

Writing the Basic Business Letter

Parts of a Business Letter:

Sender's Address: included in the letterhead. If you are not using letterhead, include the sender's address at the top of the letter one line above 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.

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 U.S. based convention for formatting a date places the month before the date. For example: June 11, 2011.) 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 tab to the center point and type the date.

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 Mr. Mrs. Ms. Dr., etc. If you are unsure of a woman's preference in being addressed, use Ms. For international address, 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. 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 do not 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 are 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 business letters, 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. In the next few paragraphs, continue justifying the importance of the main points. 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 (for example: 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 ensure that the recipient is aware of each document, it may be a good idea to list the names.

A Note About Format and Font:

Block Format: 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.

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.

Sample Letter: (Block Format)

123 Winner's Road
New Employee Town, PA 12345

November 9, 2011

Betty Business
1234 Computer Lab Drive
Computer City, MO 12345

Dear Ms. Business:

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.

Beginning with the second paragraph, state the supporting details to justify your purpose. These may take the form of background information, statistics or firsthand accounts. A few short paragraphs within the body of the letter should be enough to support your reasoning.

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 information, think about closing with gratitude for the reader's time.

Sincerely,

Victoria Abel