

11: Letters

Chapter Objectives

The purpose of the chapter is to:

- List different types of letters
- Explain the difference between full-block and modified-block style letters
- Review major parts of a letter
- Discuss organization of a letter

The Purpose of Letters

As one of the most formal documents you can send, a letter conveys a high degree of respect to its recipient. Sending a **letter** is your way of saying that the recipient matters. Letters are usually one- to two-page documents sent to people or organizations outside of the organization from which they're sent, whereas **memos**, as you have previously learned, are equivalent documents for formal communications within an organization. Though we use **email** for many of the occasions that we used to send letters for before the twenty-first century, the following types of letters are still sent rather than emails:

- Cover letters to employers in job applications
- Thank-you letters and other goodwill expressions
- Letters of recommendation (a.k.a. reference letters)
- Letters of transmittal to introduce reports or proposals
- Campaign initiatives, such as for fundraising or political advocacy
- Official announcements of products, services, and promotions to customers
- Claims and other complaints sent to companies to lay down a formal paper-trail record as evidence in case matters escalate into the court system
- Responses (adjustments) to claims and other complaints (although this can also be done via email if you are responding to an email complaint)
- Formal rejection notices to job or program applicants
- Collection notices to people with overdue payments

Letters offer the advantage of formality, confidentiality (it's illegal to open someone else's mail), and a record of evidence. In order for you to determine when to use a letter in your communication, review the advantages, disadvantages, and appropriate use in the table below:

Advantages	Disadvantages	Appropriate Use

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows respect through formality and effort • Ensures confidentiality when sealed in an envelope and delivered to the recipient's physical address (it is illegal to open someone else's mail) • Can introduce other physical documents (enclosures) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take time to arrive at the recipient's address depending on how far away they are from the sender • Can be intercepted or tempered with in transit (albeit illegally) • Can be overlooked as junk mail • Require more time because they need to be printed, signed, sealed, and sent for delivery • Cost money to send 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • job application letters • persuasive messages (for example, fundraising campaigns) • bad news messages • matters with potential legal implications (claims and adjustments) • non-urgent matters
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Components of a Letter

Though you may see minor format variations from company to company, letters have about 10-12 major parts. There are two main types of letters: **full-block-style letters** and **modified-block-style letters** (see Figure 1 below). In a full-block letter, all of the components of the letter are aligned left. The letter should have one-inch margins and the entire document should be single spaced. Paragraphs should not be indented. Instead, use one double space between paragraphs. This style is used by most companies today.

Modified-block letters, on the other hand, have several components centered or aligned slightly to the right: the return address, date, complimentary closing, and the signature block. Modified block letters are not commonly used in business. They are more suitable for personal letters. For that reason, the instructions provided below will focus on full-block-style letters only.

Figure 1: Full Block and Modified Block Letter Formats, [Communication @ Work](#)

Major Parts of a Letter

- Return address or company letterhead
- Date line

- Recipient address (inside address)
- Subject reference (optional)
- Salutation (greeting)
- Message opening
- Message body
- Message closing
- Complimentary closing
- Signature
- Signature block
- Enclosure notation

Figure 2 below provides step-by-step instructions for a full-block-style letter.



Figure 2: Creating a Block Style Business Letter, [YouTube](#)

Return Address or Company Letterhead

The first piece of information in a letter is usually the sender's address. In block-style letters, the address usually appears as part of the company letterhead in the header under or beside the prominently displayed and brand-stylized company name and logo. Use a company letterhead template whenever writing on behalf of the company you work for; personal letterhead can be used for personal letters (many formats are available in word processing programs and various websites). Company letterhead also includes other contact information such as phone and fax numbers, as well as the company web address. Some company letterhead templates move some or all of these parts, besides the company name and logo, to the footer so that the whole page is framed with company branding. For dozens of letter template examples, browse [Letters](#) in Microsoft Office.

