

Planning a Business Letter

A business letter is not a place for chit-chat. Unlike business conversations where a certain amount of small talk is used to break the ice, a business letter should be clear and concise.

By taking time to plan your letter, you will save time in the writing and proofreading stages.

During the planning stage, ask yourself a few simple questions.

Jot down (=write down briefly or hastily) your answers to create an outline before you start writing.

Who am I writing this letter to?

Identifying your audience always comes first. Are you writing to more than one person, to someone you don't know, or to someone you have known for a long time? This will help you determine how formal the letter needs to be. You may need to introduce yourself briefly in the letter if the recipient does not know you. You may also need to find out the updated address and title of the recipient. This is a good time to confirm the correct spelling of first and last names.

Why am I writing this letter?

The main reason for the letter should be understood from the subject line and first few sentences. You may cover more than one thing in one business letter, but there will almost always be a general reason for the letter.

- Identify your main goal and what you hope to accomplish.
- Review some example reasons why people write business letters on the introductory page of this lesson.
- Are there specific details I need to include?
- Gather any dates, addresses, names, prices, times or other information that you may need to include before you write your letter.
- Double check details rather than relying on your memory.

Do I require a response?

Many types of business letter require a response.

Others are written in response to a letter that has been received.

Before you start writing, determine whether or not you require an action or response from the recipient.

Your request or requirement should be very clear.

In some cases you may even need to provide a deadline for a response.

If you do require a response, how should the recipient contact you? Indicate this information clearly as well. You may want to provide more than one option, such as an email address and a phone number.

How can I organize my points logically?

Think about how you would organize your thoughts if you were speaking rather than writing to the recipient.

First you would introduce yourself.

Second you would state your concern or reason for writing.

After the main content of your letter you would include information on how you can be contacted. The end of the letter is also a place to express gratitude, wish good-luck, or offer sympathy.

Here is an example outline:

RECIPIENT

Jessica Walter

Acquaintance (met twice before, briefly)

Title: President, The Internet Club

Address: 800 rue Rainitovo, Ambatomena, Antananarivo 101, MADAGASCAR

REASON

To invite a board member to remain on the board for a second term.

Other members suggested that she has enjoyed this position and has been thinking about staying on.

No other volunteers have come forward to take over at the end of September.

SPECIFIC DETAILS

If she decides to stay on she will need to be available for the national meeting on November 5th.

Board members who stay for two terms are sometimes asked to take on extra duties, such as taking minutes or hosting social events.

RESPONSE

She will need to respond by September 1st.

She can contact me by email or phone.

ORGANIZATION

- Return address of our institution
- Jessica Walter's title and address
- Salutation: Dear Ms. Walter
- First paragraph: Introduce myself briefly--remind Jessica where we met before. Provide my reason for writing: "I have heard from a number of board members that you may be interested in staying on for a second term. We would be very pleased to have you stay on for another year."
- Second paragraph: Explain what type of commitment this position will involve this year (once a month meetings, national meeting, plus possible extra duties)
- Third Paragraph: Provide deadline for response and how to contact me.
- Closing: Express thanks to Jessica for volunteering her time this year

Writing a Business Letter

The term "business letter" makes people nervous. Many people with English as a second language worry that their writing is not advanced enough for business writing. This is not the case. An effective letter in business uses short, simple sentences and straightforward vocabulary. The easier a letter is to read, the better. You will need to use smooth transitions so that your sentences do not appear too choppy (=saccadé).

Salutation

First and foremost, make sure that you spell the recipient's name correctly. You should also confirm the gender and proper title.

Mr. (American English) or **Mr** (British English)

Mr is used for men- originated as a contraction of Mister, or Master.

Mrs. (American English) or **Mrs** (British English)

Mrs is used for a married female - originated as a contraction of the Mistress, the feminine of Mister, or Master. Use Mrs only if you are 100% sure that a woman is married.

Ms. (American English) or **Ms** (British English)

Ms is used for women who perhaps you don't know if she is married or not. Ms is also used for some woman who prefers to be called this anyway.

Miss was used before for unmarried woman but the 20th century saw the coinage of a new unmarked option Ms.

- Under less formal circumstances or after a long period of correspondence, it may be acceptable to address a person by his or her **first name**.
- When you don't know the name of a person and cannot find this information out you may write, "**To Whom It May Concern**".
- It is standard to use a comma (colon in North America) after the salutation. It is also possible to use no punctuation mark at all.

Here are some common ways to address the recipient:

Dear Mr Watkins,
Dear Ms Mackenzie,
Dear Frederick Benson:
Dear Editor-in-Chief:
Dear Valued Customer
Dear Sir or Madam:
Dear Madam
To Whom It May Concern

Dear Sir,
Dear Sirs
Gentlemen:

First paragraph

In most types of business letter it is common to use a friendly greeting in the first sentence of the letter.

