

How To Write A Business Letter

By E. T. Robbins

The biggest mistake people make when writing a business letter is that they think "formal" is a synonym for "professional."

Trust me, you *can* write a professional business letter in a conversational style. And I guarantee that your reader will be much happier as a result.

But first, a word for business letter purists. To my knowledge, no one has ever thrown away a piece of business correspondence because it was "too easy to read" or because the writing was "too simple." Even doctors, lawyers, and academics prefer straight shooting over excessive garble.

We all have so much information vying for our attention that it's easy for our mind to convert messages (especially formal, stuffy ones) into white noise. Don't let this happen to your letters. Follow these simple guidelines, and you'll be in business letter nirvana.

Format Does Count

"Format" and "formal" are not synonyms. I recommend following proper format guidelines (at least until you develop your own unique format) because this will show that you are a professional. A book I recommend (for all your writing needs) is *A Writer's Reference* by Diana Hacker.

Layout

Print letters on high-quality stock in white, off-white, or some other neutral tone. Margins should be one inch all around (you can get away with wider or smaller margins, but I recommend making them uniform). Don't use funky fonts! Stick to 12-point, Times New Roman (the default font in Word). If your letter is more than one page, consider using paragraph headings (in bold letters) for easier reading.

Addresses

Typically, your return address goes in the upper left-hand corner of the paper (if you have your own company stationary or letterhead, you needn't add your information again). Skip two to three lines (no one will count -- it depends on how it looks when printed) and then write the full name and title (on the same line), company name, and address.

Salutation

"Dear" and the name of the person usually work best. If you're on a first-name basis with the person, feel free to use the first name. If you're not (or if you're not sure), then use the person's last name. As for the punctuation that follows the name, I always use a comma, but books will tell you to use a colon. This is a matter of preference. I think a colon is too stuffy. And I've never had a problem with using a comma. After the salutation, skip a line and begin your letter.

Body Format

Most business letters you see today are written in "full block" style, meaning all text is lined up against the left-hand margin. Do not indent paragraphs. Skip a line between paragraphs. Use ONE space after a period. I know, I know. That's not the way you learned in typing class. And the truth is there's much debate over this "rule." If you want your writing to show that you're on the cutting edge and that you keep up with style and format changes, go with one space (it's the way kids are taught in schools today).

Write In A Conversational Style

Use contractions. Keep paragraphs at a "readable" length. Same goes for sentences. If you have a long sentence, make sure you mix in shorter ones. A sentence should rarely have more than 20 words. If it does, consider splitting it into two sentences. Don't use colons or semicolons -- they add unnecessary weight to your writing. Be clear. Be concise.

Proofread, Proofread, Proofread

I can't stress this enough. If you want to avoid sounding unprofessional, make sure your spelling and grammar are flawless. Read your letter OUT LOUD. Never send important correspondence without another set of eyes reviewing your work.

What do you want the reader to do?

Don't assume it's obvious. Make sure you clearly state a call to action. Do you want the reader to call you? To email you? To place an order? Make sure you provide all the necessary information for fulfillment.

Signature

Use what you're comfortable with. Use what sounds like you. I typically use "Best," "Best wishes" or "Best regards." But if you like "Sincerely," go for it. Make sure you leave space for your handwritten signature.

Proofread again.

Really, you can't do this enough.

End