

Business Letter Writing

The Secret to Effective Business Communication

<http://www.business-letter-writing.com/writing-a-business-letter-examples/keeping-your-business-plan-to-the-point.html>

1. The Seven Cs of Business Letter Writing

Effective letter writing boils down to knowing why you are writing a letter, understanding your reader's needs and then clearly writing what you need to say. Every letter should be clear, human, helpful and as friendly as the topic allows. The best letters have a conversational tone and read as if you were talking to your reader. In brief then, discover the Seven-Cs of letter writing. You should be

- **Clear**
- **Concise**
- **Correct**
- **Courteous**
- **Conversational**
- **Convincing**
- **Complete**

When you write a letter, you are trying to convince someone to act or react in a positive way. Your reader will respond quickly only if your meaning is crystal clear.

Put yourself in the reader's shoes and write in a friendly and helpful tone. Don't represent your company as one that cannot make a mistake and must always be in the right. Try not to reply in the normal bland and defensive way of organizations—write a sincere and helpful letter.

Show you are interested in the reader's circumstances. If he or she has mentioned something personal in the letter, refer to it in your reply. This builds a bridge between you and the reader. Read the original letter carefully and see if there is something you can put in your letter to show your interest.

2. Putting your reader first

For all writers the most important people are their readers. If you keep your readers in mind when you write, it will help you use the right tone, appropriate language and include the right amount of detail.

What do readers want from writing? They want relevant information, presented in a clear, easy-to-understand style. They don't want muddled thinking, background information they already know, business-speak and jargon or waffle. Above all, they want to get the gist of your message in one reading—they don't want to dig for the meaning through long sentences and a boring style. So if you always keep your readers in mind, you will have to adapt your style and content to meet their needs.

Getting a clear picture of your readers before you start to write helps to focus your writing to get your message across. The better picture you have of your readers, the better you can direct your writing.

Ask questions to get a clear picture of your readers.

- **Who are my readers?**
- **What do they already know about the subject?**
- **What do they need to know?**
- **Will they understand technical terms?**
- **What information do they want?**
- **What do I want them to do?**
- **What interests or motivates them?**

- **What prejudices do they have?**
- **What worries or reassures them?**
- **What will persuade them to my view?**
- **What other arguments do I need to present?**
- **How are they likely to react to what I say?**

If you imagine yourself in your reader's position, you're more likely to write a good letter.

3. Keeping your business plan to the point

When you write a business letter, you must try not to waste your reader's time. The first step in any writing task is to set down your aim. Ask yourself, **Why am I writing?** and **What do I want to achieve?** The clearer you are in your own mind about what you want to achieve, the better your letter. These questions help you focus on the information that supports your central aim, and to cut information that's irrelevant. By doing this, you'll find you keep to the subject and perhaps write a document that is a third shorter than you would otherwise draft.

People read to find out information. You can write the clearest letter or report, but if it doesn't say anything worth knowing, it's a useless document. You have to learn to present the most relevant information for your readers' needs. Then having said what you need to say—stop.

The more specific information you give, the better. You need to be ruthless in cutting out the padding most of us put into letters. It just wastes readers' time and clouds your message.

To help you to keep to the point of your letter, you can draw up an outline to plan your letter. Follow these steps:

- Make a list of the topics you want to cover but don't worry about the order.
- Under each topic, list key words, examples, arguments and facts.
- Review each topic in your outline for relevance to your aim and audience.
- Cut out anything that's not relevant to your aim or audience.
- Sort the information into the best order for your readers.

You don't have to stick rigidly to your business letter plan as it may change if you discover new information. It should help you shape your thinking but not be a straitjacket. Let your outline focus your thinking to make your writing coherent.

The advantage of spending a little time setting out a plan is that it not only helps the reader, it also helps you write. By breaking down a complex topic into subject areas, you'll find it easier to concentrate on the most relevant information.

4. Avoiding overused business letter phrases

Many business letters contain hackneyed phrases that detract from a clear, natural style. You need to look for them in your writing and use fresh, clear expression instead. Look at this list and see if you recognize any from your letters:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| • according to our records | • on receipt of |
| • after careful consideration | • please do not hesitate to |
| • any further action | • please find enclosed |
| • as you are aware | • please forward |
| • at your earliest convenience | • trust this is satisfactory |
| • detailed information | • under separate cover |

- enclosed for your information
- for your convenience
- further to
- in receipt of
- upon receipt of
- urgent attention
- we acknowledge receipt
- we regret to advise

Look at these examples from typical business letters and you'll see how removing the business clichés changes the tone of the sentence. The originals have a formal and impersonal tone; the redrafts sound more personal and genuine.