Here are some examples:

I hope you are enjoying a fine summer.
Thank you for your kind letter of January 5th.
I came across an ad for your company in The New York Times today.
It was a pleasure meeting you at the conference this month.
I appreciate your patience in waiting for a response.

After your short opening, state the main point of your letter in one or two sentences:

I'm writing to enquire about...
I'm interested in the job opening posted on your company website.
We'd like to invite you to a member's only luncheon on April 5th.

Second and third paragraphs

Use a few short paragraphs to go into greater detail about your main point. If one paragraph is all you need, don't write an extra paragraph just to make your letter look longer. If you are including sensitive material, such as rejecting an offer or informing an employee of a layoff period, embed this sentence in the second paragraph rather than opening with it. Here are some common ways to express unpleasant facts:

We regret to inform you...
It is with great sadness that we...
After careful consideration we have decided...

Final paragraph

Your last paragraph should include requests, reminders, and notes on enclosures. If necessary, your contact information should also be in this paragraph. Here are some common phrases used when closing a business letter:

I look forward to...
Please respond at your earliest convenience.
I should also remind you that the next board meeting is on February 5th.
For further details,...
If you require more information,...
Thank you for taking this into consideration.
I appreciate any feedback you may have.
Enclosed you will find...
Feel free to contact me by phone or email.

Closing

Here are some common ways to close a letter. Use a comma between the closing and your handwritten name (or typed in an email). If you do not use a comma or colon in your salutation, leave out the comma after the closing phrase:

Yours truly,
Yours sincerely,
Sincerely,
Sincerely yours
Thank you,
Best wishes
All the best,
Best of luck
Warm regards,

Writing Tips

- Use a conversational tone.
- Ask direct questions.
- Double-check gender and spelling of names.
- Use active voice whenever possible.
- Use polite modals (would in favor of will).
- Always refer to yourself as "I".
- Don't use "we" unless it is clear exactly who the pronoun refers to.
- Rewrite any sentence or request that sounds vague.
- Don't forget to include the date. Day-Month-Year is conventional in many countries; however, to avoid confusion, write out the month instead of using numbers (e.g. April 9th, 2014)

Paragraphs

Tips from Sydney.edu.au

What makes a good paragraph?

Every paragraph you write should follow the principles listed below:

1. The paragraph must *contain* a topic sentence
2. All remaining sentences should support and *develop* the topic sentence
3. Only one main idea should be developed
4. The sentences should *flow* smoothly and logically
5. A concluding sentence may be added but is not essential

Paragraph word length can and should vary. However, be aware that paragraphs that are too long can be hard to read, and that paragraphs that are too short look 'choppy' and can read like a list. To be more specific, a one sentence paragraph is usually too short, and writing only two paragraphs on one A4 page indicates paragraphs may be too long.

However, there is no fixed rule about the number of sentences that should make up a paragraph. What is important is that the paragraph only develops one main idea. This is this factor which should be the primary determinant of paragraph length. When you need to say something else, start a new paragraph.

Paragraph structure

Now, let's look at paragraph structure in more detail.

Think of a paragraph as having two, or possibly three sections:

1. A topic sentence: this states the **main topic** of the paragraph and the **controlling idea**
2. Supporting sentences: these develop the topic sentence
3. A concluding sentence: this signals the end of the paragraph and leaves the reader with important points to remember, but is often unnecessary.

Writing the topic sentence

When writing the topic sentence, try to state the main point of the paragraph as clearly and as accurately as possible. Do not make the topic sentence too general or too specific.

Too general

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult.

Too specific

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult for 63% of the people surveyed who cited a range of difficulties including homesickness, loneliness, difficulty making Australian friends, changes to diets, health problems, weight gain, and difficulties with money and jobs.

Good #1

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult in three main respects for 63% of the people surveyed.

Good #2

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult for 63% of the people surveyed due to the impacts of culture shock, financial concerns and health concerns.

A **topic sentence** contains:

1. A topic

Example: Studying overseas

2. A **controlling idea** (what you say about the topic)

Example: ...was deemed to be very difficult...

The topic is best placed at or near the start of the sentence. The topic should not be a pronoun (he, she, his, this, it) as starting with a pronoun often makes the focus of the paragraph unclear.

The controlling idea 'controls' everything else in the paragraph; it indicates what you want to say about the topic.

Studying overseas was deemed to be very difficult...

In this case, do not talk about such things as the benefits of studying overseas, or statistics about the overseas student population. If you want to do this, start a new paragraph.

Linking ideas between paragraphs

The topic sentence may contain language which helps link it to other paragraphs, such as:

- Firstly,
- The most important reason,
- The next step,
- In addition to...
- The result of...

