you with making a purchase from the store’s website

Solution 2: Request that the company send out an email to all customers, offering a discount on the next purchase to those who can’t shop on their website because of accessibility barriers

Solution 3: Request that the company do a complete overhaul of their website to make it accessible to all customers

While all the above solutions are reasonable, the first solution would likely be most attractive to the company. It is specific, realistic, and inexpensive. Solutions 2 and 3 are also specific and realistic but would come at a much higher cost to the company and would take much more time to implement. In this example, you can see how providing multiple solutions makes it easy for the recipient to choose one and resolve the issue, at least in the short term.

## **The Anatomy of the Solution**

* Be prepared
* Be specific
* Be realistic
* Consider multiple solutions, depending on the issue

## **Example**

To mitigate the safety risks that sandwich boards can pose for pedestrians, especially those who are blind or partially sighted, the city should establish by-laws that only allow sandwich boards and other sidewalk furniture in areas where a clear path of travel for pedestrians can be maintained. If this is not possible, the city should ban the use of sandwich boards on sidewalks.

# **5. The Conclusion**

You have found the appropriate salutation, crafted a concise introduction, presented the issue, and offered solutions. While it may seem as though all the work is done, you shouldn’t disregard the conclusion of your letter. This is where you’ll wrap it all up by reiterating the importance of the issue, connecting it to the broader community, detailing any follow-up items, and signing off.

There is no need to provide an exhaustive summary of everything you’ve already stated in your letter. However, you should take this opportunity to restate the importance of the issue so that the message stays with your recipient after they’ve finished reading. If you haven’t already done so in your letter, you can use this space to highlight the impact of the issue on the broader community. For example, if you’ve shared how access to print-only resources creates a barrier for you and others who are blind or partially sighted, you can also note that it is a barrier for people with print disabilities. If you’ve explained how curb cuts create barriers for you and other people who are blind or partially sighted, you can also note that they pose barriers for people who are wheelchair users and parents using strollers.

In your closing remarks, you should outline any action items that the recipient should be aware of. This could include dates and times of any upcoming meetings to address the issue, or a date or timeframe in which you will follow up.

Finally, you’ll want to sign off and include your relevant contact details so that the recipient can get in touch with you if needed. Your sign off should be concise and respectful, just like the rest of your letter.

If you are advocating on behalf of another person or group of people, it is essential that you share the letter with them to ensure that it accurately captures their experiences before you send it. Make sure that the person or group is comfortable with what you’ve written. If they are not comfortable, make any necessary edits until they are satisfied that the letter reflects their experiences.

## **A Note About the Value of Advocacy**

While the barriers faced by people who are blind or partially sighted can often seem insurmountable, it’s important to remember that advocacy can and does create change. Consider next stop announcements, the availability of accessible banking machines at most financial institutions, and the presence of accessible pedestrian signals at a growing number of intersections. One person really can make a difference.

## **The Anatomy of The Conclusion**

* Restate the importance of the issue
* Explain how the issue impacts the broader community
* Summarize action items
* Sign off
* If you are advocating on behalf of another person or group, seek feedback before sending the letter

## **Example**

In summary, we request that an additional bus stop be placed on the west side of the street until an audible pedestrian signal can be installed at the nearest intersection. An additional bus stop will not only mitigate risks for people who are blind or partially sighted, but for all transit users in the area, including youth from the nearby high school and parents travelling with small children from the adjacent daycare facility.

I would appreciate an opportunity to discuss this with you in more detail. I will reach out to your office in two weeks to request an appointment.

Sincerely,

Francisco Martinez

# **Escalating an Advocacy Issue**

You will have noticed that we have not yet mentioned rights, legislation, or formal complaints. The reason for this is simple: if a solution can be found without a formal complaint, everyone wins. In an ideal situation, the barrier will be removed, the person(s) being impacted by the barrier will have increased safety, access, or independence, and the person to whom you’ve advocated will have a better understanding of the needs of customers or constituents who are blind or partially sighted.

It is important to note that, in some circumstances, your advocacy efforts may be strengthened by referring or linking to a relevant document or piece of legislation. For instance, if you are advocating to a municipality about accessibility barriers for pedestrians, linking to the municipality’s accessibility plan or a pedestrian safety initiative could highlight the goals of the municipality and create a mutually beneficial objective.

However, not all advocacy efforts have a swift and straightforward resolution. If your advocacy efforts have not resulted in a solution, you may need to escalate the issue.

For more information about the different levels of government as well as disability legislation that may be relevant to your advocacy issue, see our [Government Relations 101 guide](https://www.cnib.ca/sites/default/files/2023-02/Guide%20-%20Government%20Relations%20101_EN.docx).

If you need additional support with an advocacy issue, you can contact advocacy@cnib.ca

If you need additional support with an advocacy issue related to guide dogs, you can contact guidedogs@cnib.ca