

Business Letter Writing: Inquiries - Asking for Information

We write an enquiry when we want to ask for more information concerning a product, service or other information about a product or service that interests us. These letters are often written in response to an advertisement that we have seen in the paper, a magazine, a commercial on television when we are interested in purchasing a product, but would like more information before making a decision.

Remember to place your or your company's address at the top of the letter (or use your company's letterhead) followed by the address of the company you are writing to. The date can either be placed double-spaced down or to the right.

Important Language to Remember

- **The Start:** Dear Sir or Madam
To Whom It May Concern - (very formal as you do not know the person to whom you are writing)
- **Giving Reference:** With reference to your advertisement (ad) in...
Regarding your advertisement (ad) in ...
- **Requesting a Catalogue, Brochure, Etc.:** After the reference, add a comma and continue - ... , would (Could) you please send me ...
- **Requesting Further Information:** I would also like to know ...
Could you tell me whether ...
- **Signature:** Yours faithfully - (very formal as you do not know the person to whom you are writing)

An example letter

Kenneth Beare
2520 Visita Avenue
Olympia, WA 98501

Jackson Brothers
3487 23rd Street
New York, NY 12009

September 12, 2000

To Whom It May Concern:

With reference to your advertisement in yesterday's New York Times, could you please send me a copy of your latest catalog. I would also like to know if it is possible to make purchases online.

Yours faithfully,

(Signature)

Business Letter Writing Basics

The basics of good business letter writing are easy to learn. The following guide provides the phrases that are usually found in any standard business letter. By using these standard phrases, you can give a professional tone to your English business letters. These phrases are used as a kind of frame and introduction to the content of business letters. At the end of this guide, you will find links to sites that give tips on the difficult part of writing successful business letters –arguing your business objective.

The Start	
Dear Personnel Director, Dear Sir or Madam	(use if you don't know who you are writing to)
Dear Mr, Mrs, Miss or Ms	(use if you know who you are writing to, and have a formal relationship with – VERY IMPORTANT use Ms for women unless asked to use Mrs or Miss)
Dear Frank	(use if the person is a close business contact or friend)
The Reference	
With reference to	your advertisement in the <i>Times</i> , ... your letter of 23 rd March, ... your phone call today, ...
Thank you for your letter of March 5 th .	
The Reason for Writing	
I am writing to	enquire about ... apologize for ... confirm ...
Requesting	
Could you possibly ... ?	

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I would be grateful if you could ...	
Agreeing to Requests	
I would be delighted to ...	
Giving Bad News	
Unfortunately ...	
I am afraid that ...	
Enclosing Documents	
I am enclosing ...	
Please find enclosed ...	
Enclosed you will find ...	
Closing Remarks	
Thank you for your help	
Please contact us again if	we can help in any way. there are any problems. you have any questions.
Reference to Future Contact	
I look forward to	hearing from you soon. meeting you next Tuesday. seeing you next Thursday.
The Finish	
Yours faithfully,	(If you don't know the name of the person you're writing to)
Yours sincerely,	(If you know the name of the person you're writing to)

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Best wishes, Best regards,	(If the person is a close business contact or friend)
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Here is a sample letter using some of these forms:

Ken's Cheese House
34 Chatley Avenue
Seattle, WA 98765
Tel: (206) 456 8967
Fax: (206) 456 6745
Email: kenny@cheese.com

Fred Flintstone
Sales Manager
Cheese Specialists Inc.
456 Rubble Road
Rockville, IL 896756

Dear Mr Flintstone,

With reference to our telephone conversation today, I am writing to confirm your order for:
120 x Cheddar Deluxe Ref. No. 856

Please contact us again if we can help in any way.

Yours sincerely,

Kenneth Beare

Business Letters

A **business letter** is more formal than a personal letter. It should have a margin of at least one inch on all four edges. It is always written on 8½"x11" unlined stationery. There are **six** parts to a business letter.

1. The Heading. This contains the return address (usually two or three lines) with the date on the last line. Sometimes it may be necessary to include a line after the address and before the date for a phone number, fax number, E-mail address, or something similar. Often a line is skipped between the address and date. That should always be done if the heading is next to the left margin. It is not necessary to type the return address if you are using stationery with the return address already imprinted. Always include the date.

2. The Inside Address. This is the address you are sending your letter to. Make it as complete as possible. Include titles and names if you know them. This is always on the left margin. If an 8½" x 11" paper is folded in thirds to fit in a standard 9" business envelope, the inside address can appear through the window in the envelope. An inside address also helps the recipient route the letter properly and can help should the envelope be damaged and the address become unreadable. Skip a line after the heading before the inside address. Skip another line after the inside address before the greeting.

