



# Marblehead Student Advocacy Guide

*How You Can Influence Government Decisions*

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Sample Letters to the Editor / Op-Eds (See separate document)

This Guide, the Appendix, and other information from LWV-Marblehead is available at <https://my.lwv.org/massachusetts/marblehead>.

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## What is Advocacy?

**Advocacy** is the act of speaking on behalf of or in support of another person, place, or thing. This Guide deals with advocacy for an issue you care about.

**Lobbying** is the act of talking to elected officials about the merits of your position on an issue. Your goal is to influence their position through your knowledge of and passion for the issue. Paid lobbyists and special interest groups aggressively seek to influence public policy, but the same message has a different impact coming from a student—and future voter—in the district. Students have a unique opportunity to educate our elected officials about the views of new or future voters.

**Grassroots advocacy** refers to common or ordinary people joining together to advocate for a specific cause. Grassroots advocacy includes organizing, mobilizing, and engaging the public to advance the cause. Students may start a grassroots movement or join grassroots organizations already in existence.

**Media advocacy** is a means to get your message out to the public, beyond government officials and those already engaged in the issue. Individuals, grassroots organizations, candidates, officials, etc., all use media to reach the public at large, hoping to gain broad support for their cause. You should explore different types of media that reach fellow students but also go beyond your own peer groups.

## What Is Your Issue?

Your issue can be anything that is controlled by the government that you think should be changed. Before deciding on an issue, consider some practical questions, such as:

How can a change be made (e.g., enacting a constitutional amendment, passing a law, changing a policy)?  
Are others working on this issue (e.g., advocacy groups and individuals)?

## State and Local Government

### Massachusetts Government

The Massachusetts legislature, or General Court, is the primary author of laws enacted in Massachusetts. It is a two-chambered body - the Senate has 40 members and the House of Representatives has 160 members, all of whom are elected to concurrent two-year terms in November of even-numbered years.



*Massachusetts State House, Boston*



The official website of the Massachusetts General Court is [malegislature.gov](http://malegislature.gov). Here you will find listings of legislators, bills and laws, and hearings and events, as well as a detailed description of the legislative process. Many of the hearings and events are livestreamed and recorded.

Each two-year legislative session begins on the first Wednesday in January of odd-numbered years and ends on the day before the beginning of the next session. Most of the active work on legislation, however, is completed by the last day of the formal session, July 31 of the following even-numbered year.

Most legislation is submitted to the House or Senate Clerk's office on or before 5:00 p.m. on the third Friday in January at the beginning of the two-year session. In the weeks prior to filing, caucuses are held in which sponsors seek other legislators to co-sponsor their bills.

Under the state Constitution, any citizen may submit a proposed piece of legislation to a his or her representative or senator and request the legislator to submit the bill "by request" (these bills do not necessarily have the support of the legislators who file them). This "right of free petition" is unique to Massachusetts. There is no prohibition on an individual's right to continually refile a bill year after year.

The deadline for filing legislation is 5 p.m. on the first Wednesday in December preceding the beginning of the new biennial session. If this deadline is missed, a bill may be "late-filed". Late-filed bills, which are routinely admitted, must be approved by the House and Senate Committees on Rules and then receive the approval of four-fifths of the members of each branch to be introduced.

Each session there are approximately 6,000 bills filed in the House of Representatives and 2,000 in the Senate. For each bill, the clerk's office in the chamber where the bill was filed has the responsibility to assign House or Senate numbers, assigned to a joint committee of members of the House and the Senate, and sent to the non-initiating chamber for agreement and committee assignment. Once a bill is submitted to a joint committee, that committee must hold a public hearing on the bill. Interested parties may attend and submit oral and/or written testimony. Most bills must be reported out of joint committees by a deadline set by the legislature early in the second year of the session in order to remain active in that session.

Following the public hearing, the committee will deliberate in Executive Session and make its recommendation to the body that initiated the bill (House or Senate). Their options are: 1) ought to pass; 2) ought not to pass; 3) ought to pass as changed; 4) discharge to another committee; 5) refer for a study order. (A study order authorizes the committee to create a subcommittee to study the bill during recess and file a report on its findings, but this is often a quiet way to kill a bill.) Frequently, the bill number will change during this process and subsequent deliberations, so if you are following a bill you need to keep track.

