Writing Guide for Business Letters
Introduction: Business Letters
When you write business letters in industry or for a class, knowing your purpose and audience will help determine what information to include. Generally, business letters follow a particular format, although your instructor or company may require you to use alternative formats.

Definition of a Business Letter
The business letter is the basic means of communication between two companies. It is estimated that close to 100 million Business Letters are written each workday. It is a document typically sent externally to those outside a company but is also sent internally to those within a company.

Most business letters have a formal tone. You should write a business letter whenever you need a permanent record that you sent the information enclosed. Because you generally send business letters to other professionals, always include a formal salutation and closing.

Purpose of a Business Letter
You will write business letters to inform readers of specific information. However, you might also write a business letter to persuade others to take action or to propose your ideas. Business letters even function as advertisements at times. Consider the letters long-distance phone companies send to those not signed up for their services or the cover letter to your resume. Both of these serve to promote or advertise.

Business letters can be challenging to write, because you have to consider how to keep your readers' attention. This is particularly the case if your readers receive large amounts of mail and have little time to read.

Writing business letters is like any other document: First you must analyze your audience and determine your purpose. Then you gather information, create an outline, write a draft, and revise it. The key to writing business letters is to get to the point as quickly as possible and to present your information clearly.

Audience Analysis
Writing a business letter is like any other type of technical communication. First you have to analyze your audience and determine your purpose. The typical audience is other professionals. However, you might also write business letters to your co-workers. These audiences generally require you provide a detailed background about your purpose.
As a student, you may have to write business letters to your instructor or classmates. When composing academic business letters, consider what this audience already knows about the subject.

For example, if you are writing a business letter to accompany a paper, does your audience already know what the paper is about? What further information do they require? What do you require from them as a result?

Because a business letter is a communication from one person to another, a letter must convey a courteous, positive tone. Look at the situation from your reader's point of view and adjust the content and tone to meet the audience's needs.

**General Format**
When you write a business letter, you will follow a general format. However, your instructor or your company may have specific requirements that you must use. For instance, a company might have a particular way of presenting a salutation or may even use a specific type of letterhead.

Because a business letter is an effective way to communicate a message, its format should allow readers to quickly grasp information. Information should stand out to readers as they scan the document. Remember, a business letter reflects your professionalism.

**Letterhead or Return Address**
Readers should always be able to quickly locate your contact information. This information is located at the top of the business letter in the return address or by using the company's letterhead. This includes:

- name
- address
- phone number
- company logo or letterhead

The letterhead and the date the letter will be sent (usually printed two lines below the letterhead) make up the heading. When printing on blank paper, use your address (without your name) and date as the heading.

Print only the first page of any letter on letterhead stationary, with subsequent pages on blank paper, with the heading looking like this:

Ms. Leslie Scott
Page 2
May 23, 1999
Do not number the first page.
Inside Address
The inside address is your reader's full address. This includes the reader's:
- name
- position
- organization (as the company calls itself)
- complete mailing address
If your reader has a courtesy title, such as Professor, then use it. Otherwise use Mr. or Ms., unless you know the reader prefers Miss or Mrs. These should also appear identically on the envelope. For example:

Dr. I. M. Reading, Professor
ICU Technical College
Chicago, IL 60624

Attention Line
When you cannot address a business letter to a particular person, use an attention line:
Attention: Human Resource Manager

Use the attention line if you want an organization to respond even if the person you write to is unavailable. In this instance, put the name of the organization or division on the first line of the inside address, and the attention line immediately afterwards:

Department of Journalism,
Colorado State University
Clark C223 Fort Collins, CO 80526
Attention: Dr. Jon Smith, Department Chair

Subject Line
Use a brief phrase or keywords to describe the content of the business letter:

Department of Journalism,
Colorado State University
Clark C223 Fort Collins, CO 80526
Attention: Dr. Jon Smith, Department Chair
Subject: Admission Requirements
Salutation

A business letter should always include a salutation. This is to whom the letter is addressed. Salutations add a personal touch to your letter. If unsure to whom you should address a letter, always call an organization to find a contact. You should also use a colon rather than a comma because a comma is less professional.

Dear Dr. Reading:
Dear Sir or Madam:

If you have no attention or subject line, put the salutation two lines below the inside address. The traditional salutation is Dear followed by the reader's courtesy title and last name.

When addressing a group of people, use one of the following salutations:

Ladies and Gentlemen:
Gentlemen: (if all the readers are male)
Ladies: (if all the readers are female)

Body

The body of a business letter is typically single-spaced and has three paragraphs:
- introductory paragraph
- one or more body paragraphs
- concluding paragraph

Like essays written for college courses, a business letter introduces one main idea and then supports this idea. At the end of the letter, always include a way for your readers to contact you.

Finally, consider how your letter looks. If you have nothing but paragraph after paragraph of text, you might use lists to draw attention to specific information. Lists are effective ways to present information because they break down large amounts of text and are visually pleasing. Lists are especially useful when you have to convey steps, phases, years, procedures, or decisions, and can be bulleted or numbered.

When creating a list, consider writing phrases, fragments or even questions and answers. By avoiding full sentences in a list, your information is concise and more likely to engage your readers.