3. The Greeting. Also called the salutation. The greeting in a business letter is always formal. It normally begins with the word "Dear" and always includes the person's last name. It normally has a title. Use a first name only if the title is unclear--for example, you are writing to someone named "Leslie," but do not know whether the person is male or female. The greeting in a business letter always ends in a colon. (You know you are in trouble if you get a letter from a boyfriend or girlfriend and the greeting ends in a colon--it is not going to be friendly.)

4. The Body. The body is written as text. A business letter is never hand written. Depending on the letter style you choose, paragraphs may be indented. Regardless of format, skip a line between paragraphs. Skip a line between the greeting and the body. Skip a line between the body and the close.

5. The Complimentary Close. This short, polite closing ends with a comma. It is either at the left margin or its left edge is in the center, depending on the [Business Letter Style](#) that you use. It begins at the same column the heading does. The block style is becoming more widely used because there is no indenting to bother with in the whole letter.

6. The Signature Line. Skip two lines (unless you have unusually wide or narrow lines) and type out the name to be signed. This customarily includes a middle initial, but does not have to. Women may indicate how they wish to be addressed by placing **Miss, Mrs., Ms.** or similar title in parentheses before their name. The signature line may include a second line for a title, if appropriate. Use blue or black ink. Business letters should not contain postscripts.

The Seven Cs of Business Letter Writing

Effective letter writing boils down to knowing why you are writing a letter, understanding your reader's needs and then clearly writing what you need to say. Every letter should be clear, human, helpful and as friendly as the topic allows. The best letters have a conversational tone and read as if you were talking to your reader. In brief then, discover the Seven-Cs of letter writing. You should be

- **Clear**
- **Concise**
- **Correct**
- **Courteous**
- **Conversational**
- **Convincing**
- **Complete**

When you write a letter, you are trying to convince someone to act or react in a positive way. Your reader will respond quickly only if your meaning is crystal clear.

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Put yourself in the reader's shoes and write in a friendly and helpful tone. Don't represent your company as one that cannot make a mistake and must always be right. Try not to reply in the normal bland and defensive way of organizations—write a sincere and helpful letter.

If you are responding to a letter, show you are interested in the reader's circumstances. If he or she has mentioned something personal in the letter, refer to it in your reply. This builds a bridge between you and the reader. Read the original letter carefully and see if there is something you can put in your letter to show your interest.

Business letter writing checklist

When you write a business letter, use this checklist to remind you of the key principles of effective letter writing.

Keep it Short

- Cut needless words and needless information.
- Cut stale phrases and redundant statements.
- Cut the first paragraph if it refers to previous correspondence.
- Cut the last paragraph if it asks for future correspondence.

Keep it Simple

- Use familiar words, short sentences and short paragraphs.
- Keep your subject matter as simple as possible.
- Keep related information together.
- Use a conversational style.

Keep it Strong

- Answer the reader's question in the first paragraph.
- Give your answer and then explain why.
- Use concrete words and examples.
- Keep to the subject.

Keep it Sincere

- Answer promptly.
- Be human and as friendly as possible.
- Write as if you were talking to your reader.

Writing a strong opening to your business letter

Your first job in writing any letter is to gain your reader's attention. It's an important principle of effective writing to put the most important information first. Your opening paragraph is both the headline and the lead for the message that follows in the rest of the letter.

Don't weigh down the front of your letter with boring repetition of information that your reader already knows. Many letters fail to start well because they follow the standard paragraph of every business letter. Here are some typical examples of openings in business letters

- Thank you for your letter of 8th March 1998, which has been passed to me for my attention.
- I refer to previous correspondence in respect of the above and note that to date we have not received your check for the outstanding arrears.
- I write with reference to our telephone conversation yesterday regarding the above matter.

Starting with a reference to the incoming letter is **weak** and wastes your reader's time. Most readers skip it, looking to the second and third paragraphs to get the answer to their questions. **If you step right into your subject in the first paragraph, you'll show your reader you do not intend to waste valuable time.** So get rid of any opening reference to the reader's letter and answer the most important question or give the most relevant information in your first sentence.

Make your first paragraph do something other than just referring to known information—so plunge straight into your message and don't waste your reader's time. For example, you could

- answer a question
- ask a question
- explain an action taken

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- express pleasure or regret
- give information

As the opening paragraph sets the tone for your letter, try to avoid using tired phrases that are wordy, give little information and create a formal and impersonal tone. Using the classic business-speak opening of **Further to...** almost guarantees the rest of the letter will be a typical, long-winded, standard piece of business writing.