Once a bill is out of the joint committee, a series of reviews by House and/or Senate committees occurs. Bills can be held up or die in these committees, particularly the Ways and Means Committee. With a positive vote ("passed to be engrossed"), the bill is sent to the non-initiating body. The non-initiating chamber places the bill on its calendar to be discussed and voted on. Both chambers must deliver a positive vote on the same bill. If the second chamber alters the initiating chamber's bill, a conference committee is formed to work out a bill that both branches will adopt.

Once both branches have "passed to be engrossed" the identical bill, it is sent to the Engrossing Division for official printing. The bill is then sent first to the House and then the Senate for enactment. The engrossed bill may be debated and rejected (but not amended) in either chamber, but this is usually just a formality.

The final step is for the governor to either sign or veto the bill within 10 days of receipt. A two-thirds vote of both branches of the legislature is required to override a gubernatorial veto. The governor may also return the bill to the branch where it originated with recommendations that amendments be made to it. If the governor does not sign the bill, veto it, or return it to the originating branch, it will

become law without his or her signature after ten days during which the legislation is in session. If the ten-day period occurs when the legislature has concluded its session (i.e. no longer is in session), the bill becomes law only if the Governor signs it. If he does not sign it, it will not become law and this is known as a **pocket veto**. You can find out here what [bills are on the Governor's desk](#).

Any bills that are not passed by the conclusion of the two-year legislative session are no longer under consideration and must be refiled in order to be considered during the next session.

### **Marblehead Government**

Marblehead is primarily governed by state law and town by-laws. Marblehead has an Open Town Meeting form of government. The Select Board and Town Administrator serve as the overseeing entities.

### **Marblehead Town Meeting**



The legislative body of Marblehead's town government is Town Meeting. The quorum for Town Meeting (the minimum number of registered voters required to conduct business) is 300. The Annual Town Meeting begins on the first Monday in May and continues after adjournment on subsequent evenings until all business is completed. Any registered voter in Marblehead may attend, speak and vote at Town Meeting. Special Town Meetings may be called in two ways 1) by the Select Board or 2) by two hundred registered voters or 20% of the total number of registered voters, whichever is less in number. The Special Town Meeting must be held no later than 45 days after the Select Board receives the request from registered voters. (There are some exceptions to this rule.)

The elected Town Moderator presides at Town Meeting. The public may attend and speak on issues being considered upon recognition by the Moderator. Only registered voters in Marblehead may vote at Town Meeting. MHTV broadcasts Town Meeting live on the local government channel and posts it for future viewing.

Town Meeting is responsible for passing the annual town budget, setting salaries for elected officials, approving funding for capital items and stabilization funds, amending and adopting new general and zoning by-laws, adopting resolutions, and addressing other matters deemed appropriate, including citizens' petitions that have been approved by the Town for inclusion.

The agenda and supplementary information for Town Meetings are contained in the Town Meeting Warrant. The Warrant consists of a series of Articles, (one Article for each item to be voted on), and supplementary information. Warrants are available to Marblehead registered voters in advance of Town Meeting (at least 7 days for annual Town Meeting and 14 days for a special Town Meeting). Warrants and supporting documents are posted on the Town website at <https://www.marblehead.org>.

### **Select Board**

The executive body of Marblehead's town government is the Select Board. This board consists of five members elected for three-year staggered terms. The Select Board, as the executive body, has general supervision over all matters that are not specifically delegated by law or vote to some other officer or board.

### **Town Administrator**

The Town Administrator is hired by the Select Board and serves as the chief executive

officer for the Town. The Town Administrator administers the business of the Select Board and is responsible for day-to-day operation and oversight of Town departments, appointed positions under the jurisdiction of the Select Board, and other positions determined by Town Meeting.

### **Town of Marblehead Information**

Town website: <https://www.marblehead.org>

General By-Laws: <https://ecode360.com/MA1991?needHash=true>

Zoning By-Laws and Regulations: <https://www.marblehead.org/zoning-board-appeals/pages/zoning-laws-regulations>

Annual Town Reports <https://www.marblehead.org/select-board-office/pages/annual-town-reports>

Marblehead boards and committees, elected and appointed <https://www.marblehead.org/boards>

### **Boston Government**

Students who live in Boston may be interested in advocating for a neighborhood or citywide issue. The city of Boston has a Mayor and City Council system. In this form of municipal government, the City Council serves as the city's primary legislative body and the Mayor serves as the city's chief executive.

