

# Writing a Formal Letter

**Formal letter writing** is undoubtedly one of the most challenging types of letter format. When putting it together, often you are addressing a person or organization with whom you are not familiar and the quality of your content, including spelling and grammar will be strongly scrutinized.

**Sender's Address:** The sender's address usually is included in 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 United States-based convention for formatting a date places the month before the day. For example: June 11, 2001. ) 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 Ms., Mrs., Mr., or Dr. Follow a woman's preference in being addressed as Miss, Mrs., or Ms. If you are unsure of a woman's preference in being addressed, use Ms.

**Mr.** - for a male

**Mrs.** - for a married female

**Miss** - for an unmarried female

**Ms.** - for a female whose status is unknown or would prefer to remain anonymous

**Dr.** - for a person with the status of a doctor

If there is a possibility that the person to whom you are writing is a Dr. or has some other title, use that title. Usually, people will not mind being addressed by a higher title than they actually possess. To write the address, use the U.S. Post Office Format. For international addresses, 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 (for example: Dear Lucy:). In all other cases, however, use the personal title and last/family name followed by a colon. Leave one line blank after the salutation. If you don't know a reader's gender, use a nonsexist salutation, such as their job title followed by the receiver's name. 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 were 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 a business letter, 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. The next paragraph should begin

justifying the importance of the main point. 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 vertical 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 :**Another important factor in the readability of a letter is the 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. If you are writing to a conservative company, you may want to use Times New Roman. However, if you are writing to a more liberal company, you have a little more freedom when choosing fonts.

**Punctuation:** Punctuation after the salutation and closing - use a colon (:) after the salutation (never a comma) and a comma (,) after the closing. In some circumstances, you may also use a less common format, known as open punctuation. For this style, punctuation is excluded after the salutation and the closing.

### Types of Formal Letters

- Write a *Request* Letter
- Writing a *Letter of Interest* (job)
- Writing a *Complaint* Letter
- Writing an *Apology* Letter
- Writing a *Letter of Appeal*
- Writing an *Invitation* Letter
- Writing a *Resignation* Letter
- *Requesting a Letter of Recommendation*
- *Interview Thank You* Letters
- Write a *Farewell* Letter
- Writing a *Reference* Letter

# Formal Letter Writing Workshop #1—*Request Letter*

A request letter is a letter requesting either information or a favor. There are a variety of things that can be requested of when writing a request letter. A good request letter will usually be concise and to the point. A hard-copy request letter should be written in the business letter format while an email should be sent in the same format but without the heading (your return address, their address, and the date).

## Request Letter Writing

- In the opening paragraph, briefly introduce yourself and let the recipient know why you are writing to them.
- In the next paragraph, tell the recipient what you are requesting of them along with any pertinent details that would help them to fulfill your request. If you need your request filled by a certain date, be sure to let them know in this paragraph.
- In the closing paragraph, thank the recipient for their time/consideration and provide your contact information (if applicable).

### *Example*

764 Cheery Lane  
Clearwater Falls, FL 23619

September 27, 2015

Mr. Louis Henderson  
Store Manager  
The Corner Cafe  
273 Main Street  
Clearwater Falls, FL 23619

Dear Mr. Henderson:

My name is Cathy Pettis and I'm the chair of the Clearwater Falls Elementary School Fundraising Committee. The committee is planning to hold a fundraiser next month to raise funds for this year's field trips and we're looking for donors to help out with providing goods for the fundraising event.

If The Corner Cafe is willing to help donate some coffee and cups, we would greatly appreciate it. Our fundraiser will be held on the morning of October 18th and we're expecting around 200 people to show up.

Thanks for your time and consideration, if you need to contact me with any questions, feel free to call me at 555-555-5555, I'm available to speak between 10am-5pm on weekdays.

Sincerely,

Signature

Cathy Pettis

## **Formal Letter Writing Workshop #2—Letter of *Interest***

Letters of interest are written to express your interest in working for a particular company in a specific field. Your letter may be written either in response to a job opening or just to investigate possible employment.. However, make your letter stand out from the crowd using the following tips:

1. Before you write, do your homework. Research the background of the company and familiarize yourself with their products and/or services.
2. Be sure to find out the name of the individual who does the hiring. Address your letter to his/her attention and use her/his name in the salutation. Simply writing “To Whom It May Concern” and “Dear Sir or Madam” could be considered be lazy or rude.
3. Start your introductory paragraph with the reason you are interested in pursuing employment with this company. Try not to start the first sentence with “I”. (See sample letter of interest.) Also, explain what prompted your inquiry, such as a classified advertisement, a media article or interview, or a referral from an employee.
4. In the next paragraph(s), give specific examples of your qualifications. Don’t hesitate to indicate the reasons why you would be an asset to the company. Illustrate your skills, strengths, and achievements in a professional, yet personable way. Stay away from strings of abbreviated credentials. These, if you have them, should be on the resume you’ll enclose with the letter. Direct the reader to your resume and any other enclosures.
5. In your final paragraph, thank the individual for his/her time in considering you as a new employee. Indicate a precise time when you will contact him/her by phone to follow up on your letter. Also, be sure to let the individual know how to contact you.

A hard-copy interest letter should be written in the business letter format, while an email should be sent in the same format but without the heading (your return address, their address, and the date). Keep your letter short, no more than a single page. Remember to check it thoroughly for errors in spelling, grammar and to be sure it addresses each point you wanted to m

*Example (Interest)*

421 Liberty St.  
Kenyon, MN 55021

June 7, 2007

Ms. Jen Carlson  
Human Resources  
DTI  
111 Riverfront Ste 325  
PO Box - Box 157  
Wabasha, MN 55946

Dear Ms. Carlson:

Your recent advertisement in the Herald made it clear that customer satisfaction is an integral part of DTI. In addition, my close friend, Paula Chavez who is an employee at DTI suggested that my special talents might benefit your customer service department.

Part of my success is because I place a high value on personal integrity and represent both my employer and myself in an ethical and respectable manner. Also, I have a diligence in paying close attention to detail; as a representative of your company I would bring focus not only to the value of your services but also to quality of customer service. Furthermore, I am a hard, smart-working, self-starter who works well in a team environment.

I will call you on June 15 to answer any questions about this letter or my resume in the hope of scheduling an interview. If you prefer, please contact me by phone (555) 454-1307 or e-mail, ljones@nowhere.com.

Thank you for your time in considering my qualifications.

Sincerely,

Signature

Linda Jones

## **Formal Letter Writing Workshop #3—*Complaint Letter***

When writing a complaint letter, you want to keep it short and to the point to help ensure that your letter will be read in its entirety. If you write a seven page complaint letter, it's highly unlikely that someone will sit down and read all seven pages.

The complaint letter should be addressed to the customer service/consumer affairs department or the head office if there is no customer service department. The address and contact information of the customer service department should be available on the company's products or website.

- In the first paragraph you should identify what the issue is and any relevant information that you believe is important. Be sure to include the following information if it's applicable to the situation: the date/time of the issue, location, name of person on duty, name of product, what the problem was, your account number, model number, price, warranty information and reference number. Be sure to stick with the facts and avoid putting emotions into your letter.
- The next paragraph should state what you would like done to resolve the situation. If you received poor service, you could request an apology or a coupon. If a product malfunctioned, you could request that you could exchange the product for a new one or request a refund.
- The last paragraph should thank the reader for the time. You can also throw in some compliments about something you liked about their company's product or service.
- You should include your telephone number/e-mail address after your printed name so that they can contact you ASAP if necessary.
- Be sure to keep a copy of the letter for yourself and include photocopies of any relevant documents and enclose them with your letter.

*Example (Complaint)*

65 Market Street  
Val Haven, CT 95135

June 30, 2014

Customer Service  
Cool Guy Sports, LLC  
8423 Green Terrace Road  
Guyville, WA 65435

Dear Sir or Madam:

I have recently ordered a new pair of soccer cleats (item #6542951) from your website on June 21. I received the order on June 26. Unfortunately, when I opened it, I saw that the cleats were used. The cleats had dirt all over them and there was a small tear in front of the part where the left toe would go. My order number is AF26168156.

To resolve the problem, I would like you to credit my account for the amount charged for my cleats; I have already went out and bought a new pair of cleats at my local sporting goods store so sending another would result in me having two pairs of the same cleats.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I have been a satisfied customer of your company for many years and this is the first time I have encountered a problem. If you need to contact me, you can reach me at (555) 555-5555.

