

How to write a formal letter

With the advent of email, it is becoming less and less common to write letters, but the few letters that you will write will probably be very important ones, such as covering letters for job applications, covering letters for questionnaires or surveys which are part of your research, or letters of complaint to your bank manager.

Therefore, it is very important that your letters have the desired effect on the reader. In order to achieve this, they should be:

- in the correct format
- short and to the point
- relevant
- free of any grammatical or spelling mistakes
- polite, even if you're complaining
- well presented

This guide will give some general advice on letter writing and includes some sample letters.

If you are replying to a letter it can be a good idea to note how that letter has been formatted and expressed.

Format

There are certain conventions that your reader will expect you to follow; if you do not, you will create a bad impression.

Here is a letter in standard format. Refer to the notes afterwards for explanation.

	1 42 Greyhound Road Perry Barr Birmingham B42 6HJ
Mr. E. Scrooge 2 The Manager Barclay's Bank Ltd 113 Mammon Street Andover HU4 9ET	
5 April 2008 3	
Dear Mr. Scrooge, 4	
<u>Re: Application for post of trainee manager</u> 5	
INTRODUCTION - State purpose of writing letter and what you will be elaborating in the body.	
BODY - At least 3 paragraphs - each based on choice made and criteria stated. Make sure in each paragraph you are comparing choices given and state positives and negative points. Balanced arguments.	
CONCLUSION -Reiterate the points in another way. Thank the reader for the opportunity to share whatever. State how the reader can contact you if there are any further clarifications. 6	
Yours sincerely, 7	
Signature	
Jane Teller 8	
Encl. 9	

- ① Your address, but not your name, usually goes in the top right hand corner. You would not usually include your telephone number or email address here, but this would be permissible.
- ② The name and address of the person you are writing to (“receiver”) goes below this, on the left. If you do not have a specific name, always at least try to put some sort of title. However, you should always address the letter to a particular person if at all possible.
- ③ The position of the date is more flexible. It can go on the left or the right, usually below the receiver’s details. The format of the date is also flexible; it could be written **5 April 2017**, **5th April 2017**, **5/4/17** or **05/04/17**. However, these last two options are risky because they can be interpreted as May 4 by someone from the USA.
- ④ The salutation at the beginning of the letter depends on whether or not you have the name of the person, but it always starts with “**Dear**” and ends with a comma.

If you know the name, write **Dear Mr. Ochs**, **Dear Mrs. Baez**, **Dear Miss Perhacs**, or, if you do not know the marital status of a woman, or if she has written this, use “**Ms.**”: **Dear Ms. Bunyan**. It is possible to write *Dear Robert Fripp* or *Dear Alison Statton*, but many people consider this awkward. If the person has a specific title, use this: **Dear Dr. Hammill**.

If you do not know the name of the person, you traditionally write **Dear Sir**. This is clearly somewhat sexist, so many people prefer **Dear Sir/Madam** or **Dear Sir or Madam**.

The ending of the letter depends on how you have started: see ⑦ below.

- ⑤ Nowadays, it is common to place the subject of the letter directly below the salutation (④). This would be in **bold** or underlined. The purpose is to give the reader an idea of what the letter is about before reading it, and to be able to pass it on to a more appropriate person if necessary.

If you are replying to a letter which had a *reference* (or *ref.*) on it, you should repeat this on your letter, probably on the same line as the date, but on the other side of the page. Write “**Your ref.: xxxx/xx**”

- ⑥ It is common to end your letter with a phrase such as “**I look forward to hearing from you.**”
- ⑦ To end the letter, you would normally write “**Yours sincerely**” if you have started the letter with the name of the person, or “**Yours faithfully**” if you have started with something like “Dear Sir”. A comma follows this phrase.
- ⑧ Sign your name directly below this and then print it below the signature.

If you have had no correspondence with this person before and if it is hard to guess your sex from your first name, you might add “(Mr.)” or “(Ms.)” after your name so that they will know how to start their letter when they send you a reply.

- ⑨ If you enclose any documents to your letter, give a list here. For example:

Encl. My CV (5 pp.)
 Copy of MS Diploma
 Translation of MS Diploma

Be concise and relevant

The person you are writing to may be deluged with letters and if yours is 3 pages of dense text, then it is likely that it will end up in the bin. Letters should take seconds rather than minutes to read.

