

10 A Formal Letter (Hardcopy or Online)

This chapter covers the requirements for hardcopy formal letters that accompany the transmission of large documents, online formal communications and letters of application for a position. All formal letter types have the same requirements.

- The parts of a formal letter
- Overall layout
- Structure of the information
- Style for letter writing
- Various types of letters:
 - Covering letter
 - Letter of transmittal
 - Letter of application
- Checklists

The components of a formal letter need to be arranged in a particular sequence, as dictated by the conventions of formal letter writing.

The Parts of a Formal Letter

All parts are left justified, except for the subject heading.

- 1. Your address or institution's address (or letterhead)**
2-line space
- 2. The date**
2-line space
- 3. Name and address of the person you are writing to**
3-line space
- 4. The greeting (salutation)**
2-line space
- 5. The subject heading**
2-line space
- 6. The body of the letter**
2-line space
- 7. The closing**
Leave a 6/8-line space for your signature

8. Your written signature with your typed name and position below it

2-line space

9. The letters *Enc.* if you are enclosing additional documentation with the letter

1 Sender's address	<i>2-line space</i>
2 Date	<i>2-line space</i>
3 Address of the person you are sending it to	<i>3-line space</i>
4 The greeting	<i>2-line space</i>
5 Subject heading	<i>2-line space</i>
6 Body of the letter	
7 The closing	<i>2-line space</i>
8 Your signature. Below it, your typed name and position	<i>6/8-line space</i>
<i>2-line space</i>	
9 'Enc.' (if you are enclosing something)	

The parts listed above are described in more detail here:

1. Your address or institution's address (or letterhead)

- Left justified. (Note: the conventions of some years ago dictated that it should be right justified. This is now regarded as old-fashioned.)
- If you are using letterhead paper, an address isn't needed.
- It is now no longer the convention to put a comma at the end of each line.

2. The date

Use the format: Day (*in figures*) Month (*written out*) Year (*in figures*). No commas.

Correct: 8 October 20xx

Incorrect: 8/10/xx (different countries use different formats when using only figures; it can cause confusion); 8th October 20xx (is going out of fashion).

3. Name and mailing address of the person you are writing to

- Left justified.
- Commas not needed at the end of each line.

4. The greeting (salutation)

According to the tone of the letter, choose from the following:

Dear Sir or **Dear Madam** (used in formal situations, *either* when you don't know the family name of the person *or* when it would be inappropriate to use it).

Dear Sir/Madam (used in formal situations when you don't know the family name or the gender of the person you are writing to).

Dear Mr *surname*; **Dear Ms** *surname*; **Dear Mrs** *surname* (used infrequently in a formal situation and only when the woman has signed herself that way); **Dear Dr** *surname* or **Dear Prof** *surname*.

Dear (*first name*) used when you are on familiar terms with the person you are writing to but still need to use a formal letter format.

5. The subject heading (title)

- A concise title, two lines below the greeting, centred and boldfaced for emphasis. It should give the reader instant access to the main point of the letter.
- Don't use *Re:* before the title. It's meaningless and out of date.
- Don't underline, which is outdated. Use boldfacing instead.

6. The body of the letter (see below: *Structuring the Information*, page 130)

7. The closing

- Classical letter-writing conventions dictate the following:

If you have used **Dear Sir**, **Dear Madam**, **Dear Sir/Madam**:

You must use **Yours faithfully** as the closing.

If you have used the surname in the salutation:

You must use **Yours sincerely**.

- This rigid convention has now been considerably relaxed. Many companies now favour **Yours sincerely**, whatever the initial salutation.

If the letter is not strictly formal, the tone of the letter can be softened by using **Regards**, **Kind regards** or **Best wishes**, either before the closing or alone.

8. Your written signature. Below it, include your typed name and position.

- After the closing, leave about eight blank lines for your written signature.
- Then enter your name (left justified). Use your full first name and surname (e.g. *Joe Bloggs*), not initials and surname (not *J. F. Bloggs*). This conveys to the reader your gender – making you easier to contact – and the sense of a real person behind the letter.
- On a new line, add your position.

9. Insert *Enc.* if you are enclosing additional documentation with the letter.

Overall Layout

- Choose a simple serif (e.g. Times Roman) or sans-serif (e.g. Arial) font. Elaborate fonts are more difficult to read and give the wrong impression.
- 10- or 12-point font.
- In the text of the letter, use single-line spacing and one blank line between paragraphs.
- Use ample margins.
- If the letter is short, adjust the various spacing so that it isn't squashed into the top part of the page.
- The last page shouldn't contain just the signature. If necessary, slightly reduce the font size and/or margins.
- All of the elements should make a pleasing arrangement on the page (see Page 129).