Sincerely,

*Signature*

Kenny "Soccer Man" Thomas

# Formal Letter Writing Workshop #4—*Apology Letter*

An apology letter shows that you are sorry and says that you value your relationship with the other party. The sooner an apology letter is written and sent out the better it is for the relationship. Depending on the nature of the letter, it can either be written in the friendly or the business letter format.

## **Friendly/Personal Apology Letter**

If this is a personal letter you should start the letter by saying that you are sorry to the recipient. Next you should admit your fault and take responsibility for your actions. Next you should volunteer or ask if there is any way that you can help out to resolve the situation. Then you should let the recipient that you will try to make sure that the situation will not happen again. To close off the letter, you should apologize again. When writing a personal apology letter it should come from the heart and be sincere.

## **Formal/Business Apology Letter**

If this is a business letter you should start the letter by saying that you are sorry to the recipient. Next you should give an explanation as to what went wrong. Then you should try to rectify the problem. To close off the letter you should apologize again.

### *Example (Personal Apology)*

68 Pine Zaggat Lane  
Pamperville, NE 25385

January 5, 2015

Dear Jolene,

I am sorry about forgetting about our lunch date. It was completely my fault; I was so busy at work that it must have slipped my mind. How about I treat you to lunch next Wednesday at the new Irish restaurant Crean's Cabbage Factory at 12:30PM? I have marked this date in my planner so I will not forget about it. I'd just like to apologize again for missing the lunch date.

Your friend,

*Signature*

*Example (Business Apology)*

5868 Maple Wood Street  
Fairfield, CA 37626

November 29, 2014

Mr. Joseph Bicman  
358 Noncook Road  
John's Town, PA 57323

Dear Mr. Bicman:

I apologize for the mix-up of order #: 26429782. We have just implemented a new packaging system that still has a few bugs that still needs to be worked out, but we did fix your order and sent it out this morning. For your trouble, we have enclosed a \$10 gift certificate which can be used at any of our stores (restrictions apply). Once again I would like to apologize for the mix-up in your order and any inconveniences this may have caused you.

Sincerely,

*Signature*

Theodore Donald 'Donny' Kerabatsos  
Customer Service Manager

## Formal Letter Writing Workshop #5—*Appeal Letter*

In cases where unfair treatment has occurred, a letter of appeal can help to rectify the situation. An appeal letter allows you to state your side of the story using facts to support your cause to convince the reader(s) to reconsider your case.

### *Appeal Letter Writing*

1. The first paragraph should introduce yourself and explain why you are writing the letter. Although it may be difficult, be sure to keep your tone and emotions in check to show that you can present an objective viewpoint. Keep the first paragraph as concise and clear as possible so that the reader can immediately understand its urgency.
2. The next paragraph(s) should narrate the account of what happened, and why your appeal should be granted. Include all the necessary facts in order to legitimize your case. You can start by referring to your handbook or guidelines as member of that particular group or institution. Also, provide specific times and date when particular events occurred. To make your letter more reader-friendly, use bullet-points every time you need to enumerate. After doing this, refer to testimonials from people related to your work, transcript of records, and medical certificate, if necessary.
3. The last part should summarize everything you have stated above. Repeat the necessary points that need to be elucidated. Also include the contact details and where you can be reached. Close out the letter by thanking the reader for their time

***Example (Appeal)***

4682 Farrow Parkway  
Chicago, IL 60621

June 20, 2012

Ward Cleaver  
Dean, Academic Division  
Chicago College University  
1323 E. 84th St., 5th floor  
Chicago, IL 60621

Dear Mr. Cleaver:

I am a senior Philosophy major who took PH401 Advanced Metaphysics class under Prof. Lebowski, and I am writing to you to appeal a retake for the final comprehensive oral exam that was given on June 18, 2012.

I feel that Mr. Lebowski did not give my situation the proper respect and understanding that it truly deserved. On June 8, 2007 at 10:37 A.M., I was struck by a sedan going 65 mph on my way to the university. I survived the accident but fractured the bones in my legs and hips. I have enclosed the medical documents detailing my stay at St. Francis Hospital along with this letter.

