

Business Letters: The FORMAT

Heading or Letterhead

In most cases, the heading of a letter is simply the printed letterhead on the company stationery giving the company name, address(es), phone number(s), and perhaps the name of an officer or correspondent. If the stationery you are using does not have a printed letterhead, type the company name, address, and phone number in the upper right-hand corner of the paper about one and one-half inches from the top and flush with the right margin.

Dateline

All business letters should have the correct date typed under the letterhead. The date records when the letter was written and may serve as an important reference. For example, if there is a question about an order or shipment, a contract, or a reply to customer complaints, you will have the dated copy of a letter in your files to verify when you wrote the message and what you said. Try to mail the letter on or close to the date typed under the letterhead. The postmark on the envelope and the date in your letter should correspond as nearly as possible.

Inside Address

The inside address is typed below the dateline. It is single-spaced and placed flush against the left margin. The inside address contains the name, title, company division or department (if any), mailing address, and zip code of the receiver.

*Mr. Alfred McKenna, Treasurer
Finance and Accounting Department
Warren, Hanson & Associates
459 Third Avenue
New York, New York 10017*

Reference Lines

In Some Cases You Will Want To Call Special Attention To the Subject of the Letter Or Single Out a Particular Person To Whom the Letter Is Addressed in a Company. You Would Use a Reference Line for This Purpose.

The reference "Personal and Confidential" is typed in initial capitals and underscored before the inside address as follows:

Personal and Confidential

*Ms. Jane Purdy, Vice President
Trust Department
First National Bank of Atlanta
900 Grove Street
Atlanta, Georgia 30319*

The other reference lines "Attention" and "Subject" are typed below the inside address. They are followed by a colon and are not underscored.

*Mr. Earl Jacobs, Sales Manager
Merchant's Restaurant
633 South Dearborn
Leland, Kansas 67073*

Subject: Delivery of red snapper catch

*Personnel Department
Western Utilities, Inc.
817 West Main Street
Denver, Colorado 80061*

Attention: Reena Culver, Data Processor

Salutation

After the inside address or reference line, the salutation is typed two lines down, flush with the left margin, and followed by a colon. The salutations for the above inside addresses are as follows:

*Dear Ms. (or Miss or Mrs.) Culver:
Dear Mr. Jacobs:
Dear Ms. (or Miss or Mrs.) Purdy:
Dear Mr. McKenna:*

If you do not know the name of the recipient but do know that you will be addressing a man or woman, your salutation would be:

*Dear Sir:
Dear Madam:*

If you do not know whom the receiver will be, use a title or some general greeting for the salutation:

*To Our Friends at Royal:
Dear Manager:
Dear Executive:
Dear Members:
To the Sales Staff:*

As a rule, use a formal salutation in your correspondence, even if you know the person to whom the letter is addressed.

Body of the Letter

The body of the business letter begins two lines down from the salutation. The body can be typed in block style with no paragraph indentations or semiblock style in which the paragraphs are indented. There is no "correct" style. Which one you use is a matter of personal or company preference. Paragraphs are typed single-space with double spaces between them.

It is best, even for a short letter, to divide the body into at least two or three paragraphs. This step makes your text easier to read and presents your message more clearly. A typical plan for a three-paragraph letter would look like the following:

1. **Paragraph one**—Begin with information that catches the reader's attention and refers to some need or interest of the reader. Put the "you" into the letter.
2. **Paragraph two**—Bring in your involvement, what role you are playing, or what service or information you have to offer. Put "you and I" into the letter.
3. **Paragraph three**—End the body of the letter with the action or idea that you want the reader to consider or with the results you would like to have. Keep the "you and I" in the reader's mind, but emphasize "you."

- The example below follows the basic plan of the business letter.

In your October 10 letter, you mentioned that your company was purchasing an IBM office system with a main computer and several terminals and printers. You asked for a quote on our acoustical covers for microprinters.

I am happy to report we can offer you a substantial discount on a lot order of 20-25 acoustical covers. These covers will fit any microprinter and can be adapted to fit printer options such as single-sheet feeders and track feeders. They will reduce printer noise levels by 80 percent. Studies have shown that lower levels of noise in the office increase worker productivity and efficiency.

The discount offer expires November 30. You can take advantage of our discount by phoning in your order, using our toll-free number 800-444-2222. I would be happy to arrange for shipment directly to your home office or warehouse.

Notice that the writer states the reader's needs in the first sentence. The following paragraph describes how the writer can help satisfy that need. The closing paragraph outlines the desired actions for the recipient and the writer. The plan of the letter helps the writer be concise, specific, and direct.