For personal letters, the address is formatted as follows. Below the sender's name, the street number, name, and type go on the first line (with no comma at the end) and the city/town, state, and ZIP code go on the second, as shown below:

Example of Return Address for an Individual

135 Market Street
Harrisburg, PA 17110

Note: Strike a formal tone by fully spelling out the street type rather than abbreviating it (e.g., Street, not St.; Avenue, not Ave.; Road, not Rd.; Crescent, not Cres.; Boulevard, not Blvd.; Court, not Crt.; etc.). Also, use [the two-letter state abbreviations](#) established by the United States Postal Service.

Date Line

In a formal letter, the date must follow the unambiguous style that fully spells out the month, gives the calendar date, a comma, and the full year (e.g., March 26, 2021). In block-style letters, this appears left-justified (its left edge lines up with the left margin) often with 2-3 lines of space between it and the company letterhead above it and, for symmetry, as much between it and the recipient address below.

Recipient Address (Inside Address)

The recipient address, also called the inside address, is left-justified, begins with the recipient's full name on the top line, and follows with their mailing address on the lines below in the format options given in the table below.

Address Format	Example
Title Full Name, Professional Role or Job Title Company Name Address City, State ZIP Code	Dr. Michelle Masterton, Geriatrician Tidal Healthcare Center 201 Hall Avenue Seaford, DE 19973
Title Full Name, Credentials Professional Role or Job Title (if long) Address City, State ZIP Code	Mr. Jonathan Carruthers, MBA Freelance Marketing Consultant 3489 Cook Street Portland, OR 97227

Subject Reference

Like a subject line in an email or a memo, letters might include subject lines that indicate the topic or purpose. The same titling principles as email and memo apply, only the letter's subject reference begins with "**Re:**" or "**RE:**" and is entirely in either bold typeface or all-caps, but not both. You might also see it positioned above or below the opening salutation, but usually above. One double space usually separates the subject line from the other parts above and below.

Salutation

Begin the letter with a salutation or **greeting**. The most common greeting is "Dear" followed by the title, name, and colon. Variations in formal letters include omitting the title or the first name, but not both at once. Omit the title if you're at all concerned about its accuracy. For instance, if the recipient's first name is a unisex name and you're not sure if they're male or female, skip the gender title to avoid offending the recipient by mixing up their gender. Unless you're sure that the recipient prefers Mrs. (indicating that she's married) over Ms. because she's used it herself, Ms. might be the safer option. Avoid the title Miss because it's no longer commonly used and appears outdated. If you're addressing someone who identifies as non-binary, then Mx. might be best if you must use a title, or just no title at all. Other considerations in the opening salutation include the following:

- Use the recipient's first name only if you know them well and are on a friendly, first-name basis.
- Only use a comma instead of a colon with **very** informal letters.
- The use of "To Whom It May Concern" is considered outdated. In the past, it was used in situations where someone intended for their letter to be read by whomever it is given to, as in the case of a reference letter that an applicant distributes to potential employers. Every effort should be made to direct the letter to a particular person, especially job application letters. If an employer has deliberately omitted any mention of who is responsible for hiring, for example, addressing the person by professional role in your letter (e.g., Dear Hiring Manager) is preferred. If no name or title as known, omitting a salutation is best.

Examples of Salutations in Business Letters

Dear Dr. Boyd:
Dear Ms. Alexander:
Dear Mr. Farinelli:
Dear Dwayne Jones:

Message Opening

Letters are ideal for both **direct-** and **indirect-approach** messages depending on the occasion for writing them. Direct-approach letters get right to the point by stating their main point in the first paragraph and follow with explanations and other specific information in subsequent paragraphs. Letters organized with openings like this lend themselves to positive or neutral messages. Ideal for formally delivering bad-news or persuasive messages, indirect-approach letters begin with a buffer paragraph or another

neutral statement—again, this may only be a sentence or two—just to establish some common ground before getting to the bad news or difficult request in the body of the message.

