

Business Letter Format

Most students admit to having learned in junior high school or in high school about writing business letters and about conventional formats for them. When it comes down to writing them, however, all too many students seem not to know how and to be unwilling to look up the forms (or perhaps they don't have a reference about using English). This web page was prepared so that you would have an easily obtained description of what to do.

When a business that has *letterhead stationery* writes a business letter, the first page of the letter uses paper with the printed letterhead and succeeding pages, if any, use matching quality and color sheets without the letterhead. A business with very good quality printing *might* generate the *letterhead graphic* with an image embedded in a word processor document. An individual normally won't use letterhead stationery and won't attempt to fake it. An attempt at letterhead that produces a tacky result or that conveys pompousness produces effects that you want to avoid.

In a business letter, everything that you "type" should be in the same typeface and in the same font size. You should use "formal English" and you should very carefully check your grammar and spelling. You should arrange things neatly. You should consider the appearance of the letter "at arm's length" as well as close up -- use white space to produce an attractive sheet.

In a conventional business letter you should see these parts, in order top to bottom:

- A return address
This item is the postal address of the author of the letter. Each line of it is left justified -- either at a tab stop that puts the information toward the right side of the page or at the left margin. Normally the return address is at the top of the page, but you can move it down a little to improve over-all appearance. Do not put email addresses here -- if you need to convey an email address, do it in the body of the letter.
- The date
This item is the date of the letter. It is aligned with the return address. Formerly there was never whitespace (blank lines) between the return address and the date, but some current styles allow blank lines.
- An *inside address*
This item duplicates what goes on the envelope. It has the formal name of the intended recipient of the letter and that person's postal address. Each line of the inside address is left justified at the left margin. No email addresses appear here. You can put blank lines between the date and the inside address to fill the page better and to improve the "arm's length" appearance.
- A salutation
This item formally addresses the recipient. If the addressee is not a friend, you should write "Dear Mr. Brown:" or "Dear Mrs. Smith:" or "Dear Ms. Jones:" or "Dear Dr. Greene:" or the like. A letter to a close associate might say "Dear Mike:" or "Dear Sally:".
There is at least one line of white space between the inside address and the salutation. You can put a little more to improve the over-all appearance.
Before the days of *political correctness* a letter to an organization would begin "Dear Sir:" or "Dear Sirs:" or "Gentlemen:" -- for example, if the envelope were addressed "Personnel Director, XYZ Company, City, State" you might do this. These days you should probably make an effort to get a name, but...
- The body of the letter.
The body is single spaced.
Ordinarily the body contains more than one paragraph. Avoid both extremely short and very long paragraphs.
You can use either *indented paragraphs* (in which the first line is indented more than the rest) or *block paragraphs* (in which all lines begin at the left margin). With block paragraphs you must

leave extra white space between paragraphs -- one blank line or one "empty paragraph" is often used, but you can also use Word's extra space before or after paragraph option (Format --> Paragraph...); the extra space should probably not exceed the size of an empty paragraph. With indented paragraphs, extra space between paragraphs is common, but optional. Indented paragraphs should be avoided if the return address was aligned at the left margin.

Special effects like bulleted lists and paragraphs whose left and right edges are both indented should be used *very* sparingly -- avoid them as much as you can. Likewise, consider whether having your paragraphs fully justified (both left and right edges squared off) will make the letter look too much like a form letter or piece of junk mail.

- A closing

This item is something like "Yours truly," or "Sincerely,". It is normally vertically aligned with the return address. (See the examples.)

- Space for a handwritten signature.

- Typed name of letter author

This item is aligned with the return address, date, and closing. Leave enough white space above it for a (handwritten) signature. If you have a job title and this letter is being written as part of that job, it is common to type the job title directly below the typed name (single spaced). An individual writing a letter normally doesn't include a job-title line.

- cc:/Typist/enclosures

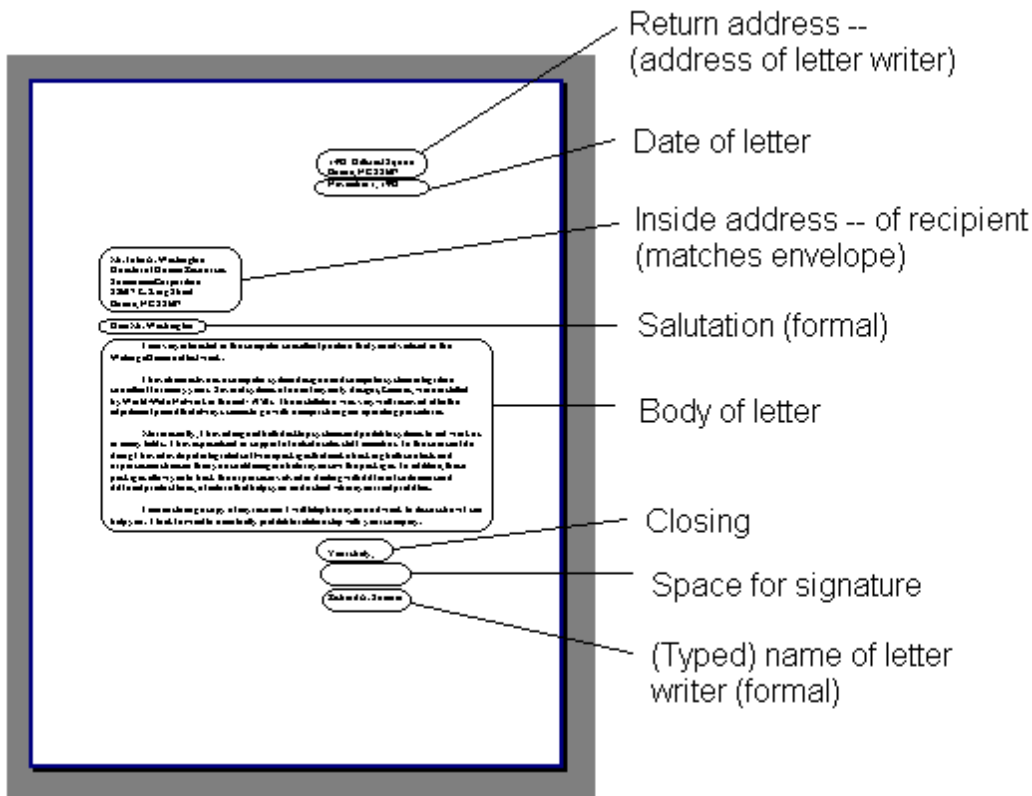
An individual writing a letter usually omits these items.

It is assumed that you will keep a copy of the letter. If you are supplying copies to people other than the addressee, it is common to put a "cc:" list at the bottom left of the last page ("cc" originally stood for "carbon copy" to). When the letter is prepared by a professional typist, it is common for the initials of the typist to be supplied at the bottom. If there are enclosures, that fact is often noted there too.

Your instructor may have told you not to use a template. Do what your instructor told you. Many of MS-Word's templates appear to have been created more to show off weird or fancy effects that Word can do than to produce a well-done product useful to the ordinary user. Some of Word's templates encourage you to produce a tacky document -- resist the temptation. If you're using Word '97, our friend "Office Bob" may pop up when you type the letter's salutation. If your instructor told you not to use templates, decline "Office Bob"'s offer of "help."

Examples

A business letter with the return address to the right and using indented paragraphs.



A business letter with the return address at the left margin and using block paragraphs.

