

Writing an official letter

Use these tips when writing a formal letter

In today's Internet- and email-driven society, the need to write a formal letter arises less often than in the past. However, it is still occasionally necessary to present a formal letter to obtain information, to apply for an academic program or a job, to write a complaint letter, or simply to express your opinion in an effective and coherent manner.

Be concise

State the purpose of your formal letter in the first paragraph and don't veer from the subject. Try to avoid flowery language or long words. Keep the letter short and to the point. This excerpt from Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* (4th edition) provides the perfect rule of thumb:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all sentences short, or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

Use the right tone

A business or formal letter should be written in a tone that is slightly more formal than your everyday language. Avoid the following: slang or jargon; contractions such as I'm, can't, it's; and vague words such as good and nice. Be polite and respectful, even if you are complaining.

Proofread

Proofreading is so important. Once you have written your formal letter, check the grammar and spelling carefully. Use the spell-checker on your computer and then read the letter over yourself as the spellchecker will not catch every error. Use a dictionary or thesaurus, if necessary. Check the grammar and punctuation for correctness and make sure the sentences are complete.

It is a good idea to have someone else proofread your formal letter, even after you have done so, as you may have overlooked errors in something that you have read over many times. If this formal letter is important enough for you to take the time to write, don't rush its completion. Errors will diminish the impact of the statement or impression you are trying to make.

Use proper format and presentation

Remember that the first impression is the one that lasts. Use good quality paper and a matching envelope for your formal letter. Make sure the recipient is addressed properly and that his or her name is spelled correctly. Equally important—don't forget to sign the letter!

Present your ideas properly: Formatting a formal letter

Adhering to the standard conventions of good formal letter writing and presenting your letter attractively will ensure that your thoughts are seriously considered by the recipient and given the attention and consideration they deserve. Here are a few formatting tips:

Heading

The heading consists of your address (but not your name) and the date. Telephone numbers and email addresses are not usually included here, but they are acceptable. Using block format, the heading goes in the top left-hand corner of the page.

*123 Elm Ave.
Treesville, ON MIN 2P3
November 23, 2008*

Inside Address

The inside address consists of the name and address of the person to whom you are writing. You should try to address the formal letter to a specific person, but if you do not know his or her name, at least try to include his or her title. This address is usually placed four lines below the heading if a word processor is used or one line below the heading if the letter is handwritten.

*Mr. M. Leaf (name)
Chief of Syrup Production (title)
Old Sticky Pancake Company
456 Maple Lane
Forest, ON 7W8 9Y0*

Salutation

Skip one line after the inside address and then type the salutation. Your choice of salutation depends on whether or not you know the intended recipient of the formal letter. The most usual greeting is

Dear

followed by the person's name and punctuated with a colon. If you don't know whether the person you are addressing is a man or a woman, you may begin with

Dear Sir or Madam,

again followed by a colon.

Ms.

may be used if you don't know the marital status of a woman. Furthermore, if the person has a specific title such as

Dr.

make sure that you use it. Here are some examples of each salutation:

Dear Mr. Trunk,

Dear Ms. Root,

Dear Mrs. Branch,

Dear Dr. Acorn,

Body

Skip one line after the salutation and begin typing the body of the formal letter. This is the main part of the letter. Keep in mind the rules outlined above regarding brevity and coherence. It is best to use short, clear, logical paragraphs to state your business.

Closing and Signature

This is the end of the letter. Skip one line after the last paragraph of the body of the letter and type the closing. Only the first word of the closing should be capitalized. It is punctuated with a comma. Leave several lines after the closing and type (or print) your signature. Your actual handwritten signature is to be inserted between these two printed lines, written in ink.

Yours sincerely,

Ezra Twig

Your typed signature marks the end of your letter, and while you can write a post script (P.S.) containing additional information, it is better to include all pertinent details in the body of the letter itself so nothing is accidentally overlooked.

Now that your formal letter has been written, read it through in its entirety to ensure you have communicated your points thoroughly and accurately. Then, it's ready to be sent off to its recipient!



Date

July 1, 2002

Sender's
Address

GP & ASSOCIATES
2653 51st Channing Avenue, Suite 400
Denver, CO 80424
gparker@gpaaccounting.com
www.gpaaccounting.com

Inside Address

Ms. Ta Turington
ACTION ITEMS
2420 Crestview Parkway
Denver, CO 80444

Salutation

Dear Ms. Turington:

Body Text

I understand from our mutual acquaintance, Chad Johnson, that you are looking to retain an accounting firm to assist you in the sale of your business. I would welcome the opportunity to show you how GP & Associates was able to help Chad successfully sell his business earlier this year.

As you'll see on our Web site, my associates and I have extensive experience in finance/accounting, internal audits, and tax compliance. For the past several years, we have specialized in business valuation and transition services for sellers. We enjoy working closely with clients throughout the sale process to ensure a smooth transition. As our clients can attest, our various pre-sale price improvement strategies can significantly optimize a business's sale price.

Should you be thinking of purchasing another business, please note that we also offer business acquisition services. For your reference, I have enclosed additional information describing GP & Associates' full range of services.

Closing
"Call to Action"

To set up an appointment to discuss your specific needs, please contact me at 303-459-0007. I know how busy you are, so I will give you a call on Tuesday to follow up if I haven't heard from you.

Signature Block

Best regards,

Enclosures
Carbon Copy

Greg Parker

Enclosures
CC: