

Letters remain hugely important in our everyday lives. People still feel the need to have something confirmed in writing and a letter can add the all important personal touch. But there are pitfalls to letter writing. Below are our top tips for getting your letter right.

1. Define your purpose

Before you begin writing a business letter ask yourself:

- Why am I writing this letter – what had led up to it?
- What do I hope to get out of it (my maximum aims)?
- What do you expect to get out of it (my realistic aims)?
- What information do I need to provide? For example, dates of previous letters, dates you saw advertisement, dates of appointments, addresses of shops and people, names of people involved, reference or account numbers.
- What arguments do I need to use?

2. The first paragraph

The first paragraph of the letter should introduce the subject matter and either state or imply your purpose in writing.

3. The body of the letter

The body of the letter should consist of one or more paragraphs. It should develop clearly and logically the argument and facts of the case. If there is more than one paragraph, each paragraph should focus on a separate aspect of the subject matter and there should be clear links between paragraphs.

4. The final paragraph

The final paragraph should leave the reader in no doubt about your attitude towards the subject of the letter. It may, for example, spell out what you would like to see happen. It should be positive and unambiguous.

5. Achieve the right tone

Although the reader of your letter may be unknown to you, it is important to achieve a suitable tone in your writing and not to be too casual or too formal. So, as far as possible:

- Avoid jargon whenever possible.
- Use shorter sentences rather than longer ones.
- Avoid using the passive. For example write, 'We sent you that letter by mistake', rather than the more pompous, 'Our letter was sent in error'.
- Don't let your feelings get the better of you.
- Don't try to be too clever.
- Be clear and to the point, but don't be too blunt.

6. Adopt a clear layout

Adopt a letter layout that is clear and consistent. For example, if you put a comma after the person's name in the greeting, include one after *Yours faithfully*/*Yours sincerely*; either indent the paragraphs or leave a space between them, without indentation.

7. Sincerely or Faithfully?

If you are writing to someone whose name and title you do not know, use the greeting *Dear Sir or Madam*, and the ending *Yours faithfully*. If you are writing to a named person, address them as *Dear Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms*, and end *Yours sincerely*, followed by your first name and surname. If you have met them or spoke to them by phone, or otherwise feel that you have some acquaintance with them, address them by their first name and sign yourself *Yours sincerely*, using your first name.

If you need some extra inspiration then we have *sample letters* (<http://www.askoxford.com/betterwriting/letterwriting/sampleletters/>) for almost every occasion from letters of resignation to letters of condolence, letters of complaint to letters booking a holiday.

Below are plenty of useful phrases to get your letter started, finished, and on the right track.

Phrases for Business Letters

Openings:

The standard opening for formal correspondence is *Dear*

Dear Sir	Dear Mr
Dear Madam	Dear Mrs
Dear Sir or Madam	Dear Ms
Dear Sirs	

Useful phrases:

Thank you for your letter of [date] concerning	I apologise for the delay in replying
Thank you for sending me a [catalogue]	As stated in your letter/fax of [date]
Thank you for your enquiry of [date]	I wish to draw your attention to the
I refer to your letter of [date] concerning	I wish to inform you that
Further to our telephone conversation of [date]	I am writing to inform you that
I am writing to confirm our telephone conversation of [date]	I am writing to express my dissatisfaction with
I would be grateful if you could forward me a [price list, catalogue]	Please note that
I am contacting you regarding	Please find enclosed
I am writing to complain	

Closures:

I look forward to hearing from you	I trust that you will give this matter your urgent attention
I look forward to hearing your response	I hope you can settle this matter to my satisfaction
I would be most grateful if you would look into this matter as soon as possible	Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require further information
Please let me know as soon as possible what action you propose to take	Please contact me if you require further details

If you know the person's name use:

Yours sincerely

If you don't know the person's name use:

Yours faithfully