For example, to receive a degree in engineering, you must complete the following:
- Core Courses
- Elective Courses
- Senior Design
Complimentary Close and Signature
Business letters should end with a closing, such as:

  Sincerely,
  Cordially,
  Best regards,
  Yours very truly,

Capitalize only the first word in the complimentary close, and follow all phrases with a comma. You should also remember to sign and type your name under the closing.

End Notations
If someone else types your letters, the reference line identifies this person, usually by initials. It appears a few spaces below the signature line, along the left margin. The writer's initials come first, and they are capitalized.
For example, if Kathy Reese wrote a letter that McKenzie Allen typed, it would appear like this:

  KR/ma.
If the envelope contains any documents other than the letter itself, identify the number of enclosures:

  Enclosure or
  Enclosure (1), which means two documents

In determining the number of enclosures, count only the separate items, not the number of pages.

Copy Line
The copy line is used to let the reader know that other people are receiving a copy of the document. Use the following symbols:

  c: for copy
  pc: for photocopy
  bc: blind copy

Follow the symbol with the names of the other recipients, listed either alphabetically or according to organizational rank.

If you do not want your reader to know about the other copies, type bc on the copies only, not the original.
Types of Business Letters

The following are the six most common types of business letters. Keep in mind that the purpose and audience of your business letter effects which form you choose. If you are unsure about how to format your business letter, ask your instructor or review business letters your co-workers have written.

Order Letter

This is the most common form of business communication, and it is written for a manufacturer, wholesaler, or retailer.

When writing an order letter, include all the information the reader will need to identify the merchandise, such as:

- quantity
- model number
- dimensions
- capacity
- material
- price

Example Order Letter

May 23, 1999
Ms. Dawn Snyder,
Professor
ICU Technical College
Portland, ME 04101

Dear Ms. Snyder:

Would you please send me the following articles via COD? According to your Web site, all articles are in your possession and all is needed is the article name, date, and number of pages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Role of Maine in the fishing strike of 1867&quot;</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Effect of Maine geography on the War of 1812&quot;</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;World War II: From Androscoggin to York&quot;</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you very much,

(signature here)
I.B. Writing,
Professor, CSU
IW/gt
Inquiry Letter

As the title indicates, the purpose of this form is to obtain information from the reader. If the reader is expecting the letter, your task is easy. For example:

Could you please send me the admission requirements for your program so I can apply for next fall semester?

A secretary or school official in the college department receives many of these requests each month and would have no problem comprehending the meaning or necessary actions.

If the reader is not expecting your letter, then it is more difficult. In this case, following these four guidelines will be helpful:

State your purpose
List your questions or requested action
Offer something in return to encourage action
Follow up with a thank you note, e-mail, or phone call to the person who helped you with your request

Example Inquiry Letter

Dept. of English
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523

May 23, 1999

Ms. Dawn Snyder,
Professor
ICU Technical College
Portland, ME 04101

Dear Ms. Snyder:

I am a professor in English at Colorado State University organizing a seminar on concept mapping for a colloquium coming up in December. Based on your experience in this area, I was wondering if you would be interested in attending.

The deadline for admission is August 13. It would be a great honor to have you in attendance. Enclosed is an admissions form and more information on the colloquium.

Thank you for your time,

(signature here)
I.B. Writing,
Professor, CSU
IW/gt
Enclosure(4)
Response to an Inquiry Letter
When you receive an inquiry letter, answer the questions as clearly and as concisely as possible. If you cannot answer the questions, explain the reasons and offer to assist with alternate methods.

Example Response to an Inquiry Letter

Dawn Snyder, Professor
ICU Technical College
Portland, ME 04101

May 27, 1999

Professor I.B. Writing,
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523

Dear Mr. Writing:

I would be honored to attend your colloquium on concept mapping in December. I think you know how strongly I feel about that paradigm and the role the great state of Maine has played in its development.

I am enclosing the admissions sheet sent to me, as well as the articles you requested that I have recently published on the subject. Good luck on organizing the event- I cannot wait to be there!

Sincerely,

(signature here)
I.B. Writing,
Professor, CSU
DS/I\s
Enclosure(114)
c: Scott McRae, Dean of Department of Journalism
Sales Letter

When writing a sales letter, it is important to have a good attitude in order to sell your product or service, because the reader will want to know why they should spend their valuable time reading the letter. Therefore, you need to provide clear, specific information that will explain to the reader why they should be interested in buying your product or service.

Sales letters usually have a four-part strategy:

- **Catch the reader's eye**: it is very crucial in a sales letter to attract the reader's attention or else you will probably fail to sell your product or service
- **Describe the product or service you are trying to sell**
- **Convince your reader that your claims are accurate**: back up your comments with research and facts
- **Give the reader opportunities to learn more about your product or service**: provide the reader with a phone number, a Web site address, or some way for them to seek out information on their own

Example Sales Letter

**CLOSET CARE**

**1248 SE Lancaster Blvd**

**Tigard, OR 97225**

July 7, 1999

Professor I.B. Writing,

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, CO 80523

Dear Mr. Writing:

Are you having trouble organizing your clothes into your existing closets? If you are like most Americans, you have trouble finding your favorite shirt when you really need it. This is why it is important to have an organized closet system.