Because of this setback, I had to reschedule all my exams for the following week (June 18-22, 2012) to the week after that (June 25-29) to allow for me to recover. I had my classmate Larry Mondello send the necessary letters to all of my professors requesting to postpone the date of my final exams by a week. All of them agreed except for Prof. Lebowski, who did not send any reply at all. The doctors said that it would take me at least two weeks to properly recover, and even if I did prepare for my exams for Prof. Lebowski, I would not be able to produce the expected output considering my debilitated condition.

I feel that the situation is not warranted because I never got a grade lower than a B or (80-85) on his exams. Therefore, the risk of me failing the course and being prevented from graduating because of not being able to take his final exams due to an unavoidable circumstance is unacceptable. The handbook states in Article III, Section II that "Students who have medical emergencies prior to a particular exam will be given the option to reschedule that exam."

The medical situation which prevented me from taking the final at the scheduled time was beyond my control. I would ask you to grant me another opportunity to take the final exam. I look forward to meeting with you to discuss this matter. Feel free to call me with any questions at 555-555-5555. I appreciate the time that you have taken to read my appeal.

Sincerely,

*Signature*

Walter Sobchack

Enclosure

## **Formal Letter Writing Workshop #6—*Requesting a Letter of Recommendation (Personal)—via email***

1. Getting a good recommendation letter can significantly help you in the application process so it's important to ask someone who you are in good terms with for a letter. It is also important to ask someone that knows you well for a recommendation and that you ask them for it in person. If you are seeking a letter for college or graduate schools, it is recommended that you request letters from your teachers/professors. If you are seeking a letter for a job, business or professional school then it would be ideal if you got one from your current company. If you have not been at your current company long or if you are not currently employed then asking a previous employer is recommended. If that is not possible seek recommendations from respected professionals that you may know, such as doctors, lawyers, politicians, ministers and so on.
2. Ask for the letters early on, don't wait until the day before the letter is supposed to be sent in to request the letters of recommendation. Instead ask ahead of time. If you are going to apply to school ask your professor at least a month ahead of time. If you are seeking a professional letter, ask for a letter of recommendation whenever you leave a job.
3. Assist the writer with as much material as necessary, providing the writer with your resume and a list of achievements will make it easier on the writer. You may also want to give him/her any information that will help with the letter including your plans for the future, your strengths, experiences and other qualities you want to be presented in the letter. Be honest about the information you give, if you embellish it'll catch up with you later.
4. You should provide the writer with a stamped and addressed envelope. Also if there is a guideline that needs to be followed or any other material that needs to be filled out, you should provide that to him/her.
5. After the letter is sent out, you should send a thank you note to the writer. You can also thank them in person or over the phone as well.

### ***Example (Requesting a Letter of Recommendation—email)***

**Subject:** Recommendation Request – Jesus Quintana

Dear Mr. Treehorn,

As part of the prerequisites for acceptance to university, I have been asked to provide a letter of recommendation. Would you be so kind as to write such a letter, with particular comments regarding my association in the honors program?

The deadline for submitting the letter is March 12<sup>th</sup>. However, if you are unable to provide a letter, please let me know by March 2<sup>nd</sup>.

I would be happy to answer any questions and provide further information which will help you to write your recommendation.

Thank you for all you have done for me and for taking the time to review this request.

Regards,

Jesus Quintana

# Formal Letter Writing Workshop #7—Reference Letter

Writing an effective reference letter has the power to help a candidate. Whether it is a job applicant or a prospective renter, a well-worded recommendation can make the difference between success and rejection.

## What is a Reference Letter?

In simplest terms, a reference letter puts the weight of your personal or professional reputation behind an applicant. It shows that you are unafraid to have your character and professional affiliation connected to the individual who is requesting the reference. Not surprisingly, writing this type of recommendation is something that you should consider with care.

## Are You the Right Person for the Task?

While it is flattering to have an applicant approach you with a request for a written reference, ask yourself if you are really the right person to do so. For example, when a job applicant needs a letter attesting to her or his personal conduct around confidential documents or money, you may not be able to comply if you have never worked with the individual in this type of setting. Since this letter states that you vouch for the person in a particular setting, you must have first-hand knowledge of the facts before agreeing to put together the document.