Message Body

Whether the opening takes the direct or indirect approach, the body supports this with explanatory detail. Ensure that your message body abides by rules explained in Chapter 3, especially conciseness because a letter should only be a page or two. If appropriate for the content, use effective document design features such as numbered or bulleted lists to improve readability. For instance, if your letter contains a series of questions, use a numbered list so that the reader can respond to each with a corresponding numbered list of their own.

Like all other text blocks throughout the letter, every line in the message body must be flush to the left margin, including the first. In other words, rather than indent a paragraph's first line as novels do to mark where one paragraph ends and another begins, separate them with a double space. Brevity in formal letters limits the number of paragraphs to what you can fit in a page or two. However, a letter, unlike an email or a memo, must have at least three paragraphs.

Message Closing

The closing mirrors the opening with a sentence or two that wraps up the letter with something relevant to the topic at hand. Because of their formality, letters almost always end with a goodwill statement, such as an expression of gratitude thanking the reader for their attention or consideration. For instance, a job application letter thanks the reader for their consideration, invites them to read the enclosed resume, and expresses interest in meeting to discuss the applicant's fit with the company in person since getting an interview is the entire point of an application. A thank-you letter will thank the recipient again, and a recommendation letter will emphatically endorse the applicant. Even letters delivering bad news or addressing contentious situations should end with positive statements and expressions of goodwill rather than hostile or passive-aggressive jabs.

Complimentary Closing

A simple "Sincerely" or "Best regards" are standard business letter closing salutations that signal the formal end of the message much like the opening salutation did before the beginning of the message proper. A more personal letter sent to someone you know well may end with "Yours truly," but don't use this with someone you've never met or with anyone you want to maintain a strictly professional relationship with. Always place a comma after the closing.

Signature

Your signature is a guarantee of authorship that carries legal weight. In a printed letter, leave enough space—usually about three single-spaced lines—to autograph your signature by hand. When sending a letter that you write and submit completely electronically, you have two options for an electronic signature, as explained below. Of the two, an image of your hand-written signature looks much more professional than a typed-out version using a simulated handwriting font. The hand-written image gives the impression that you are adept at technology.

Signature Image

Sincerely,

Sign name here

Galileo Galilei, Astronomer

1. Write your signature on a sheet of white paper.
2. Scan the document.
3. Crop the image into a close-fitting jpeg image file. If the scanner makes a PDF file of the scanned image, make a jpeg file of the signature by using the [Snipping Tool](#).
4. Drag and drop the signature image from the folder where you saved it to the space between your complimentary closing and your full printed name in the signature block.
5. Adjust the signature size so that it occupies the equivalent of about 2-3 single-spaced lines and delete any blank lines of space above and below it so that it would fit snugly between the closing and your full typed name.

Simulated Signature

Sincerely,

John Smith

John Smith

1. Type your name on the line between the closing and full printed name in the signature block.
2. Highlight it.
3. Go to the font selection drop-down menu and select a simulated handwriting signature that is common to most computers, such as Freestyle Script.
4. Adjust the font size so that your simulated signature occupies the equivalent of 2-3 single-spaced lines.

Don't cut corners when assembling an image of your handwritten signature. For instance, taking a smartphone photo of your signature rather than scanning it will look amateurish because the background will probably be grayish or another off-white shade that will clash with the pure white of your page background. Also, drawing your signature with your computer's mouse or touchpad will look shaky like it was signed by a seven year-old. The inserted signature image must be seamlessly integrated and smoothly drawn for it to look professionally done.

Besides giving the impression that you're adept at technology, making an image file of your handwritten signature for electronic letters also sets you up for using it repeatedly to sign contracts and other documents electronically. Unless you're sent a contract via technology solution to legally sign documents in a secure manner, a PDF contract sent to you would otherwise require printing it out, signing it, scanning it, and emailing it back. With a signature image, you can just drag and drop your signature into the document after downloading it, re-save it as a PDF, and email it back to the employer in a minute or two.