Checklist: the parts of the letter

- ☐ All left justified, except for the subject heading
- ☐ Date format: 8 October 2001
- ☐ Name and address of person you are writing to:
Left justified with no commas at the end of each line
- ☐ The Salutation:
Dear Sir, Dear Madam, Dear Sir/Madam, Dear Mr .../Ms.../Mrs .../Dr .../Prof...
- ☐ Subject heading:
Describes the main point of the letter
Centred, boldfaced
- ☐ The closing:
Yours sincerely or *Yours faithfully*,
Your signature
Your typed name, including your first name; not just your initials and surname
Your position
- ☐ *Enc.* (if you are enclosing something)

Checklist: overall layout

- ☐ Simple font, 10 or 12 point
- ☐ Single-line spacing
- ☐ One blank line between paragraphs
- ☐ Pleasing arrangement on the page

Example: Layout of a Formal Letter

Composites Laboratory
School of Engineering
University of Middletown
PO Box 123
Middletown

8 October 20xx

Dr Lesley Green
Director, Research and Development
Composites Construction Ltd
Middletown.

Dear Dr Green,

Research Seminar to the Board of Directors

Body of the letter

Yours sincerely,



Pat Black (Dr)
Isaac Newton Research Fellow, Composites Development

Structure of the Information

Overall principle

Place the main point at the beginning and the supporting information after the main point.

- **First paragraph:** (*if appropriate*) A courteous acknowledgement of the letter/phone call and so on.
- **Second paragraph:** The main point.
 - **This is important.** It applies to all letters, including those conveying bad news.
 - Don't build up to the main point. The main point should be at the beginning with the supporting information below it. (*Rule of thumb:* This is not a detective story. Don't lead up to the disclosure at the end; start with it.)
- **Last paragraph:**

Don't finish abruptly. A courteous final paragraph is needed, e.g. *I am looking forward to your response.*

Checklist: structure of the information

- ☐ (*If appropriate*) Does the first paragraph courteously acknowledge their letter/phone call?
- ☐ Is the main point at the beginning of the letter?
- ☐ Does the supporting information come after the main point and not lead up to it?
- ☐ Have you avoided finishing abruptly?
- ☐ Does your final paragraph make a courteous finish?

Style of Writing

Overall principle

Write as you would speak in a comfortable, serious conversation.

1. Use plain language. Write to inform, not to impress.
2. Put yourself in the reader's mind, and work out how he/she would react to your language.
3. Avoid the old-fashioned, stuffy phrases associated with classic formal letter writing.
4. Make sure the spelling and grammar are correct.

The style directives listed above is described in more detail here:

1. **Use plain language; write as you would speak in a comfortable, serious conversation.**
Imagine that you are across the table from the person to whom you are writing, or on the telephone. Write in the way you'd speak in these situations but without colloquialisms or contractions (*don't, wouldn't*, etc.; see *Contractions*, Chapter 18: *Problems of Style*, page 208).
2. **Put yourself in the reader's mind, and work out how he or she would react to your language.**
It is possible to innocently write something that could be interpreted quite differently by the reader.

For this reason, **stand away from your personal involvement in what you have written, and try to interpret it in the way the reader may see it.** It's not easy, but it's absolutely necessary.

3. **Avoid the old-fashioned, stuffy phrases associated with classic formal letter writing. Express the idea in plain English.**

Do not use phrases such as:	Use these instead:
As per	In accordance with
Attached hereto <i>or</i> herewith	I am <i>or</i> We are attaching <i>or</i> Attached is...
Enclosed hereto <i>or</i> herewith	I am <i>or</i> We are enclosing <i>or</i> Enclosed is...
Pursuant to your request	Following your request...
We are in receipt of your letter	Thank you for your letter
We are pleased to advise <i>or</i> I am pleased to advise	We are pleased <i>or</i> I am pleased to tell you that/let you know that...
You are hereby advised	This letter is to let you know that...
Please contact the writer	Please contact me

4. **Make sure the spelling and grammar are correct**

- Spell check at the very end of writing.
- But proofread it thoroughly afterwards once again. The spell-checker can pass words that you did not mean (e.g. *as* instead of *at*, *hit* instead of *him*; see Chapter 18: *Problems of Style*, page 212).
- If you know your grammar may be faulty, give it to someone to check.

Checklist: style of writing

- ☐ Have you used plain language?
- ☐ Is your letter easy to understand for someone without your level of knowledge?
- ☐ Have you made the letter sound personal?
- ☐ Have you checked it to see if your phrasing could be misinterpreted?
- ☐ Have you avoided using the classic, stuffy letter-writing phrases?
- ☐ Have you spell-checked the *absolutely final version*?
- ☐ Are you sure that it is grammatically correct?

Types of Formal Letters

Letters that accompany a document

1. A **Covering Letter** is any letter that is sent together with any document.

Purpose of a Covering Letter

- To provide the recipient with a specific context within which to place the document
- To give the sender a permanent record of having sent the material
- To show willingness to provide further information

2. A **Letter of Transmittal** accompanies formal documents such as reports or proposals.

Purpose of a Letter of Transmittal

To achieve one or more of the following:

- To identify the report topic, and scope or extent of the study
- To give an overview outlining the main aspects of the primary document

- To identify the person who authorised the report and the date of authorisation
- To call for a decision or other follow-up action
- To emphasise any particular points you may want to make
- To show willingness to provide further information

3. Structure of a *Letter of Transmittal*

It should be **brief**.

