

Formal Letter Writing

How to Write Formal Letters

Help with formal and business letter writing. A summary of writing rules including outlines for cover letters and letters of enquiry, and abbreviations used in letters.

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Layout of a Formal Letter

The example letter below shows you a general format for a formal or business letter. Pass your mouse over the different areas of it to find out more information (JavaScript needs to be turned on in your browser).



Rules for Writing Formal Letters in English

In English there are a number of conventions that should be used when formatting a formal or business letter. Furthermore, you try to write as simply and as clearly as

possible, and not to make the letter longer than necessary. Remember not to use informal language like contractions.

Addresses:

1) Your Address

The return address should be written in the top right-hand corner of the letter.

2) The Address of the person you are writing to

The inside address should be written on the left, starting below your address.

Date:

Different people put the date on different sides of the page. You can write this on the right or the left on the line after the address you are writing to. Write the month as a word.

Salutation or greeting:

1) Dear Sir or Madam,

If you do not know the name of the person you are writing to, use this. It is always advisable to try to find out a name.

2) Dear Mr Jenkins,

If you know the name, use the title (Mr, Mrs, Miss or Ms, Dr, etc.) and the surname only. If you are writing to a woman and do not know if she uses Mrs or Miss, you can use Ms, which is for married and single women.

Ending a letter:

1) Yours faithfully

If you do not know the name of the person, end the letter this way.

2) Yours sincerely

If you know the name of the person, end the letter this way.

3) Your signature

Sign your name, then print it underneath the signature. If you think the person you are writing to might not know whether you are male or female, put your title in brackets after your name.

Content of a Formal Letter

First paragraph

The first paragraph should be short and state the purpose of the letter- to make an enquiry, complain, request something, etc.

The paragraph or paragraphs in the middle of the letter should contain the relevant information behind the writing of the letter. Most letters in English are not very long, so keep the information to the essentials and concentrate on organising it in a clear and logical manner rather than expanding too much.

Last Paragraph

The last paragraph of a formal letter should state what action you expect the recipient to take- to refund, send you information, etc.

Abbreviations Used in Letter Writing

The following abbreviations are widely used in letters:

- **asap** = as soon as possible
- **cc** = carbon copy (when you send a copy of a letter to more than one person, you use this abbreviation to let them know)
- **enc.** = enclosure (when you include other papers with your letter)
- **pp** = per procuracionem (A Latin phrase meaning that you are signing the letter on somebody else's behalf; if they are not there to sign it themselves, etc)
- **ps** = postscript (when you want to add something after you've finished and signed it)
- **pto (*informal*)** = please turn over (to make sure that the other person knows the letter continues on the other side of the page)
- **RSVP** = please reply

Outline: A Covering Letter

A covering letter is the one that accompanies your CV when you are applying for a job. Here is a fairly conventional plan for the layout of the paragraphs.

Opening Paragraph

Briefly identify yourself and the position you are applying for. Add how you found out about the vacancy.

Paragraph 2

Give the reasons why you are interested in working for the company and why you wish to be considered for that particular post. State your relevant qualifications and experience, as well as your personal qualities that make you a suitable candidate.

Paragraph 3

Inform them that you have enclosed your current CV and add any further information that you think could help your case.

Closing Paragraph

Give your availability for interview, thank them for their consideration, restate your interest and close the letter.

Outline: A Letter of Enquiry

A letter of enquiry is when you are approaching a company speculatively, that is you are making an approach without their having advertised or announced a vacancy.

Opening Paragraph

Introduce yourself briefly and give your reason for writing. Let them know of the kind of position you are seeking, why you are interested and how you heard about them.

Paragraph 2

Show why their company in particular interests you, mention your qualifications and experience along with any further details that might make them interested in seeing you.

Paragraph 3

Refer to your enclosed CV and draw their attention to any particularly important points you would like them to focus on in it.

Closing Paragraph

Thank them, explain your availability for interview and restate your enthusiasm for their company and desire to be considered for posts that might as yet be unavailable.