These opening phrases are so popular because we don't have to think of what to write. Watch out for standard phrases in opening paragraphs. Examples are:

- Further to my recent
- I am writing
- I refer to my letter dated
- I refer to previous correspondence
- I write in reference to
- In respect of the above
- Recent correspondence
- Regarding
- With reference to
- With regards to

So be sure your opening paragraph sets the right tone for your letter. **Be direct and use your words positively so your reader has a good impression from the beginning of your letter.** Decide what is the most important information—and put it in the your first paragraph. Don't be afraid to start your letter strongly.

Putting your reader first

For all writers the most important people are their readers. If you keep your readers in mind when you write, it will help you use the right tone, appropriate language and include the right amount of detail.

What do readers want from writing? They want relevant information, presented in a clear, easy-to-understand style. They don't want muddled thinking, background information they already know, business-speak and jargon or waffle. Above all, they want to get the gist of your message in one reading—they don't want to dig for the meaning through long sentences and a boring style. So if you always keep your readers in mind, you will have to adapt your style and content to meet their needs.

Getting a clear picture of your readers before you start to write helps to focus your writing to get your message across. The better picture you have of your readers, the better you can direct your writing.

Ask questions to get a clear picture of your readers.

- Who are my readers?
- What do they already know about the subject?
- What do they need to know?
- Will they understand technical terms? (*Always write out Associated Student Body—never use ASB*)
- What information do they want? (*Why should they donate, attend, participate?????*)
- What do I want them to do? (*THIS is so important—spell it out: “Will you donate four gift certificates to award the “Most Improved Student” in each class?”*)
- What interests or motivates them? (*For a business—this may be getting their name out there, or gaining customers, or appealing to the high school age group, or giving back to the community...*)
- What prejudices do they have?

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- What worries or reassures them? (*Think about this when writing to teachers—remember they have a concern about their curriculum being interrupted!*)
- What will persuade them to my view? (*See above and think about how you can let them know that what you are doing is VALUABLE to student learning!*)
- What other arguments do I need to present?
- How are they likely to react to what I say?

If you imagine yourself in your reader's position, you're more likely to write a good letter.

Keeping your letter to the point

When you write a business letter, you must try not to waste your reader's time. The first step in any writing task is to set down your aim. Ask yourself, **Why am I writing?** and **What do I want to achieve?** The clearer you are in your own mind about what you want to achieve, the better your letter. These questions help you focus on the information that supports your central aim, and to cut information that's irrelevant. By doing this, you'll find you keep to the subject and perhaps write a document that is a third shorter than you would otherwise draft.

People read to find out information. **You can write the clearest letter or report, but if it doesn't say anything worth knowing, it's a useless document.** You have to learn to present the most relevant information for your readers' needs. Then having said what you need to say—stop.

The more specific information you give, the better. You need to be ruthless in cutting out the padding most of us put into letters. It just wastes readers' time and clouds your message.

To help you to keep to the point of your letter, you can draw up an outline to plan your letter. Follow these steps:

- Make a list of the topics you want to cover but don't worry about the order.
- Under each topic, list key words, examples, arguments and facts.
- Review each topic in your outline for relevance to your aim and audience.
- Cut out anything that's not relevant to your aim or audience.
- Sort the information into the best order for your readers.

The advantage of spending a little time setting out a plan is that it not only helps the reader, it also helps you write. By breaking down a complex topic into subject areas, you'll find it easier to concentrate on the most relevant information.

Getting the right tone to your business letter

When you write a business letter, it's important to use a tone that is friendly but efficient. Readers want to know there's someone at the other end of the letter who is taking notice and showing interest in their concerns. Try to sound—and be—helpful and friendly.

To do this, write as you would speak and **talk on paper**. This doesn't mean you should use slang, bad grammar or poor English, but try to aim for a conversational style and let the reader hear your voice.

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Imagine that your reader is sitting opposite you at your desk or is on the telephone. You'd be unlikely to say "please be advised" or "I wish to inform you"; instead you'd be more informal and say, "I'd like to explain" or "Let me explain" or use other everyday expressions.

Here are some ways to change your writing style to a conversational style.

Use Contractions

Using contractions such as **it's, doesn't, I'm, you're, we're, they're, isn't, here's, that's, we'll** gives a personal and human feel to your writing.

If there are no contractions in your writing, put some in. You don't have to use contractions at every opportunity. Sometimes writing **do not** comes more naturally than don't. When you speak, you probably use a combination of these styles—try to reflect this in your writing.

Use Personal References

Use words such as **I, we, you, your, my, and our** in your writing. Don't be afraid to identify yourself—it makes writing much more readable. This is a useful trick to make writing look and sound more like face-to-face talk.

Using I, we and you also helps you to avoid using passive verbs. It makes your style more direct and clear.

So instead of writing:

Our telephone number has changed

write

We've had our phone ripped out by the construction people

Instead of writing:

The goal of the Renaissance program is...

write

Our goal is ...

Using active verbs with personal references is a quick and dramatic way to make your writing readable and more direct.