Original:

We trust this is satisfactory, but should you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact us.

Redraft:

We hope you are happy with this arrangement but if you have any questions, please contact us.

Original:

Further to your recent communication. Please find enclosed the requested quotation...

Redraft:

Thank you for contacting us. I enclose the quotation you asked for...

Hackneyed business phrases ruin a clear natural style; so avoid using them and choose your own words instead.

5. Getting the right tone to your business letter

When you write a business letter, it's important to use a tone that is friendly but efficient. Readers want to know there's someone at the other end of the letter who is taking notice and showing interest in their concerns. Try to sound—and be—helpful and friendly.

To do this, write as you would speak and **talk on paper**. This doesn't mean you should use slang, bad grammar or poor English, but try to aim for a conversational style and let the reader hear your voice. Imagine that your reader is sitting opposite you at your desk or is on the telephone. You'd be unlikely to say "please be advised" or "I wish to inform you"; instead you'd be more informal and say, "I'd like to explain" or "Let me explain" or use other everyday expressions.

Here are some ways to change your writing style to a conversational style.

Use Contractions

Using contractions such as **it's, doesn't, I'm, you're, we're, they're, isn't, here's, that's, we'll** gives a personal and human feel to your writing.

If there are no contractions in your writing, put some in. You don't have to use contractions at every opportunity. Sometimes writing **do not** comes more naturally than don't. When you speak, you probably use a combination of these styles—try to reflect this in your writing.

Use Personal References

Use words such as **I, we, you, your, my, and our** in your writing. Don't be afraid to identify yourself—it makes writing much more readable. This is a useful trick to make writing look and sound more like face-to-face talk.

Using I, we and you also helps you to avoid using passive verbs. It makes your style more direct and clear.

So instead of writing:

Our address records have been amended ...

write

We've changed your address in our records ...

Instead of writing:

The company policy is ...

write

Our policy is ...

Using active verbs with personal references is a quick and dramatic way to make your writing readable and more direct.

Use Direct Questions

Direct questions are an essential part of the spoken language. Using them gives your writing much more impact and is a common technique in marketing and advertising material. Marketing people use this technique to put information across clearly and to give their writing impact.

In much business writing, we hide questions in our writing by using words such as **whether** to introduce them. Look for these in your writing and change them into direct questions. For example:

Original: We would appreciate your advising us **whether** you want to continue this account or transfer it.

Redraft: Do you want to continue your account or transfer it?

Original: Please inform us **whether** payment against these receipts will be in order.

Redraft: Can we pay against these receipts?

Apart from making your style more conversational, direct questions liven up your writing—it's as though you change the pitch in your voice. There's nothing like a direct question to get some reaction from your reader and to give your writing impact.

6. Writing your business plan in plain English

Good writing is effortless reading that makes you want to read more. It is clear and concise, uses short sentences and simple words. It keeps to the facts and is easy to read and to understand.

Plain English is clear English. It is simple and direct but not simplistic or patronising. Using plain English doesn't mean everyone's writing must sound the same. There is no one 'right' way to express an idea.

There's plenty of room for your own style—but it will only blossom once you have got rid of the poor writing habits that are typical of most business writing.

Here are some of the key techniques to help you write in plain English:

Use active verbs rather than passive verbs

Using active verbs rather than passive verbs is the key to good writing. Why? Because passive verbs are longwinded, ambiguous, impersonal and dull. Active verbs make your writing simpler, less formal, clearer and more precise. Here's an example:

Passive: It was agreed by the committee...

Active: The committee agreed...

Passive: At the last meeting a report was made by the Secretary...

Active: At the last meeting the Secretary reported...

Passive: This form should be signed and should be returned to me.

Active: You should sign the form and return it to me.

In switching your style from passive verbs to active verbs throughout your writing, you face several problems.

- You must accurately spot them. Often writers miss passive verbs or try to change verbs that are already active.
- You need to measure your use of passive verbs. One or two passive verbs a page will not ruin your style, nine or ten will.
- You need to know how to turn passive verbs to active verbs.

Use [StyleWriter](#) to spot and measure passive verbs accurately.

Keep your sentence average length low

Sentence length is crucial to good writing. Almost everything written by good writers has an average sentence length of between 15 and 20 words. This doesn't mean writing every sentence the same length. Good writers naturally vary the length and rhythm of their sentences—longer sentences balanced with shorter ones—but they keep their average sentence length well below 20 words.