Though the simulated signature is certainly easier to put together, it carries with it several problems: it looks lazy and even tacky, carries no legal authority, and may not appear as a simulated signature font when it's opened by the recipient on another computer. If it's opened on, say, a Mac computer when you wrote it on a Windows-based PC, the signature might be converted into 25-pt. Arial font, making the recipient wonder why you chose a font that looks nothing like handwriting for your signature. The reason is that their computer didn't have the signature font you chose, or something was lost in translation, and their reader rendered the signature into a different font. For these reasons, using an image of your actual signature is better.

Signature Block

The signature block clarifies the sender's name in full since handwritten signatures are rarely legible enough to do so themselves. The sender's professional role follows their name either on the same line (with a comma in between) if both the name and role are short enough, and on the second line if they are too long together. On the line below the sender's name and role can appear the name of the company they work for and their work email address on the third line; all three lines are single-spaced. If you are writing independently, putting your email address and phone number on the line(s) below your printed name is a good idea. If you used a personal letterhead, perhaps for a job application letter, then you need not include anything more than your full printed name in your signature block.

Sometimes letters are written on someone else's behalf, perhaps by an administrative assistant. In such cases, the signature and typed-out name of the person responsible for the letter is given at the bottom, then the initials of the person who typed it appear after a line of space below the last line of the signature block.

Enclosure Notation

Just as emails can include attachments, letters are often sent along with other documents. **Job application letters** introduce résumés, for instance, and **letters of transmittal** introduce reports to their intended recipients. In such cases, an enclosure notation on the very last line of the page (above the footer margin) tells the reader that another document or other documents are included with the letter. Remember that you need to mention the enclosure in the body of the letter as well. For example, you can write: "I am including the expense report we discussed last week during our meeting."

Examples of Enclosure Notations

Enclosure: Expense Report

Enclosures: Resume, Portfolio

Enclosures (2)

Enc. or Encs.

Given the importance of the letter you're writing, especially if it has to do with employment, editing is crucial to your career success. Even a single writing error in a job application letter, for instance, is enough to prompt the reader to dump it in the shredder without even glancing at the enclosed résumé, making the applicant's efforts useless. Also ensure that the letter fulfills its purpose and represents you well with its flawless attention to detail.

Your letter must meet all expectations for standard business letter format. In North America, the page must be 8.5" x 11" (21.6 x 27.9cm) with one-inch (2.5cm) or 3cm margins all around. Though letterhead and graphic elements may go in the header and footer for company branding purposes, the side margins must remain blank. Make the font 12-point Times New Roman or a similar serif font, or alternatively a sans-serif font such as Arial, but definitely not something exotic like Papyrus or something informal like Comic Sans MS. Single-space the text by ensuring that the line spacing is 1.0 in your word processor, which may be different from your word processor's default (the MS Word default is 1.08). Adjusting the default setting that adds additional line spaces every time you hit the Enter or Return key is essential to avoiding the effect of the line spacing looking like it's double even when you indeed set it to single.

Though letters sent electronically can be attached in emails or uploaded to a website, hard-copy letters must be printed out and signed. Those mailed on their own or perhaps with one or two enclosed pages can be folded twice to make three horizontal panels of equal height so that the letter fits in a standard 4 1/8" x 9 1/2" envelope. When a hard-copy letter covers extremely important documents (e.g., a mailed job application or report), consider sending them pristinely unfolded in a 9" x 11.5" envelope.

Finally, ensure that you leave enough time for your letter to arrive at its destination if punctuality is a factor. Though letters sent to a destination within your city may take only a couple of days to get there, those sent across the country may take a week or longer depending on weekend and holiday slow-downs (e.g., letters sent during the Christmas holiday season take longer to arrive). Email has largely replaced hard-copy letters because it ensures that a message gets to its destination the instant you press Send, so send letters when urgency isn't an issue.

General Letter Tips

For more perspectives on business letters, including slight format variations, see the following resources:

- [How to Format a Business Letter](#)
- [Writing the Basic Business Letter](#)
- [How to Write a Business Letter](#)

All links live as of June 2021.

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