As a result, get straight to the point and stick to it, do not include any unnecessary or supplementary information, do not use any flowery language or long words just for the sake of it, and do not repeat too much information which may already be included in a CV, for example.

Check your grammar and spelling very carefully

Mistakes will create a very bad impression, will lessen the effect of what you are saying and in the case of a job application letter, could well also consign it to the bin. So:

- use the spellchecker if you are using a computer
- check the spelling yourself, as the spellchecker will not recognize incorrect use, for example, of *dose* and *does*; use a good dictionary
- check your grammar carefully; if it has been pointed out to you that you make mistakes, look especially for these kinds of errors *and* get someone else to check it for you if necessary
- check your sentences and punctuation: Are the sentences complete? Does the punctuation help to make what you are saying clearer?

Do not rush the letter; many mistakes occur because of this. Allow plenty of time for checking, and if necessary, for rewriting. The letter may well help to decide your future.

Use the right tone of language

It is important to use the right type of language, the right ‘register’. Most letters you write will need to be formal, but not overly so. In fact, you should use similar language to that which you use in your academic writing. This means you should:

- avoid everyday, colloquial language; slang or jargon
- avoid contractions (*I’m*; *it’ll*, etc.)
- avoid emotive, subjective language (*terrible*, *rubbish*, etc.)
- avoid vague words such as *nice*, *good*, etc.

You should always be polite and respectful, even if complaining. One way of doing this in English, which is common in formal letter writing, is to use ‘modal verbs’ such as **would**, **could** and **should**. Instead of simply writing *Please send me*, you could express this more formally as *I would be grateful if you could send me ...* Do not overdo it though - this may make your language too formal or perhaps old fashioned; do not look through a thesaurus and put in lots of unnecessarily long words.

Make sure the letter is well presented

First impressions are important, so use good quality paper, centre the letter on the page, do not leave coffee stains on it, make sure you have spelt the person’s name correctly and do not forget to sign it! Most important of all, do not forget to send the letter!

Sample letter 1: Covering letter

12, Kenmore Road
Littletown
LT12 9BH
1st December 2001

Mr G. Sands
Fitness First
Lake Road
Littletown
LT1 5MX

Dear Mr Sands,

Re: Fitness Instructor FF/32

I am writing to apply for the job of Fitness Instructor, as advertised in Thursday's Courant. This is an ideal job for me given my enthusiasm for sport, my related experience and qualifications.

Sport and fitness training have always been important to me, which is why I chose to take a BTEC Diploma in Sports Science. I obtained distinctions in the Sports Anatomy & Physiology and Sports Injuries modules last year and am confident that I will get similar marks in Exercise Physiology, Mechanics of Sport and Sports Supervision & Management this year. I am a confident user of Microsoft Office 2000 and have worked extensively with Fitness Publisher, a program for analysing fitness.

As you can see from my CV, I have taken the opportunity to gain extra qualifications that were on offer at college, which has helped me get part-time work as a pool attendant. I am called on to provide cover during busy times so am used to working irregular hours at short notice. I have also run a lunchtime aerobics class at college since the start of this year.

I finish college in six weeks and am keen to find a job rather than carry on with further full-time study. I could start any part time work or training sooner as many of my classes are finishing and most of my assignments are done. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Louise Longford

Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/onelife/work/applications/example.shtml>

Sample letter 2: Business letter

Whitcomb Polytechnic
20-30 Newcastle Road
Whitcombe
Tyne and Wear
WT5 4AH

11 October 2007

The General Manager
Fukuoka Motors (UK) Ltd
PO Box 137
York Road
Loughton
Durham
LT3 5HD

Dear Sir,

I understand from my colleague, Professor William Jones, who visited your Loughton plant last month, that you sometimes allow groups of students to tour the factory and see for themselves how Japanese production techniques operate in a European environment. Professor Jones himself was most impressed by his own visit, and recommended that I write to you.

Would it be possible for a group of 20 Business Studies students - male and female, aged between 18 and 22 - from Whitcomb Polytechnic to visit you before the end of this term, which is on the 21 December? I realise that you must receive many requests for such visits, and that the time available may already be booked up. If it is not, and you are able to see us, I should be most grateful if you could suggest a date and let me know of any normal conditions you lay down for visits of this kind.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,

B Farrant (Dr)
Senior Lecturer