Compare these examples:

(One Sentence—45 words)

I refer to my letter of 13th June and am writing to advise you that if we do not receive your completed application form within the next fourteen days, I shall have no alternative but to arrange property insurance on the bank's block policy.

(Two sentences—13 words and 24 words)

I have not yet received your reply to my letter of 13th June. If we do not receive your completed application form within fourteen days, I shall have to arrange property insurance on the bank's block policy.

Use simple words rather than complex ones

Many writers have difficulty keeping their message simple and clear. Instead of using everyday words they use complex or unfamiliar words. Simple, everyday words will help you get your message across. Too often we use words such as **additional**, **indicate**, **initiate** and **proliferate** for **extra**, **show**, **start** and **spread**.

*As we noted in the **preceding section**, if you **purchased additional** printer **options**, such as a second printer tray, it is a **requirement** you **verify** its correct installation.*

As we noted in the previous section, if you bought extra printer equipment, such as a second printer tray, you must check you install it correctly.

StyleWriter searches your writing for over 6,000 complex words and offers you plain English alternatives. This encourages you to use everyday language and improves the style and tone of your document.

7. Edit wordy phrases

Padding is the enemy of good writing. Unnecessary words and phrases clutter up sentences and obscure meaning. By comparison, economy of words is the mark of good writing. You have to learn to make every word count in technical documents. You must edit ruthlessly, cutting any word. Set yourself a target of cutting 10 to 20 percent of the words in your document.

Look for wordy phrases such as these in your writing and replace them with a single word or cut them out completely:

WORDY

at a later date
at the present time
for the purpose of
have no alternative but
in addition to
In order to
in relation to
on a regular basis

later CONCISE

now
for
must
besides, as well as, also
to
about, in, with, towards, to
regularly

StyleWriter helps you learn to write concisely by checking your writing for over 10,000 wordy phrases. Once you start using the program, you'll soon find you can run an editorial pen through any draft, tightening the prose and writing in a clear and concise style.

8. Avoid jargon and technical terms

It's up to you to judge how much you need to explain your industry jargon and specialist terms by putting yourself in your readers' shoes. Don't overestimate your readers' understanding of terms because they may have a hazy idea of the true definition.

It doesn't insult the intelligence of your readers to explain terms clearly. Imagine a customer was sitting with you when you mentioned a technical term and asked 'What's that?' You would explain in everyday language. Do the same when you write.

9. Avoid abbreviations

The most common and irritating form of jargon is overuse of abbreviations. Here are some abbreviations. How many do you know?

Acronym

Meaning

Camera-ready Artwork

CRA

DPI

Dots Per Inch	DTP
Desktop Publishing	PMS
Pantone Matching System	SC
Spot Color	UGD
User Guide Documentation	

How many did you get right? Two out of six? Probably **DPI** for dots per inch and **DTP** for desktop publishing as these are industry terms. Many people would not recognize these two. As for **CRA**, camera-ready artwork would be better. **SC** for spot color is an unnecessary shortened form and **UGD** for User Guide Documentation is jargon for a manual.

10. Avoid abstract words and phrases

One habit you should avoid, common to many writers, is overusing abstract words. Here's a list of the most common ones to avoid in your writing.

Abstract words to avoid in technical writing

activities, devices, inputs, sectors, amenities, elements, operations, structures, amenity, facilities, outputs, systems, aspects, factors, processes, variables, concepts, functions, resources.

For example, what is a **device, output** or **facility**. Such words are so abstract they become meaningless to the reader. String them together, such as **output device** and you have instant jargon for the word **printer**. Add them to acronyms and you can produce **CAS Facility** which in turn means **Civic Amenity Site Facility**, pure jargon for **Council Recycling Site**.

[StyleWriter](#) highlights these abstract words in your writing to stop you falling into the jargon trap and help you make your information more specific.

11. Writing powerful headings for your business letters

Can you imagine reading a newspaper or magazine without any headlines or headings? Headlines and headings help us find our way around, decide what to read, signal what's coming next and highlight key points. Looking at today's financial pages of the newspapers, we found these examples:

- Banking code outlaws obsolescence for savings accounts
- Electronic banker offers taste of the future
- Euro-fish out of its depth
- FT-SE falls on foreign woes
- Kingfisher flies in the face of retail gloom
- Masters sells pub chain
- Whitbread stops 5,000-job plan

In most business documents, the headings are much weaker. At best they cover the subject matter; at worst they sound academic and tedious.

You can learn to write good headings and subheadings that transform your business letter writing and organise the information to help your reader. Compare these headings.

