

# **STYLE IN BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE**

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**Writing business letters and memos differs in certain important ways from writing reports. Keep the following advice in mind when you write and especially when you revise your business letters or memos**

# 1

## STATE THE MAIN BUSINESS, PURPOSE, OR SUBJECT MATTER RIGHT AWAY

- Let the reader know from the very first sentence what your letter is about. Remember that when business people open a letter, their first concern is to know what the letter is about, what its purpose is, and why they must spend their time reading it.
- Avoid round-about beginnings. If you are writing to apply for a job, begin with something like this:

*"I am writing to apply for the position you currently have open...."*

- If you have bad news for someone, you need not spill all of it in the first sentence:

*"I am writing in response to your letter of July 24, 1997 in which you discuss problems you have had with an electronic spreadsheet purchased from our company."*



Dear Sir:

On June 1 of this year I purchased a McCallum Model 311 chainsaw from your company. I had difficulties with the saw from the very beginning. After checking with your company, I took the saw to a local repair shop, H & H Lawn and Garden, here in Santa Barbara, for warranty service. The problem, a misaligned chain assembly, was corrected in one day. About three weeks later, however, I again had problems. I took the saw back to H & H. The repairman there said he would have to order parts for the carburetor so I left the saw there, expecting it to be ready in about a week.

However, four weeks went by, unable to get the needed parts. I had an out-of-town project that called for a dependable chainsaw so I rented a saw for a total of \$35. When I returned to Santa Barbara, I found out that the reason for the delay had been that your company had lost H & H's parts order.

As a result of this inconvenience and expense, I am writing you to request reimbursement on the rental charges I paid for a dependable chain saw and a brand new replacement for the chainsaw that I originally bought.

*Revised version: writer inserts an introductory paragraph that states the purpose of the letter before going into the problem.*

*Problem version: writer does not establish the purpose of the letter in the first paragraph. That doesn't get stated until the third paragraph.*

Dear Sir:

I am writing this letter to describe problems that I have had over the past five months with one of your chainsaws and to request reimbursement for rental charges that I incurred during that time and a new replacement saw.

There were problems with the McCallum Model 311 chainsaw from the very beginning when I bought it on June 1. After checking with your company, I took the saw to a local repair shop, H & H Lawn and Garden, here in Santa Barbara for warranty service. The problem, a misaligned chain assembly, was corrected in one day. About three weeks later, however, I again had problems. I took the saw back to H & H. The repairman there said he would have to order parts for the carburetor so I left the saw there, expecting it to be ready in about a week.

However, four weeks went by, and H & H was still unable to get the needed parts. At this time, I had an out-of-town project that called for a dependable chainsaw so I rented a saw for a total of \$35. When I returned to Santa Barbara, I found out that the reason for the delay had been that your company had lost H & H's parts order.

As a result of this inconvenience and expense, I am writing you to request reimbursement on the rental charges I paid for a dependable chain saw and a brand new replacement for the chainsaw that I originally bought.

# 2

## IF YOU ARE RESPONDING TO A LETTER, IDENTIFY THAT LETTER BY ITS SUBJECT AND DATE IN THE FIRST PARAGRAPH OR SENTENCE

- **Busy recipients who write many letters themselves may not remember their letters to you. To avoid problems, identify the date and subject of the letter to which you respond:**



**Dear Mr. Stout: I am writing in response to your September 1, 19XX letter in which you describe problems that you've had with one of our chainsaws. I regret that you've suffered this inconvenience and expense and....**

**Dear Ms. Cohen: I have just received your August 4, 19XX letter in which you list names and other sources from which I can get additional information on the manufacture and use of plastic bottles in the soft-drink industry....**

# 3

## KEEP THE PARAGRAPHS OF MOST BUSINESS LETTERS SHORT

- The paragraphs of business letters tend to be short, some only a sentence long. Business letters are not read the same way as articles, reports, or books. Usually, they are read rapidly. Big, thick, dense paragraphs over ten lines, which require much concentration, may not be read carefully — or read at all.



enable the recipient to read your letters more rapidly and to comprehend and remember the important facts or details. As a result, create relatively short paragraphs of between five and eight lines long. In business letters, paragraphs that are made up of only a single sentence are common and perfectly acceptable. Throughout this section, you'll see examples of the shorter paragraphs commonly used in business letters.

# 4 "COMPARTMENTALIZE" THE CONTENTS OF YOUR LETTER

When you "compartmentalize" the contents of a business letter, you place each different segment of the discussion — each different topic of the letter — in its own paragraph. If you were writing a complaint letter concerning problems with the system unit of your personal computer, you might have these paragraphs:

- **A description of the problems you've had with it**
- **The ineffective repair jobs you've had**
- **The compensation you think you deserve and why**

Study each paragraph of your letters for its purpose, content, or function. When you locate a paragraph that does more than one thing, consider splitting it into two paragraphs. If you discover two short separate paragraphs that do the same thing, consider joining them into one.