Use Direct Questions

Direct questions are an essential part of the spoken language. Using them gives your writing much more impact and is a common technique in marketing and advertising material. Marketing people use this technique to put information across clearly and to give their writing impact.

In much business writing, we hide questions in our writing by using words such as **whether** to introduce them. Look for these in your writing and change them into direct questions. For example:

Original: We would appreciate your advising us **whether** you want to continue this account or transfer it.

Redraft: Do you want to continue your account or transfer it?

Original: Please inform us **whether** payment against these receipts will be in order.

Redraft: Can we pay against these receipts?

Apart from making your style more conversational, direct questions liven up your writing—it's as though you change the pitch in your voice. There's nothing like a direct question to get some reaction from your reader and to give your writing impact.

Use active verbs rather than passive verbs

Using active verbs rather than passive verbs is the key to good writing. Why? Because passive verbs are longwinded, ambiguous, impersonal and dull. Active verbs make your writing simpler, less formal, clearer and more precise. Here's an example:

Passive: It was agreed by the committee...

Active: The committee agreed...

Passive: At the last meeting a report was made by the Secretary...

Active: At the last meeting the Secretary reported...

Typical Heading

Action Headings

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Supporting Terra Linda High School Helping students become successful

We are looking for contributions Would you like to give gifts that motivate students to achieve?

Improving academics at TL Creating excitement about academic achievement at TL

Headings often fail because they stick too rigidly to the subject matter. The key to writing powerful headings is to use a strong verb and specific words. Because each heading has a strong verb, we call these action headings. You can also use direct questions as headings as they have an added impact. For example:

- Why Donate Pizzas to Terra Linda High School?
- Why Invest Your Money in Terra Linda High's Renaissance Program?
- Are You Looking for a Place to Give Back to Your Community?

Use simple words rather than complex ones

Many writers have difficulty keeping their message simple and clear. Instead of using everyday words they use complex or unfamiliar words. Simple, everyday words will help you get your message across. Too often we use words such as **additional**, **indicate**, **initiate** and **proliferate** for **extra**, **show**, **start** and **spread**.

Avoid jargon and technical terms

It's up to you to judge how much you need to explain your industry jargon and specialist terms by putting yourself in your readers' shoes. Don't overestimate your readers' understanding of terms because they may have a hazy idea of the true definition.

It doesn't insult the intelligence of your readers to explain terms clearly. Imagine a customer was sitting with you when you mentioned a technical term and asked 'What's that?' You would explain in everyday language. Do the same when you write.

Avoid abbreviations

The most common and irritating form of jargon is overuse of abbreviations. NO "ASB," you must spell it out: Associated Student Body, so it would be Associated Student Body President—etc.

Edit wordy phrases

Padding is the enemy of good writing. Unnecessary words and phrases clutter up sentences and obscure meaning. By comparison, economy of words is the mark of good writing. You have to learn to make every word count in technical documents. You must edit ruthlessly, cutting any word. Set yourself a target of cutting 10 to 20 percent of the words in your document.

Look for wordy phrases such as these in your writing and replace them with a single word or cut them out completely:

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Wordy	Concise
at a later date	later
at the present time	now
for the purpose of	for
have no alternative but	must
in addition to	besides, as well as, also
In order to	to
in relation to	about, in, with, towards, to
on a regular basis	regularly

Writing a strong close to your business letter

If the average business letter starts poorly, then it invariably finishes poorly. Your closing paragraph should bring your letter to a polite, businesslike close. Typical final paragraphs in business letters invite the reader to write again or use overused and meaningless phrases that detract from the impact of the letter. Take a look at these examples of good closing sentences for business letters:

- I would again apologize for the delay in replying and I trust that this has clarified the points you have raised, however, if you wish to discuss any points I have not clarified, or need any further information, you may wish to telephone or contact me accordingly.
- I look forward to hearing from you and in the meantime, should you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.
- I regret that I cannot be of more assistance in this matter, and should you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Your last paragraph should do something. In a longer letter it can summarize the key points or repeat the key message. If some action is needed, explain what you want the reader to do or what you will do. Use positive words such as **when** not **if**.

Make sure you **avoid using these weak phrases** and overused business phrases in your closing paragraph.

- Thanking you for your...
- Hoping for a prompt reply...
- Thanking you in advance for your assistance...
- Trusting this answers your questions...
- Please do not hesitate to contact me
- I trust this clarifies the situation

Instead use phrases like:

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- ◆ We are excited about your company's involvement with our Renaissance Program.
- ◆ I will contact you at the beginning of next week to discuss how your company will fit into our Renaissance Program.

End your letter positively and politely. Don't leave your reader in mid-air, but use the final paragraph to explain or repeat what you want your reader to do.