Typical Heading

First-time Mortgages
 Re: Account Arrears
 Job Application Appraisals for the Position of Research Officer

Action Headings

Helping you Buy your First Home
 Repaying the Money you Owe
 Selecting a Research Officer Shortlist

Headings often fail because they stick too rigidly to the subject matter. The key to writing powerful headings is to use a strong verb and specific words. Because each heading has a strong verb, we call these action headings. You can also use direct questions as headings as they have an added impact. For example:

- Why Have an Annual Review?
- Why Invest Your Lump Sum?
- Are You Paying Too Much Tax?

12. Writing a strong opening to your business letter

Your first job in writing any letter is to gain your reader's attention. It's an important principle of effective writing to put the most important information first. Your opening paragraph is both the headline and the lead for the message that follows in the rest of the letter.

Don't weigh down the front of your letter with boring repetition of information that your reader already knows. Many letters fail to start well because they follow the standard paragraph of every business letter. Here are some typical examples of openings in business letters

- Thank you for your letter of 8th March 1998, which has been passed to me for my attention.
- I refer to previous correspondence in respect of the above and note that to date we have not received your cheque for the outstanding arrears.
- I write with reference to our telephone conversation yesterday regarding the above matter.

Starting with a reference to the incoming letter is weak and wastes your reader's time. Most readers skip it, looking to the second and third paragraphs to get the answer to their questions. If you step right into your subject in the first paragraph, you'll show your reader you do not intend to waste valuable time. So get rid of any opening reference to the reader's letter and answer the most important question or give the most relevant information in your first sentence.

Make your first paragraph do something other than just referring to known information—so plunge straight into your message and don't waste your reader's time. For example, you could

- answer a question
- ask a question
- explain an action taken
- express pleasure or regret
- give information

As the opening paragraph sets the tone for your letter, try to avoid using tired phrases that are wordy, give little information and create a formal and impersonal tone. Using the classic business-speak opening of **Further to...** almost guarantees the rest of the letter will be a typical, long-winded, standard piece of business writing.

These opening phrases are so popular because we don't have to think of what to write. Watch out for standard phrases in opening paragraphs. Examples are:

- Further to my recent
- I am writing
- I refer to my letter dated
- I refer to previous correspondence
- I write in reference to
- In respect of the above
- Recent correspondence
- Regarding
- With reference to
- With regards to

So be sure your opening paragraph sets the right tone for your letter. Be direct and use your words positively so your reader has a good impression from the beginning of your letter. Decide what is the most important information—and put it in the your first paragraph. Don't be afraid to start your letter strongly.

13. Writing a strong close to your business letter

If the average business letter starts poorly, then it invariably finishes poorly. Your closing paragraph should bring your letter to a polite, businesslike close. Typical final paragraphs in business letters invite the reader to

write again or use overused and meaningless phrases that detract from the impact of the letter. Take a look at these examples of good closing sentences for business letters:

- I would again apologise for the delay in replying and I trust that this has clarified the points you have raised, however, if you wish to discuss any points I have not clarified, or need any further information, you may wish to telephone or contact me accordingly.
- I look forward to hearing from you and in the meantime, should you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.
- I regret that I cannot be of more assistance in this matter, and should you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Your last paragraph should do something. In a longer letter it can summarise the key points or repeat the key message. If some action is needed, explain what you want the reader to do or what you will do. Use positive words such as **when** not **if**.

Make sure you avoid using weak phrases and overused business phrases in your closing paragraph.

- Thanking you for your...
- Hoping for a prompt reply...
- Thanking you in advance for your assistance...
- Trusting this answers your questions...
- Please do not hesitate to contact me
- I trust this clarifies the situation

End your letter positively and politely. Don't leave your reader in mid-air, but use the final paragraph to explain or repeat what you want your reader to do.

14. Business letter writing checklist

When you write a business letter, use this checklist to remind you of the key principles of effective letter writing.

Keep it Short

- Cut needless words and needless information.
- Cut stale phrases and redundant statements.
- Cut the first paragraph if it refers to previous correspondence.
- Cut the last paragraph if it asks for future correspondence.

Keep it Simple

- Use familiar words, short sentences and short paragraphs.
- Keep your subject matter as simple as possible.
- Keep related information together.
- Use a conversational style.

Keep it Strong

- Answer the reader's question in the first paragraph.
- Give your answer and then explain why.
- Use concrete words and examples.
- Keep to the subject.

Keep it Sincere

- Answer promptly.

- Be human and as friendly as possible.
- Write as if you were talking to your reader.