At CLOSET CARE, we have the skills and experience to come in and help you with your closet needs. May we stop by and offer you a FREE estimate at how much it would cost you to rebuild your closet? If so, give us a call at 555-1212 and set up an appointment with one of your friendly operators.

Sincerely,

*(signature here)*

Kent Lenoir

President

KL/jt
Claim Business Letter

When you have a complaint, you use a claim letter to relay this information in a professional and ethical manner to the person you have the problem with. The purpose of the claim letter is to convince the reader that you have a legitimate complaint that deserves a desired response.

The more professional and written the claim letter is, the better the chance you have of receiving positive feedback in your favor. Consider this strategy when writing a claim letter:

- Identify the product or service
- Explain the problem
- Propose a solution
- End the letter respectfully

Example Claim Letter

WJ&M Construction Company
2383 NW Turner Blvd
Tigard, OR 97225

July 10, 1999

Kent Lenoir, President
Closet Care
Tigard, OR 97225

Dear Mr. Lenoir:

As someone who has worked with you for over 12 years, we were very disappointed to see the work that you did on one of the houses we subcontracted to you in the Camas development.

As our oral agreement stipulated, we expected 5 black armoire units to be installed in the master bedroom, but instead, we found that 3 white particle-board desks were put in. I think you will agree that a communication problem exists.

We would like you to send out a crew to take out the white desks and put the black armoire units in immediately, or provide us with a refund.

Yours truly,

(signature here)
WJ Billings,
President
WJ/mm
Adjustment Business Letter

Here you respond to a claim letter and tell the customer how you plan to handle the situation. Regardless of what your final decision is, your purpose remains the same: show that you value the customer's business and concerns, and that your company is fair and reasonable.

If the customer's complaint can be resolved, simply express your regret about the situation, state the correction you will make, and end on a positive note by encouraging future business with your company.

If you cannot solve the customer's problem, then the letter becomes more difficult. In this situation, the letter will have four parts:

- attempt to meet the customer on some neutral ground: consider an expression of regret but not an apology, perhaps even thanking the customer for bringing it to your attention
- explain why your company is not at fault: explain the steps that led to the dissatisfaction clearly and concisely
- clearly state that your company is denying the request, and supply reasons in the letter for this denial: make this statement at the end, because if it is at the beginning, the customer may not finish the letter
- try to create goodwill for future business transactions: offer a special discount on a future transaction

Example Adjustment Letter

CLOSET CARE
1248 SE Lancaster Blvd
Tigard, OR 97225

July 17, 1999

WJ Billings, President
WJ&M Construction Company
2383 NW Turner Blvd
Tigard, OR 97225

Dear Ms. Billings:

I was very disappointed to read your letter of July 10th dealing with the issue of wrong product installed in one of your homes. As someone who values your business, I have already put a plan in motion to fix the problem.

My warehouse manager and a crew will be at the site July 19th to take out the white desks and replace them with the black armoire units, free of charge. Also, we will deduct another 10 percent of the bill for the misunderstanding. Thank you for your patience.

Sincerely,

(signature here)
Kent Lenoir
President
KL/jt
Effective Writing

Even though no one formula exists for a perfect business letter, some basic guidelines will help you, regardless of the form, purpose, and audience of the document.

Many executives still prefer a written document over other forms of communication, because the document can serve as a contract, the facts will be on record in writing, and executives do not have to rely on memory.

This is why it is important to write a good business Letter, and the principles below will help you do so.

Empathy

Empathy means to care about someone's feelings or ideas. A well-written business letter will convey the feeling that the writer does care about the reader and is genuinely interested in working together to solve a problem or discuss a concept.

To write a good letter, put yourself in the reader's shoes and try to anticipate the reader's reaction to your comments. By doing this, you are more likely to choose more appropriate words and use the correct tone.

Persuasion

Every business letter is in some degree a sales letter, because you are always requesting a response or course of action. Therefore, the following principles of persuasion will help you compose an efficient and effective Business Letter:

- plan according to the reader's reaction
- write with the "you" attitude- the state of mind where you always emphasize the benefits to the reader and subordinate your interests. This can be accomplished by using empathy and the words "you" and "your" often
- adjust the language to the reader and use terms and concepts that the reader is familiar with
- write positively and with confidence

Tone

Tone is the use of accent and inflection to express a mood or emotion in speaking or writing. Many times it is not what you say in a business letter, but how you say it. It is a good idea to always consider your tone so that you do not risk upsetting the reader, thereby lessening the chances your requests and comments will be respected.

You can avoid making mistakes with tone by using the following techniques:
avoid the "I" attitude by having more emphasis on the reader and not yourself
avoid extreme cases of humility, flattery, and modesty
avoid condescension
avoid preaching your ideas

Service Perspective
It is important to understand the service perspective when writing a business letter. The organization that uses a service attitude in letters shows its concern extends beyond purely profit objectives, and readers appreciate a genuine desire on the part of a company that cares about their needs.