



The Basic Business Letter

When writing a business letter, you must pay attention to both the parts of a business letter and to your choice of formats. This handout will explain both concepts.

Parts of a business letter

Date

The date line is used to indicate the date the letter was written. However, if your letter is completed over a number of days, use the date it was finished in the date line. When writing to companies within the United States, use the American date format. (The United States-based convention for formatting a date places the month before the day. For example: June 11, 2001.) Write out the month, day and year two inches from the top of the page. Depending which format you are using for your letter, either left justify the date or center it horizontally.

Sender's Address

Including the address of the sender is optional. If you choose to include it, place the address one line below the date. Do not write the sender's name or title, as it is included in the letter's closing. Include only the street address, city and zip code. Another option is to include the sender's address directly after the closing signature.

Inside Address

The inside address is the recipient's address. It is always best to write to a specific individual at the firm to which you are writing. If you do not have the person's name, do some research by calling the company or speaking with employees from the company. Include a personal title such as Ms., Mrs., Mr., or Dr. Follow a woman's preference in being addressed as Miss, Mrs., or Ms. If you are unsure of a woman's preference in being addressed, use Ms. If there is a possibility that the person to whom you are writing is a Dr. or has some other title, use that title. Usually, people will not mind being addressed by a higher title than they actually possess. To write the address, use the U.S. Post Office Format. For international addresses, type the name of the country in all-capital letters on the last line. The inside address begins one line below the sender's address or one inch below the date. It should be left justified, no matter which format you are using.

Salutation

Use the same name as the inside address, including the personal title. If you know the person and typically address them by their first name, it is acceptable to use only the first name in the salutation (i.e., Dear Lucy:). In all other cases, however, use the personal title and full name followed by a colon. Leave one line blank after the salutation.

If you don't know a reader's gender, use a nonsexist salutation, such as "To Whom it May Concern." It is also acceptable to use the full name in a salutation if you cannot determine gender. For example, you might write *Dear Chris Harmon*: if you were unsure of Chris's gender.

Body

For block and modified block formats, single space and left justify each paragraph within the body of the letter. Leave a blank line between each paragraph. When writing a business letter, be careful to remember that conciseness is very important. In the first paragraph, consider a friendly opening and then a statement of the main point. The next paragraph should begin justifying the importance of the main point. In the next few paragraphs, continue justification with background information and supporting details. The closing paragraph should restate the purpose of the letter and, in some cases, request some type of action.

Closing

The closing begins at the same horizontal point as your date and one line after the last body paragraph. Capitalize the first word only (i.e., Thank you) and leave four lines between the closing and the sender's name for a signature. If a colon follows the salutation, a comma should follow the closing; otherwise, there is no punctuation after the closing.

Enclosures

If you have enclosed any documents along with the letter, such as a resume, you indicate this simply by typing Enclosures one line below the closing. As an option, you may list the name of each document you are including in the envelope. For instance, if you have included many documents and need to insure that the recipient is aware of each document, it may be a good idea to list the names.

Typist initials

Typist initials are used to indicate the person who typed the letter. If you typed the letter yourself, omit the typist initials.

A note about format and font

When writing business letters, you must pay special attention to the format and font used. The most common layout of a business letter is known as block format. Using this format, the entire letter is left justified and single spaced except for a double space between paragraphs. Another widely utilized format is known as modified block format. In this type, the body of the letter is left justified and single-spaced. However, the date and closing are in alignment in the center of the page. The final, and least used, style is semi-block. It is much like the modified block style except that each paragraph is indented instead of left justified.

The following table shows examples of the different formats.

<p>March 16, 2001</p> <p>Ernie English 1234 Writing Lab Lane Write City, IN 12345</p> <p>Dear Mr. English:</p> <p>The first paragraph of a typical business letter is used to state the main point of the letter. Begin with a friendly opening; then quickly transition into the purpose of your letter. Use a couple of sentences to explain the purpose, but do not go in to detail until the next paragraph.</p> <p>Beginning with the second paragraph, state the supporting details to justify your purpose. These may take the form of background information, statistics or first-hand accounts. A few short paragraphs within the body of the letter should be enough to support your reasoning.</p> <p>Finally, in the closing paragraph, briefly restate your purpose and why it is important. If the purpose of your letter is employment related, consider ending your letter with your contact information. However, if the purpose is informational, think about closing with gratitude for the reader's time.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <p>Lucy Letter 123 Winner's Road New Employee Town, PA 12345</p>	<p>March 16, 2001</p> <p>Ernie English 1234 Writing Lab Lane Write City, IN 12345</p> <p>Dear Mr. English:</p> <p>The first paragraph of a typical business letter is used to state the main point of the letter. Begin with a friendly opening; then quickly transition into the purpose of your letter. Use a couple of sentences to explain the purpose, but do not go in to detail until the next paragraph.</p> <p>Beginning with the second paragraph, state the supporting details to justify your purpose. These may take the form of background information, statistics or first-hand accounts. A few short paragraphs within the body of the letter should be enough to support your reasoning.</p> <p>Finally, in the closing paragraph, briefly restate your purpose and why it is important. If the purpose of your letter is employment related, consider ending your letter with your contact information. However, if the purpose is informational, think about closing with gratitude for the reader's time.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <p>Lucy Letter</p>	<p>March 16, 2001</p> <p>Ernie English 1234 Writing Lab Lane Write City, IN 12345</p> <p>Dear Mr. English:</p> <p>The first paragraph of a typical business letter is used to state the main point of the letter. Begin with a friendly opening; then quickly transition into the purpose of your letter. Use a couple of sentences to explain the purpose, but do not go in to detail until the next paragraph.</p> <p>Beginning with the second paragraph, state the supporting details to justify your purpose. These may take the form of background information, statistics or first-hand accounts. A few short paragraphs within the body of the letter should be enough to support your reasoning.</p> <p>Finally, in the closing paragraph, briefly restate your purpose and why it is important. If the purpose of your letter is employment related, consider ending your letter with your contact information. However, if the purpose is informational, think about closing with gratitude for the reader's time.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <p>Lucy Letter</p>
<p>Block Format</p>	<p>Modified Block Format</p>	<p>Semi-block format</p>

If your computer is equipped with Microsoft Office 2000, the Letter Wizard can be used to take much of the guesswork out of formatting business letters. To access the Letter Wizard, click on the Tools menu and then choose Letter Wizard. The Wizard will present the three styles mentioned here and input the date, sender address and recipient address into the selected format. Letter Wizard should only be used if you have a basic understand of how to write a business letter. Its templates are not applicable in every setting. Therefore, you should consult a business writing handbook if you have any questions or doubt the accuracy of the Letter Wizard.

Another important factor in the readability of a letter is the chosen font. The generally accepted font is Times New Roman, size 12, although other fonts such as Arial may be used. When choosing a font, always consider your audience. If you are writing to a conservative company, you may want to use Times New Roman. However, if you are writing to a more liberal company, you have a little more freedom when choosing fonts.

As far as punctuation after the salutation and closing is concerned, the standard is to use a colon after the salutation (never a comma) and a comma after the closing. There is also a less accepted format, known as open punctuation, in which punctuation is excluded after the salutation and the closing.

The following information must remain intact on every handout printed for distribution.

This page is located at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/pw/p_basicbusletter.html

Copyright ©1995-2002 by OWL at Purdue University and Purdue University. All rights reserved. Use of this site, including printing and distributing our handouts, constitutes acceptance of our terms and conditions of fair use, available at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/fairuse.html>.

To contact OWL, please visit our contact information page at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/lab/contact.html> to find the right person to call or email.