Complimentary Close

The complimentary close is typed one double space after the body of the letter. It can be centered on the page or set flush with the left or right margin. The preferred complimentary close for most business letters is *Sincerely*, although many companies also use *Yours truly* or *Sincerely yours*.

The closing is followed by four lines and the typed name and title of the person sending the letter. In rare instances when the letter is not typed on letterhead stationery, the company name and address follow the name and title of the sender. A phone number or extension may also be included if the writer wishes to have a quick reply to the letter.

Sincerely,
Frank W. Weston
Vice President, Distribution
(878) 999-6200 x 321

Yours truly,
Caroline Roberts
Admissions Office
University of Arizona
445 Yellow Spring Road
Tucson, Arizona 85725

Signature

The writer signs his or her name in ink in the space between the complimentary closing and the typed name. If you are signing for someone else or using a stamped signature, put your initials after the signature and on the same line.

Stenographic Reference

These reference initials refer to the person who is sending the letter and to the typist. The sender's initials are typed in all capitals, followed by a colon or a slash, then the initials of the typist in lowercase letters: FWW:tg or FWW/tg.

Stenographic reference initials appear one double space below the last line of the typed signature and are set flush with the left margin. In some companies, only the typist's initials, in lowercase letters, are used. If you type your own letters, omit the reference initials.

Enclosures or Copies

This designation is typed one single space below the stenographic initials. It alerts the reader to the fact that material has been enclosed with the letter or that copies of the letter have been sent to others. You may want to list the enclosures or simply indicate how many have been included. The reader can then check to make sure all the material is there. In general, you would list the names of those receiving copies of the letter.

Encl: or *Enclosures: (5)* or *Enclosures: Map/ Brochure/ Car rentals/ Hotel list*

cc: or *Copies: R. Hanlin, Treasurer*
M. McKenna, Secretary
T. Freund, Sales Manager

Active Language

Business letters do not have to be dull, stiff, or lifeless. You can use active verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs to create vivid images in your readers' minds. Active language is particularly important in sales or promotional letters. You want to attract and hold the readers' attention. Remember that your letter is competing with countless other letters, phone calls, office duties, and personal visits. If your letter contains some emotional appeal or touches on pleasant memories or ties in to readers' fantasies or desires, it probably will hold their attention to the end.

In the sample letter below, the writer catches the readers' attention by piquing their curiosity.

I have a job and a dream.

The job is a challenging and exciting one: to create a Consumer Financial Association—the first one of its kind in the world. Through this Association, our bank will offer complete personal financial planning services to all its customers.

The dream? To help people like you realize their fondest hopes. Now you can plan for that second home you've always wanted, for your children's college education, or for your retirement. You will have the help and advice of over 50 of the finest financial counselors in the country.

You can help us create this Consumer Financial Association by filling out the application form below. The few minutes you take could be your most important step toward a new financial future.

Use active verbs and the active voice in your letters. They give your message vitality and immediacy, as if you were with the reader describing what is happening. The passive voice, on the other hand, slows down your message and leaves the reader with the impression everything is happening in the past. (See also Verbs, pages 228-236 in Chapter 15: Parts of Speech.)

The location for the new plant will be discussed by the board at Wednesday's meeting.

Changing from the passive to the active voice and using a more descriptive verb will improve the sentence.

The board will debate the location for the new plant at Wednesday's meeting.

Diplomatic Passive Voice

The passive voice does have its uses. When you want to soften your statement, shift the emphasis from the writer to the reader, or be more objective or formal in a sensitive situation, the passive voice is the more diplomatic choice.

- I **Active:** *We have reviewed your application and find that we cannot extend credit to your account at this time.*
- I **Passive:** *Your credit application has been reviewed carefully. Unfortunately, it did not meet the criteria established by our company for first-time credit accounts. For this reason, a charge account cannot be opened for you at this time.*

Keep Your Words Fresh

The best way to clarify your language is to edit ruthlessly. Challenge your sentences with the question, "Is there a simpler way to say this?" For example, the following paragraph may sound more "official," but it is also more confusing:

- *Re your inquiry of October 30 please be advised that the item to which you refer (i.e., the 127-A Executive Model) has been removed from our catalog as of the present writing. The optimum solution would be to select the most appropriate substitute and resubmit your order.*

What the writer meant was:

Thank you for your October 30 letter asking about our 127-A Executive Model. This item has been removed from our catalog as of November 22. However, the 128-A Trimline Model listed in our current catalog should do the job equally well. Just submit a new order for the 128-A Trimline Model, and we will ship it promptly to your address.

The first paragraph is not only less clear but gives the reader less information. The second paragraph uses simpler language and tells the reader how to solve the problem.