### **City of Boston Information**

[City of Boston Government](#)

[City of Boston Departments](#)

## Developing an Advocacy Strategy

An advocacy strategy describes how you will persuade policymakers to support your issue, ideas, or a specific course of action. The strategy should focus on identifying your key messages and how you will deliver and advocate for them to your elected officials through lobbying, grassroots campaigns, and media strategies.

## Advocating at the State Level

### **Lobbying Legislators**

Lobbying involves direct contact with legislators, usually from your own district. Each resident has two state legislators—a Senator and a Representative. Attending in-person meetings at the State House, in-person meetings in the district, or remote meetings, and mailing letters, sending email, or telephoning can all be effective ways of lobbying. Legislators' staff count all communications, particularly those from constituents. However, legislators and their staff tell us that some forms of communication are more effective than others.

Contact information for legislators may be found at [malegislature.gov](http://malegislature.gov) where there is also a tool to find your two state legislators by entering your zip code. Most legislators also have their own website and social media sites, so you can get contact information from these sites. Their websites often show their legislative priorities and bills they are sponsoring.

Common sense and practical considerations guide how best to communicate with your legislators. Each legislator's staff may also be able to give you some guidance. If you have a lot of information to share, a written communication may be most effective. If time is of the essence, a phone call or email may be best.

When calling your legislator’s office, it is likely that you will speak to a staff member. You will need to be very specific about what you are asking the legislator to do and why.

A first contact with a legislator or staff member can be the beginning of an ongoing, productive relationship. A written thank-you note when your legislator takes the action you requested or just takes the time to meet or discuss an issue with you helps build a relationship. Even if you disagree with your legislator on one issue, you may be able to work together on another.

### **Before Contacting Your Legislators**

**KNOW YOUR “ASK”:** Be specific about what you are asking your legislators to do. Would you like them to sponsor or cosponsor a bill, contact committee chairs, report bill out of committee favorably, bring the bill to the floor for a vote, vote yes, etc.?

- Do your research before attending a meeting, sending an email, or making a phone call.
  - Know who the lead sponsor of the bill is, if your elected official is a cosponsor or supporter, and who or what organizations endorse the proposal.
  - Determine the current status of the bill by checking [malegislature.gov](http://malegislature.gov).
- Share your personal story/experience in the topic area.
  - Why is this important to you?
  - How would this impact you and your community?
- Be kind.
  - Thank legislators and staff for their support on other bills and for their time.
  - Staff are your friends! Ask for their contact information and follow up after the meeting.
  - Always send a thank-you.

### **Lobbying by Phone, Email, or Letter**

A telephone call or an email to your legislator is a quick and simple way to lobby for a bill or issue. Telephone and email contacts can be found at [malegislature.gov](http://malegislature.gov). All you need to say is who you are, where you live, and why you are calling. It is useful to include the bill number.

### ***Sample Phone Conversation***

Receptionist: Good morning. Senator Joan Smith’s office.

You: Hi. My name is Jane Q. Public, and I live at 100 Main Street in Hometown.

Receptionist: May I help you?

You: I am calling to urge Senator Smith to vote for Senate Bill [number], which [does what?] [example: requires lunch be provided free for all elementary school students].

Receptionist: I will let the senator know.

You: Thank you. Good-bye.

Receptionist: Good-bye.

### ***Sample Short Email***

Dear Senator Smith,

I am writing to urge you to vote for Senate Bill [number], which [does what?] [example: requires lunch be provided free for all elementary school students].

[Write briefly about your personal reason for supporting the issue, if you have one.]

Thank you,  
Jane Q. Public  
100 Main Street, Hometown

### ***Writing a Letter or More Detailed Email (legislators will be impressed!)***

When you write to elected officials, remember to:

- Address only one issue per document.
- Include a succinct and relevant subject line.
- Add your contact information (name, street address, email address, and phone number).
- Refer to and describe the bill.
- Be clear about what you are asking for.
- State the reasons for your position.
- Humanize the issue by sharing a personal experience or an experience of a close friend or family member.
- Thank the legislator for his or her attention to the matter.
- Use official titles in both letters and emails:
  - A letter should be addressed formally (e.g., The Honorable John Smith, title, and official address).
  - Emails and letters should start: Dear Senator, Representative, Governor, etc.
- State your request first, followed by compelling evidence why this legislation will address your concerns.
- Include or attach fact sheets or other support documentation, but don't overwhelm them.