Example:

Unlike many countries in Europe, multiple voting shares do not exist in Thailand. Thai law prohibits the issuance of such shares. *Therefore*, when I identify who owns and controls the sample firms, I focus only on three control mechanisms, namely, direct, pyramidal, and cross-shareholdings.

The first form of control mechanism, "direct ownership", means a shareholder who owns shares under his own name or via a private company owned by him. "Indirect ownership" is when a company is owned via other public firms or a chain of public firms. ...

Indicating the structure of the paragraph

The topic sentence may contain language which indicates the structure of the paragraph.

- ...for three main reasons.
- ...in the following respects...
- There are two methods of...
- ...has two advantage and one disadvantage

Rhetorical questions

In some languages, rhetorical questions are often used to emphasize points. For example: "Why is this important? There are three main reasons. Firstly..."

Rhetorical questions can occasionally be used to add dramatic flair. However, it is generally not a good idea to get into the habit of using them. Good, clear, precise topic sentences and supporting sentences are almost always more effective.

Concluding sentences

Concluding sentences are optional, but can sometimes help by summarizing the main point of the paragraph.

You may begin a concluding sentence with such signals as:

- In short,
- In summary,
- Indeed,
- Therefore, it is clear that...

Paragraph unity

All paragraphs should have unity, that is, they should only discuss one idea. If you have more than one idea, start a new paragraph.

Paragraph coherence

Cohere (verb): “stick together”

Sentences in a paragraph should flow smoothly and logically.

Below are some ways you can make a paragraph become coherent:

1. Use nouns and pronouns appropriately
2. Arrange ideas in a logical order
3. Use linking words
4. Repeat key nouns regularly

Language to develop ideas within paragraphs

Use the language below to help you structure your paragraphs in the ways described above.

Classification	Process	Explanation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is a kind of ... • can be divided into... • is a type of... • falls under.. • belongs to... • is a part of... • fits into... • is grouped with... • is related to... • is associated with... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First(ly)/second(ly) ... • Recently... • Previously... • Before... • When... • After... • Finally... • subsequently ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because ... • Therefore... • Since... • Thus... • As a result of... • Consequently... • ...is due to... • Hence • It follows that ... • If . . . then...
Description	Definition	Comparison/Contrast
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is like ... • Resembles ... • Above the ... • Below the ... • The purpose ... • Besides/ next to ... • Near/ nearby ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is a kind of ... • Can be defined as... • Is like... • Is similar to... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is similar to... • On the other hand... • Both... • However... • But... • While • in contrast... • as well ... • differs from ... • Unlike...
Evaluation	Choice	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I suggest • I recommend • I advise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In my opinion ... • I like/dislike ... • I believe ... • I hope ... • I feel ... • I think that ... • I consider ... • I believe ... • I prefer ... 	

Proofreading a Business Letter

"Proofread" means to read a text carefully to check it for errors and general tone.

You should always proofread a business letter before sending it.

The most important thing when proofreading any document is to read the text out loud.

Print the letter rather than read it on your computer screen.

Make notes where your letter sounds awkward.

If possible allow one day between writing and sending your letter. You are more likely to spot any typos or other errors with a fresh eye. (If you have to respond to an important email on the same day, write it in the morning and proofread it after lunch.)

Use a spell-check function on your computer program if possible.

Computer programs are useful for pointing out passive sentences, subject-verb agreement problems etc. However, be careful when using grammar-check programs. Sometimes they will highlight a phrase that is not actually an error. If you are in doubt, try to simplify the sentence by using a sentence structure that you are more comfortable with.


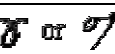










If possible, ask another person to double-check your letter. You could offer to return the favour for your colleague and become proofreading partners.

You can even use standard proofreading marks to make it easier to explain necessary changes.

Proofreading symbols or marks

Proofreading symbols or marks are shorthand notations through which the proofreader place on copy (written texts) to tell the compositor what changes to make to a proof sheet, galley or blueline before publication. They differ from editing marks and should not be confused although some are similar or even the same. Editing is a different process than proofing.

Here is an example of proofreading marks from merriam-webster outline:

Symbol	Meaning	Example
 or  or 	delete	take it out
	close up	print as <u>one</u> word
	delete and close up	close se up
 or  or 	caret	insert here  (something)
#	insert a space	put one  here
eg#	space evenly	space evenly  where  indicated
stet	let stand	let marked text stand as set
tr	transpose	change <u>order</u> the
/	used to separate two or more marks and often as a concluding stroke at the end of an insertion	