### When Would You Write a Reference for Someone?

1. The most common situation is to write the letter for a job applicant. When this applicant needs a boost behind a good resume, an effectively written reference can make a huge difference. Someone may ask you to write a letter if you have worked with the person, acted as a supervisor or were the actual employer.
2. Sometimes, property owners or managers require prospective renters to furnish personal references. They offer the rental manager an opportunity to learn a little about the individual before considering the application to rent an apartment, house or other property.
3. A third reason why you may find yourself in a position to write a reference letter is when a student or recent graduate approaches you. It is frequently a professor or teacher's letter that allows this person access to an internship position, an advanced placement course or an entry-level job.

## What Should You Say?

There are three things that you should **never** put into this kind of letter.

1. **Guarantees.** Do not offer up a personal guarantee that the applicant will be a successful intern, excellent employee or quiet renter. Since you have no control over the individual, putting such guarantees into a letter actually detracts from your message.
2. **Personal information.** Religion, race, sexual orientation and political leanings have no place in a reference letter. The same is true for the applicant's age, marital status or any health issues.
3. **Minor issues.** Although it is good to give specific details, it is a mistake to focus on one or two minor issues and miss the opportunity to provide the applicant with a powerful letter that emphasizes the weightier things. For example, an anecdote related to an excellent customer service incident is useful. Yet do not limit your reference to just this one situation. Rather, put it against the backdrop of a bigger picture.

## Structure

- Begin the body of the letter with a paragraph or two introducing yourself and your relationship to the applicant. This gives the reader an understanding why you chose to write the letter in the first place.
- The next paragraph should focus on the actual reference. This is where you refer to the applicant's job experience, rental history or academic background. Be as specific as possible. For professional references, include job titles, duties and achievements. For a rental reference, give a prior rental history and details about the individual's conduct. Within the frame of an academic reference, mention coursework that has been completed, grades earned and the current academic standing.
- Finish the letter by giving a clear personal assessment of the individual's skills that you back up with concrete examples. Welcome further inquiries and assure the reader that you are available for questions as needed. End the letter like you would any other business letter.

*Example (Reference Letter)*

Dear Admissions Committee,

I had the pleasure of teaching Sara in her 11th grade honors English class at Mark Twain High School. From the first day of class, Sara impressed me with her ability to be articulate about difficult concepts and texts, her sensitivity to the nuances within literature, and her passion for reading, writing, and creative expression- both in and out of the classroom. Sara is a talented literary critic and poet, and she has my highest recommendation as a student and writer.

Sara is talented at considering the subtleties within literature and the purpose behind authors' works. She produced an extraordinary year-long thesis paper on creative identity development, in which she compared works from three different time periods and synthesized cultural and historical perspectives to inform her analysis. When called upon to give her thesis defense in front of her peers, Sara spoke clearly and eloquently about her conclusions and responded to questions in a thoughtful way. Outside of the classroom, Sara is dedicated to her literary pursuits, especially to poetry. She publishes her poetry in our school's literary magazine, as well as in online magazines. She is an insightful, sensitive, and deeply self-aware individual driven to explore art, writing, and a deeper understanding of the human condition.

Throughout the year Sara was an active participant in our discussions, and she always supported her peers. Her caring nature and personality allow her to work well with others in a team setting, as she always respects others' opinions even when they differ from her own. When we held a class debate about gun laws, Sara opted to speak for the side opposite her own views. She explained her choice as motivated by a desire to put herself in other people's shoes, view the issues from a new perspective, and gain a clearer sense of the issue from all angles. Throughout the year, Sara demonstrated this openness to and empathy for the opinions, feelings, and perspectives of others, along with shrewd powers of observation, all qualities that makes her outstanding as a student of literature and burgeoning writer.

I am certain that Sara is going to continue to do great and creative things in her future. I highly recommend her for admission to your undergraduate program. She is talented, caring, intuitive, dedicated, and focused in her pursuits. Sara consistently seeks out constructive feedback so she can improve her writing skills, which is a rare and impressive quality in a high school student. Sara is truly a stand-out individual who will impress everyone she meets. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions at [callmeclmens@gmail.com](mailto:callmeclmens@gmail.com).

Sincerely,

Ms. Scribe  
English Teacher  
Mark Twain High School