

1.06 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.

It is very important, therefore, 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 don't, you will create a bad impression.

On the following page there is a letter in standard format. Refer to the notes afterwards for explanation.

42, Greyhound Road
Perry Barr
Birmingham
B42 6HJ

Mr. E. Scrooge
The Manager
Barclay's Bank Ltd
113 Mammon Street
Andover
HU4 9ET

5 April 2008

Dear Mr. Scrooge,

Application for post of trainee manager

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Maecenas porttitor congue massa. Fusce posuere, magna sed pulvinar ultricies, purus lectus malesuada libero, sit amet commodo magna eros quis urna.

Nunc viverra imperdiet enim. Fusce est. Vivamus a tellus.

Pellentesque habitant morbi tristique senectus et netus et malesuada fames ac turpis egestas. Proin pharetra nonummy pede. Mauris et orci.

Aenean nec lorem. In porttitor. Donec laoreet nonummy augue.

Suspendisse dui purus, scelerisque at, vulputate vitae, pretium mattis, nunc. Mauris eget neque at sem venenatis eleifend. Ut nonummy.

Yours sincerely

Jane Teller

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're writing to goes below this, on the left. If you don't have a specific name, always at least try to put some sort of title. You should always, however, 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 addressee details. The format of the date is also flexible; it could be written 5 April 2008, 5th April 2008, 5/4/08 or 05/04/08. Avoid putting the day and month the other way round.
4. The salutation at the beginning of the letter depends on whether or not you have the name of the person.

If you do, write Dear Mr. Ochs, Dear Mrs. Baez, Dear Miss Perhacs, or, if you don't know the marital status of a woman, or if she has written this, 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 don't know the name of the person, you would 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 below.

5. It is common now to put the subject of the letter directly below the salutation. 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. The content of your letter should be as short as possible, divided into short, clear paragraphs.
7. It is common to end your letter with a phrase such as I look forward to hearing from you. It's OK to do this, but it's a bit meaningless.
8. 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.

9. Sign your name directly below this and then print it below the signature.

Be concise and relevant

The person you are writing to may be deluged with letters and if yours is 3 sides of dense text, then there is every possibility 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, don't include any unnecessary or supplementary information, don't use any flowery language or long words just for the sake of it, and don't 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're saying and in the case of a job application letter, could well also consign it to the bin. So:

- Use the spellchecker if you're using a computer
- Check the spelling yourself, as the spellchecker won't recognize incorrect use, for example, of dose and does. Use a good dictionary.
- Check your grammar carefully. If it's been pointed out to you that you make mistakes, look especially for these kinds of errors. 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're saying clearer?
- Don't 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's 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's etc.)
- Avoid emotive, subjective language (terrible, rubbish etc.)
- Avoid vague words such as nice, good, get 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 ...* Don't overdo it

though, and make your language too formal or maybe old fashioned; don't look through a thesaurus and put in lots of unnecessarily long words.

Having said this, British people tend to be fairly informal, even in business and academic circles, so it is normal to start using first names at an early stage.

Make sure the letter is well presented

First impressions are important, so use good quality paper, centre the letter on the page, don't leave coffee stains on it, make sure you've spelt the person's name correctly and don't forget to sign it!

Sample letter 1: Covering letter

12, Kenmore Road
Littletown
LT12 9BH

1st December 2007

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've 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'm called on to provide cover during busy times so am used to working irregular hours at short notice. I've 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

Source: <http://www.henley-cov.ac.uk/public/xfiles/general/progarea/Overseas/LCCI/Level2/Letter/Lesson1.doc>