**Form letters** are online forms or suggested email text written and distributed by an advocacy group to many people. These may be the least effective form of communication, but they do save time and express your views. Most form letters offer the opportunity to alter the message to make it more personal, and taking the time to do so will make your letter more impactful.

### **Lobbying by Meeting with Legislator(s) (in-person or remotely)**

#### ***Arranging a Meeting***

If your legislator has scheduled "office hours" for his/her district, follow directions or arrange to meet there. For other in-person or remote meetings in the district or at the State House in Boston, call the legislator's office to request a meeting. State your name, address, and the purpose of the meeting. Staff often ask the bill's number so the legislator can be prepared, so be sure to have the [current number](#).

#### ***During the Meeting***

- Thank the legislator(s) and staff for meeting with you and for attending your presentation.
- Be relatively brief, no more than 30 minutes.
- Share personal experiences that shed light on this issue: Why does your issue matter to you?
- State key reasons for your views.
- Refer to specific bill numbers.
- Provide a fact sheet and other support documentation (in moderation) to leave with the legislator. Include your name and contact information so they will remember you and your issue. Be aware that your legislator may not be familiar with your bill.

- Is the legislator a cosponsor? Does the legislator support the bill(s)?
  - If YES, thank the legislator for his or her support and ask for the next step in the legislative process.
  - If NO or not yet, ask the legislator for his or her support.
- Counter any arguments the opposition may use.
- If you are comfortable doing so, take a photo of you and your fellow lobbyists with your legislator. Post it on social media and tag the legislator.
- Thank the legislator for taking the time to meet with you.

### ***After the Meeting***

- Send a thank-you or other follow-up communication (email or social media).

### **Grassroots Advocacy**

**Grassroots advocacy** refers to common or ordinary people joining together for a specific cause. Grassroots advocacy includes organizing, mobilizing, and engaging the public to advance the cause. Students may start a grassroots movement or participate through grassroots organizations already in existence.

A grassroots organization develops a strategic advocacy plan that includes multiple actions, high visibility, and mobilizing large numbers of people.

A strategic plan of action and advocacy may include:

- Employing lobbying techniques outlined in the section above
- Attending committee hearings (wearing visible stickers or t-shirts)
- Organizing or attending lobby days together
- Creating sample letters to the editor or op-eds for local newspapers
- Planning rallies, marches, or other high-visibility events
- Maintaining a social media and web presence for members and the public
- Holding public forums to educate and/or advocate
- Joining with other grassroots organizations to advocate for specific common goals

To organize a new group, you can:

- Organize a group of students or residents to strategize about advocating for an issue
- Ask friends, neighbors, and colleagues to join your organization
- Use media opportunities to build a larger group
- Send a press release about the formation of the group to the local newspapers and local cable news stations
- Develop a logo, tagline, and mission
- Prepare your strategy for action and advocacy

### **Media Advocacy - Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor**

Opinion pieces (or op-eds) and letters to the editor are mechanisms to get your opinions printed.

Generally, op-eds are longer than letters, and often (although not always) letters respond to a published article or editorial. **Check the target publication to determine the rules and word limits prior to preparing your submission.**



## **Op-Eds**

Op-ed is an abbreviation for “opposite the editorial page” because in printed newspapers they often appeared on a page facing the editorial page. Op-eds express the opinion of the author on a particular issue and offer an excellent opportunity for you to advance your message. Even if your op-ed is not published, it can be posted on your own website or Google drive and shared on social media.

The following are some tips for writing and submitting an op-ed that will increase your chances of getting it published:

- Determine your goal. What do you want to achieve through your op-ed? Do you want people to take a specific action?
- When drafting your op-ed, make sure that you are familiar with the types of pieces that are generally published in the paper, and be sure to focus on the topic’s significance to the community.
- Look up the rules for submitting a piece to the paper (word counts, methods of submission, and other factors vary depending on the newspaper).
- Select one message to communicate.
- Be controversial or thought provoking.
- Illustrate how the topic or issue affects readers. Put a face on the issue by starting your op-ed with the story of someone who has been affected or begin with an attention-getting statistic.
- Describe the problem and why it exists. This is often where you can address the opposing viewpoint and explain your perspective.
- Offer your solution to the problem and explain why it’s the best option.
- Conclude on a strong note by repeating your message or stating a call to action.
- Add one or two sentences at the end that include your name and title and describe your credentials as they relate to the topic (if any).

