

Letter format

The format is a “block” style, which is the most common format for business letters. The text is single spaced, with no indent at the tops of the paragraphs.

Justified & Left Aligned

The text is left aligned and justified.

Letterhead

Letterhead is designed to convey a positive image of the company. Because the letterhead includes the company’s address, phone and often email, it is not necessary to include that information again in the body of the letter.

Inside Address

Two spaces below the date are the full name and business address of the person to whom the letter is addressed. The address on the letter should be the same as the address on the envelope. As with the date, there can be legal consequences from inaccuracies.

Date

Write out the full, complete date the letter is mailed. The letter is usually dated the same day on which it is mailed. Do not abbreviate the months.

Salutation

The formal greeting always starts with “Dear” followed by the person’s title and last name, and ending with a colon. This requires finding out whether the recipient is properly addressed as Mr., Ms. or Dr. Substituting the title with the person’s first name, using impersonal phrases like “To Whom it May Concern”, or eliminating the salutation entirely indicate that the writer doesn’t actually know the recipient of the letter at all, making the letter a “form” letter, a much less formal document.

Pay particular attention to the correct salutations in letters addressed to individuals who hold legal, religious or political positions. People who have earned titles beyond Mr. or Ms. can be sensitive about their proper use.

Letter Content

The specific content of the letter will be created to meet the needs of the situation, but the structure of any letter should meet certain expectations:

Context Paragraph

The first paragraph of the letter will define the context, providing a clear statement of the letter’s topic and purpose. Avoid starting a letter with legalistic or flowery language that doesn’t explain what the letter is about. For example, “Pursuant to your recent letter of request, we are hereby responding with the information you requested,” for example, offers no information at all about the content or purpose of the letter.

Content Paragraphs

The typical letter uses one to three paragraphs to provide the information relevant to its purpose. Each paragraph should cover a single topic or point. In the case of a long letter that covers multiple pages, it is appropriate to break the information into sections with internal headers or bullets to provide clarity.

Action Paragraph

The final paragraph of the letter provides a clear, straightforward statement of the action that will be taken by the writer, requested of the reader, or expected by a third party.

Closing

Two spaces below the final paragraph of the letter, a traditional closing line, generally “sincerely” or “respectfully,” ends the letter. If the situation calls for a warmer tone, the closing might be “cordially,” “best wishes,” or “regards.”

Signature

A four-line space allows room for a written signature immediately below the closing, then the sender's full name is typed, with the full business title (sometimes with the department or division as well) on the next line.

When writing on behalf of a team or department, type the group's proper name immediately above the written signature of the team's representative. See example below:

Sincerely,
[insert 4 blank lines]
T.E.A.M Success
Sandra Thompson
Team Coordinator

Sign in dark blue or black ink, with blue preferred when the letterhead is not easily distinguished from a photocopy.

Enclosure

When anything is included in the envelope beside the letter itself, it is indicated two spaces below the signature. Typically, enclosures are not stapled directly to a formal business letter.

Type "Enclosure" or "encl" if only one item is included, or add the number of items in parentheses if more than one: "Enclosures (3)". If the enclosures have not been specifically named in the text of the letter, a short title or explanation should be provided: "Enclosure: Work Agreement." The reader should never be left to wonder what an attachment is or what it is to be used for.

Courtesy Copies

At the very bottom of the letter, the names of anyone else who is receiving a copy of the letter are provided after a lower-case "cc:" The person's title is often listed as well, especially if the recipient is not expected to know who he or she is.

Occasionally a "blind" copy is sent. There will be nothing typed on the original. The copies will show "bcc: Tom Crowe, web content editor," and those recipients will know from the "b" that the customer got the letter without any notice of the copies.

Second Page

The typical letter to a client or business associate should be kept to a single page, although contract letters, legal findings, and claim summaries can sometime run to many pages. When a second page is necessary, a special "second page" letterhead is used. This has an abbreviated address but is printed on the same kind of paper used for the regular letterhead. Unless a letter exceeds two pages, page numbers are generally not used.

Envelope

Business letters are folded into perfect thirds and mailed in a standard sized (#10) business envelope. Typically, the envelope is made from the same paper as the letterhead and has the company logo and address printed in the top left corner. The envelope is always addressed on a printer or typewriter; never send a business letter in a hand-addressed envelope.