[set farther to the left	L too far to the right
]	set farther to the right	too I far to the left
~	set as ligature (such as)	encyclo [~] pædia
=	align horizontally	align [~] ment
//	align vertically	// align with surrounding text
x	broken character	imperf [~] ect
□	indent or insert em quad space	
¶	begin a new paragraph	
Ⓢ	spell out	set 5 lbs. as five pounds
cap	set in CAPITALS	set nato as NATO
sm cap or s.c.	set in SMALL CAPITALS	set <u>signal</u> as SIGNAL
lc	set in lowercase	set s outh as south
ital	set in <i>italic</i>	set <u>oeuvre</u> as <i>oeuvre</i>
rom	set in roman	set <u>mensch</u> as mensch
bf	set in boldface	set important as important
= or -/ or [~] or /M/	hyphen	multi-colored
¹ / _N or <u>en</u> or /N/	en dash	1965–72
¹ / _M or <u>em</u> or /M/	em (or long) dash	Now—at last!—we know.
✓	superscript or superior	3 [~] as in πr^2
^	subscript or inferior	2 [~] as in H ₂ O
∧ or ∨	centered	◇ for a centered dot in $p \cdot q$
⁂	comma	
ꞌ	apostrophe	
∘	period	
⁝ or ⁞	semicolon	
⁝ or ⁞	colon	
“” or “”	quotation marks	
(/)	parentheses	
[/]	brackets	
OK/?	query to author: has this been set as intended?	

↓ or 1 ¹	push down a work-up	an unintended mark
9 ¹	turn over an inverted letter	inve <u>t</u> ed
wf ¹	wrong font	wrong si <u>z</u> e or styl <u>e</u>

¹The last three symbols are unlikely to be needed in marking proofs of photocomposed matter.

Checklist

- Did you read the letter out loud?
- Did you allow some time to pass after writing the letter before proofreading it?
- Are your requests, needs, concerns clear?
- Are there any long sentences that need to be broken into two?
- Do you use we incorrectly?
- Do all questions contain a question mark?
- Did you include the date?
- Did you spell the recipient's name correctly?
- Have you used a standard business format (e.g. block)?
- Have you used passive sentences that could be changed to active ones?
- Have you used standard spelling? (e.g. British English or American English)
- If it is an important letter (e.g. a cover letter for a resume), did someone else read it for you?

Sample Business Letters

Following are a selection of sample business letters and other correspondence samples from the world's premier free website for learners and teachers of English that you can copy and modify as you wish.

Letter Requesting Information

How to ask somebody to send you information.

Informatika Gasy Ltd
300 Avenue de l'Indépendance
Antananarivo 101
MADAGASCAR
Tel: 261 34 44 444 44
Fax: 261 34 33 333 33
Email: infogasy@moov.mg

Date

Translate Services Co.
900 Old Park Lane
London W1K 1QZ
United Kingdom.

Dear Sirs

Translation Brochure

I should be grateful if you would send us your brochure and price list about your translation services.

We are currently developing our sales literature and web sites and are interested in translating these into five languages apart from English.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully

Aina Rasendra

Aina Rasendra
Marketing Manager

Letter Sending Information

What to say when you send information.

Translate Services Co.
900 Old Park Lane
London W1K 1QZ
United Kingdom.
Tel: +44 20 123 4567
Fax: +44 20 765 4321
Email: info@translateservices.com

Date

Informatika Gasy Ltd
300 Avenue de l'Indépendance
Antananarivo 101
MADAGASCAR

Dear Ms Aina Rasendra

Translation Services & Fees

Thank you for your letter of 22 January enquiring about our translation services.

Translate Services Co. offers a full range of translation services to help you in the development of sales literature and web sites. I have pleasure in enclosing our latest brochures and price list from which you can see that our prices are highly competitive.

I look forward to calling you in a few days.

Yours sincerely

James Brown

James T Brown
Sales Manager

Enc: 3

Letter Changing Information

When a person or company changes important information, such as an address, price, or date, it is necessary to send valued customers a letter with the new information. This letter informs customers of a change in price.

Arrington Compustore
100 Main Street, Arrington,
Tennessee, 37014
Tel: (615) 123-4567

November 21st, 2012

Informatika Gasy Ltd
300 Avenue de l'Indépendance
Antananarivo 101
Madagascar

Dear Ms Rasendra:

Forthcoming Price Change

Computers and Computer Accessories from Dell, HP, Gateway, Sony, and Toshiba are going on sale in our store for next month and we wanted you to be among the first to know.

As you probably know, rental prices have skyrocketed throughout Tennessee this year. Due to our increase in rent at the Arrington Compustore, we are finding it necessary to raise the price of our Computers by 5%. Our Computer Accessories will also be subject to a price increase.

We hope that you will consider purchasing Computers and Computer Accessories for next year despite this change. The Arrington Compustore has been together for 23 years, and relies on our customers to purchase Computers and Computer Accessories. Without your support the Arrington Compustore could be forced into retirement before its 25th anniversary.

To purchase Computers and Computer Accessories for 2013, please visit our website at www.compustore.net, or call the sale agent representative at (615) 123-4567.

We look forward to having you in our audience again next year.

Yours truly,

James Walter

James Walter
Sale Director