## **Letters to the Editor**

You can use letters to the editor to correct or interpret facts in response to an inaccurate or biased article, to explain the connection between a news item and your priority issues, or to praise or criticize a recent article or editorial. Whatever your purpose, your letter will reach many people in your community—without exception, the letters section is one of the most highly read segments of newspapers and magazines.

In the first paragraph of your letter, refer to the article or position that you are writing about. If it is in reference to a particular article, name the reporter who wrote the article, the date published, and the title of the article. State why you disagree; then give your position on the issue.

Letters to the editor should be short and to the point. Most letters should be less than 200 words. The first sentence is often the most important. Letters should be concise, informative, and personal at the same time.

For larger papers, such as *The Boston Globe* or *Boston Herald*, letters to the editor generally respond to published articles, editorials, or op-eds. The key to getting your letter published is making sure that it is timely. Ideally, you would submit a letter to the editor within 24 hours after the piece you're responding to appeared.

For smaller papers, such as the *Marblehead Current* or *Marblehead Weekly News*, letters can be about any topic and do not have to be related to something previously published. Use the same guidance listed under op-eds, but your letter must be shorter.

For examples of published Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor, see the Appendix (a separate document).

### **Social Media and Websites**

Social media reaches a different audience than the traditional media options discussed above. Social media allows you to be creative with graphics, short videos, and political cartoons. A social media post may link to a fact sheet, a call to action, or an editorial for those wanting more details.

Twitter (now X) is the social media platform used by Massachusetts legislators. It is a great advocacy tool and offers a way to stay updated on Massachusetts political trends.

Remember to:

- Frame the “ask” positively - e.g., contact your legislators to support your issue.
- Use the hashtag #mapoli.?
- Tag bill sponsors as well as other organizations in your coalition if you are working within one.

A website advocating for a bill or an issue is a good place to present longer material, such as fact sheets, links to further information, op-eds, information about supporting organizations, etc. Social media posts can lead people to your website.

## **Advocating at the Local Level**

### **Marblehead**

The methods listed above for state level advocacy are similar at the local level. In Marblehead, Town Meeting makes final decisions, but the Select Board and other boards and commissions have the authority to make policy decisions and to determine what issues come before Town Meeting.

It is usually obvious which board or committee/commission to approach, depending on your issue. If your issue deals with the schools, then the School Committee is a good place to start; for fields, the Recreation and Parks Commission; for zoning, the Town Planning Board. The Select Board has authority over several departments, including Public Works, Police, Fire, and Buildings.

Public meetings of Marblehead boards and commissions can be attended in person, with meeting time, place and agenda posted 48 hours in advance at the Town of Marblehead website: <https://www.marblehead.org/calendar-by-event-type/16>. Some public meetings in Marblehead provide remote access to the public, with the link posted with the agenda. Marblehead local access television (MHTV) broadcasts Select Board and School Committee meetings live. Archived recordings of Select Board and Board of Health from the last three years are available from MHTV by searching [vimeo.com/marbleheadtv](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3mmZuBmhKUJsXeWbqwFQJQ). Some School Committee meeting recordings can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3mmZuBmhKUJsXeWbqwFQJQ>.

For a list and links to all Marblehead boards and committees, elected and appointed, see <https://www.marblehead.org>

In addition, an individual or group of Marblehead voters can propose a “citizens’ petition” to Town Meeting. These may be to change a by-law, to resolve to take an action, or simply to state the will of Town Meeting. Citizens’ petitions should be carefully considered and discussed with town officials in advance to have the greatest chance of success. For more information on citizens’ petitions, see [https://www.marblehead.org/sites/g/files/vyhlf4661/f/uploads/citizen\\_petition\\_guide\\_1.pdf](https://www.marblehead.org/sites/g/files/vyhlf4661/f/uploads/citizen_petition_guide_1.pdf)

## **Boston**

In Boston, the [Mayor](#) and [City Council](#) are the elected officials. Appointed [boards and commissions](#) are an important part of Boston’s government. Each board or commission works with internal departments, City Councilors, and the public to serve the city. The boards and commissions website gives information and contacts for each board and commission.

## **Acknowledgement and Thanks**

We thank the League of Women Voters of Needham for sharing their Student Advocacy Guide with the League of Women Voters of Marblehead so we could update it with Marblehead information. We acknowledge the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts for the original materials on which this guide is based.