

How to write a business letter that gets results

I can't tell you how many truly awful letters I've had to read in my life. As a former administrative assistant, I was responsible for all the unsolicited submissions to a major New York museum. Artists and collectors all over the country (and abroad) wrote to have their work considered for display or acquisition, and to be honest the decision frequently rested more on the quality of their cover letter than on their work — which, romantic dreams aside, rarely if ever sells itself.

In these days of email and instant messaging, letter writing is becoming a lost art, and especially the formal letter. I'm pretty sure that formal letter rules are still taught in schools, but very little of it sticks. If you're an executive or other high-ranking person within an organization, you can probably rely on your secretary or assistant to handle the niceties of letter writing, but for everyone else, knowing how to write a strong letter ourselves is important.

There is a tendency to think that the often arbitrary rules of letter writing don't really matter, that as long as your recipient can work out what you're saying, that's good enough. This shows a great deal of disrespect for your recipient, though, and for your own ideas. It suggests that a) your reader's time isn't valuable enough for you to write clearly and efficiently, and b) that you don't particularly care about the content of your letter.

The basic structure of a formal letter

The rules might be arbitrary, but taken together they create a formula that produces clarity. When a letter follows all the rules, the reader doesn't have to struggle to figure out where a piece of information might be, what action they should take next, or who sent it — everything can be found in its place. Knowing the rules of letter writing is, in that sense, akin to knowing the rules of page layout or web design — **the format of the document should support and clarify the content.**

From top to bottom, a formal letter contains the following elements:

1. **Return address and date:** (Upper right hand corner) Once upon a time, this was necessary in case the letter became separated from the envelope, but I doubt that happens much any more. Even so, this is where your reader is going to look to find your address and the date the letter was written, so it should be there.
2. **Mailing address of recipient:** (Left-hand side, one line below the return address) This identifies the recipient of the letter. In office environments, letters are often removed from their envelopes and circulated; this helps the letter get back to its rightful recipient.
3. **Salutation:** (Two lines below the recipient's address, or about 1/3 down the page) The person the letter is intended for. Avoid "Dear Sir/Madam" and especially "To Whom it May Concern" unless absolutely necessary; not directing a letter to an exact recipient suggests that you don't care who reads it (or you would have made a call or checked their website) — and may prevent the letter from reaching someone who can act on your letter.
4. **Body:** The body of the letter has three parts: an introduction that should explain who you are and why you are writing, a middle part that gives the details and persuades your reader to act, and a closing that tells your reader what action you expect or would like them to take.
5. **Valediction:** (Left-aligned, two lines below the body) This is the line before your signature. For people whose name you don't know, use "Faithfully yours" — but avoid writing letters without finding out a name first. When you know the recipient's name, sign it "Sincerely yours" or just "Sincerely", or in the US "Yours truly" is acceptable. Don't try anything more cutesy or friendly unless a) you know the recipient quite well and are certain you can be informal without seeming disrespectful, or b) you have a "trademark" letter ending that's part of your public persona (and the talent and popularity to pull it off).
6. **Signature and printed name:** Signing your name is a minimal assurance that you stand behind what was written. Since your signature is likely to be difficult to read, type your name down a

couple of lines so that your reader knows who is writing to them.

7. **Enclosures:** (Below signature block) If you have included any further material — a business card, a brochure, a price sheet, whatever — list the number of items and describe each. For example:

Enclosures (2): brochure, price sheet.

Finally, **proofread, proofread, and proofread again.** While a friend might excuse even the worst spelling and grammar, a business letter is often your first (and maybe only) chance to make an impression — it needs to be impeccable.

Tips and Tricks for Better Letters

Following the proper formatting is only the first part of writing a letter that gets action. The content of a poorly formatted letter is unlikely to be read — in one study of HR personnel, more than 80% said they'd throw out a resume if there were only one or two errors in the cover letter — but even a well-formed letter is unlikely to be acted on unless the content is powerful and engaging.

There's an old copywriting formula that can be very helpful in letter-writing: AIDA. AIDA stands for attention, interest, desire, and action. **First you get the reader's attention, then you get them interested, then you arouse their desire, and then you tell them what action to take.**

Consider, for example, the typical opening of a business letter.

- Attached please find a resume for your consideration for...
- I am writing to inform you that...
- This letter is in regard to your recent...

None of them give the reader's mind much to "stick" on. Some **attention**-grabbing strategies include:

- **Flattery:** "I have been a fan of your work for a long time..."; "It has always been my dream to work for your company..."

- **A question:** "Did you know that...": "Have you ever had this problem..."
- **Surprise:** "10 million people will be killed in fondue accidents this year"; "In the last three years, I've tracked down and brought to justice 8 of the FBI's 10 Most Wanted criminals"

Once you have their attention, you need to create **interest** in whatever you're offering. Promise to solve their problems — with a great product, with your services, with a partnership, with whatever it is you're writing about.

For instance, in a typical job application, the problem is that the company or organization needs a position filled, and more importantly they need someone who can do the job well and help the organization achieve its mission (which may be more profits, or it may be to save children in Darfur or to end global warming or to cure cancer). You arouse their interest by telling them that you're the right person for the position and by promising to help them achieve their mission.

Then you arouse their **desire** by explaining how you can do this — for instance, by showing how successful you've been in other positions, or by explaining the specialized training you have relevant to the job. Avoid jargon here — explain clearly and concisely the benefits of the solution you offer.

For example, if you are proposing a new business process, you might say something like:

I designed a system similar to this at my former position, and worker productivity jumped 20%, and profits increased even more. This new process will not be difficult to implement, either — with only minimal funds and resources, I can have it in place by the end of the next quarter.

When I worked in marketing, I learned an important lesson: **nobody buys anything based on features** (and "buy" is used in its loosest possible sense, like you "buy" an idea). You have to explain exactly how those features will **benefit** the potential buyer.

If you've done that well, they're going to be asking themselves "How can I make this happen?", which you answer in the last section of your letter by proposing an **action** they can take. "Call me at (212) 555-1212 to arrange an interview" or "Let's meet next Thursday to discuss this proposal" or "Order your copy today".

Don't leave the action for your recipient to figure out. I think a lot of time we lack the confidence to ask for the action we want, and we give ourselves an "out" by leaving it unsaid, hoping they'll figure it out themselves.

Consider the daily life of whomever you're sending a letter to — how many other things might they have on their mind when they read your letter. Maybe they have a meeting in five minutes. Maybe yours is one of 200 letters they have to wade through. Maybe it's the end of the day and they're worn out. Giving them a concrete action to take makes it all the more likely that it will "stick" — they'll add it to their todo list or their calendar, they'll pick up the phone, they'll check out your website, or they'll respond.

In the end, this is all about respect for your recipient. **If you're offering a real solution to a real problem, people want to know about it.** By following proper and well-understood formats and keeping your writing clear and engaging, you're making it easier for them to solve their problem. Provided that you're honest and have the skills and talents to back up your claims, writing a good, solid letter makes it more likely that both you and your reader will be satisfied. Try it the next time you have to write an important letter.

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