- **First paragraph:** Describe what is being sent and the purpose of sending it.
- **Middle section:** A longer letter may summarise key elements of the proposal and provide other useful information.
- **Final paragraph:** Establish goodwill by thanking the recipient and showing willingness to provide further information.

Letters of application

Purpose

To convince a prospective employer that you are a worthwhile candidate for an advertised position. This type of letter accompanies your CV (résumé).

How to Write It (Use the schematic on page 133 for the conventions of wording and formatting.)

Since it is your first approach to your prospective employer, the letter should be polished and professional, free of mistakes and well formatted.

It should contain the following information:

1. **In the first paragraph:** state the specific position that you are applying for, with the job title and the vacancy number if there is one. State where the position was advertised.

Example:

I would like to apply for the position of... (Job title, Reference number) advertised in... (Source) on Thursday 8 October.

2. **In the second paragraph:** Your qualifications and experience that are particularly relevant to the position.

Example:

I have a master's degree in Resource Management (Upper Second Class Honours) from the School of Environmental Science, University of Middletown, specialising in water quality.

3. **In the third paragraph (a fourth paragraph may also be needed):**

- **Refer to your CV.**
- **State why you are interested in the position and in the specific organisation.** This can include work experience and your aspirations.
- **State what you have to offer the organisation.** Relate your academic record and work experience to your knowledge of the activities of the organisation, stating the relevant skills and abilities you believe you can bring.

This requires some previous research into what the organisation does. Human resources personnel often state that they take as much – sometimes more – notice of the covering letter than of the CV; they look for evidence that the applicant has done some homework and thought about her or his skills relevant to the organisation's activities.

4. **In the final paragraph, ask for an interview,** and show your willingness to expand on the information contained in the CV and letter. Include information on your availability and

where you can be contacted (preferably a phone number where messages can be left, an e-mail address or a fax number).

Guidelines on style


Don't be too modest or hesitant. You need to sound enthusiastic and confident, striking a balance between that and sounding bumpitious.

Do not be afraid to use *I*, together with suitable verbs to describe your achievements. *For example: I have developed..., I have initiated..., I managed...*

Use clear, direct language. Don't try to impress with long sentences and big words.

Example of a letter of application

<p>Paragraph 1: Specific position/job title/vacancy number/source.</p> <p>Paragraph 2: Qualification and experience relevant to the position. Show knowledge of the organization.</p> <p>Paragraphs 3 and 4: Refer to CV. Your goal. Relate goal and qualifications to the organization.</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content;">Your address</div>
	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content;">Date</div>
	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content;">Recipient's address</div>
	<p>Dear Ms. White,</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Vacancy No. AF/34: Environmental Planner, EnviroCorp</p> <p>I would like to apply for the position of Environmental Planner within the Environmental Planning Section of Peterson Associates Ltd (Vacancy Number AF/34), which was advertised in <i>The Independent</i> on Tuesday 14 March 2000.</p> <p>I have a PhD in Environmental Science from the University of Middletown; the thesis topic was 'Biofilm Development in a Subsurface Flow Wastewater Treatment Wetland.' I am very interested in developing my career as an environmental planner, in particular with an interdisciplinary team in an organization with an international reputation for water quality issues such as EnviroCorp. I found your recent work on the Wylie Stream intake particularly interesting because of the difficult nature of the associated water quality issues.</p> <p>As my enclosed CV shows, my PhD topic and activities over the last six years have been directed towards my goal of becoming an environmental planner. In addition to the experimental work, my PhD also required me to be very conversant with water quality legislation. This was also needed for the three-months project for the Farleigh Community Board, which resulted in a detailed written report and a presentation to three community groups. I expect to be able to bring my skills in data analysis and my understanding of legislative procedures to the position of environmental planner, and hope to expand them considerably.</p> <p>In addition to a good academic record, I also have wide-ranging interests and I enjoy working with people, particularly with community groups. My communication skills are well developed: I have made several presentations on water quality issues to community groups and also written several reports.</p>

<p>Last-but-one paragraph: Ask for interview. Information on your availability. Contact information.</p> <p>Final paragraph: courteous closing.</p>	<p>I would very much like an opportunity to discuss my application more fully with you. I am available for interview at any time that is convenient for you. My telephone number is 012 453-6824; messages can also be left for me on 014 584-8834. I can also be reached by fax, number 014 473-8356, or by email: <i>j.brown@freenet.net</i></p> <p>I very much look forward to hearing from you.</p> <p>Yours sincerely,</p>  <p>Jane Brown (Dr)</p> <p>Enc.</p>
---	--