# 5

## PROVIDE TOPIC INDICATORS AT THE BEGINNING OF PARAGRAPHS

**Problem:** I have worked as an electrician in the Decatur, Illinois, area for about six years. Since 1980 I have been licensed by the city of Decatur as an electrical contractor qualified to undertake commercial and industrial work as well as residential work.

**Revision:** As for my work experience, I have worked as an electrician in the Decatur, Illinois, area for about six years. Since 1980 I have been licensed by the city of Decatur as an electrical contractor qualified to undertake commercial and industrial work as well as residential work. (Italics not in the original.)

**In the first sentence of any body paragraph of a business letter, try to locate a word or phrase that indicates the topic of that paragraph. If a paragraph discusses your problems with a personal computer, work the word "problems" or the phrase "problems with my personal computer" into the first sentence. Doing this gives recipients a clear sense of the content and purpose of each paragraph. Here is an excerpt before and after topic indicators have been incorporated**





# 6

## LIST OR ITEMIZE WHENEVER POSSIBLE IN A BUSINESS LETTER

- Listing spreads out the text of the letter, making it easier to pick up the important points rapidly. Lists can be handled in several ways.



6 June 1996

1117 The High Road  
Austin, TX 78703

Mr. David Patricks  
3005 West 29th, Suite 130  
Waco, TX 77663

Dear Mr. Patricks:

I received your June 6th letter requesting consultation and am providing my recommendation in the following.

First, let me review my understanding of your inquiry. The question you raise revolves around whether the heating registers should be located in a low sidewall, or in the ceiling, and, if ceiling registers are used, which type--step-down or stamped-faced--will deliver the best results. Additionally, the problem concerns whether there is any benefit to having heating registers near the floor, whether moving heated air "down" in ducts negatively affects blower performance, and whether adequate injection that can be achieved on the low speed of a two-stage furnace.

My recommendations are as follows:

- I can find nothing in either Carrier, Trane, or ASHRAE design manuals that indicates drop as being a factor in duct design any different from normal static losses. If you have different information on this, I would like to have references to it.
- I cannot see any advantage to low sidewall application. The problem is injection and pattern. I do see an advantage to low sidewall return; *Carrier Design Manual-Air Distribution* is a good reference on both items.
- I recommend step-down diffusers with OBD because they have pattern and volume control that is superior to stamped-faced diffusers.
- I am opposed to low sidewall diffusers or floor diffusers in the application you describe. The increased static losses that result from trying to get the ducts down through the walls will only increase installation cost and reduce efficiency.

If there is anyone in your organization who is uncomfortable with these recommendations, let me know. I'd be very interested in reviewing any actual documented test results. Let me know if you have any further questions or if I can be of any further assistance.

Sincerely,



Jane A. McMurrey, P.E.  
HVAC Consultants, Inc.

JAM/dmc  
Encl.: invoice for consulting services

*Heading—the date and the sender's address.*

*Inside address—name and address of the recipient of the letter.*

*Salutation*

*Body text of the letter:  
singled spaced text with  
doublespacing between  
paragraphs; no paragraph  
indentation.*

*Use of special formatting  
within the  
letter—use bulleted or  
numbered lists, even headings and  
graphics.*

*Complimentary close*

*Signature block*

*End notations*



# 7

## PLACE IMPORTANT INFORMATION STRATEGICALLY IN BUSINESS LETTERS

- Information in the first and last lines of paragraphs tends to be read and remembered better. Information buried in the middle of long paragraphs is easily overlooked or forgotten. Therefore, place important information in high-visibility points.

For example, in application letters which must convince potential employers that you are right for a job, locate information on appealing qualities at the beginning or end of paragraphs for greater emphasis. Place less positive or detrimental information in less highly visible points in your business letters. If you have some difficult things to say, a good (and honest) strategy is to de-emphasize by placing them in areas of less emphasis. If a job requires three years of experience and you only have one, bury this fact in the middle or the lower half of a body paragraph of the application letter. The resulting letter will be honest and complete; it just won't emphasize weak points unnecessarily



# 7

## PLACE IMPORTANT INFORMATION STRATEGICALLY IN BUSINESS LETTERS



**Problem:** To date, I have done no independent building inspection on my own. I have been working the past two years under the supervision of Mr. Robert Packwood who has often given me primary responsibility for walk-throughs and property inspections. It was Mr. Packwood who encouraged me to apply for this position. I have also done some refurbishing of older houses on a contract basis and have some experience in industrial construction as a welder and as a clerk in a nuclear construction site. (Let's not lie about our lack of experience, but let's not put it on a billboard either!)

**Revision:** As for my work experience, I have done numerous building walk-throughs and property inspections under the supervision of Mr. Robert Packwood over the past two years. Mr. Packwood, who encouraged me to apply for this position, has often given me primary responsibility for many inspection jobs. I have also done some refurbishing of older houses on a contract basis and have some experience in industrial construction as a welder and as a clerk in a nuclear construction site.

# 8

## FIND POSITIVE WAYS TO EXPRESS BAD NEWS IN YOUR BUSINESS LETTERS

- **Business letters must convey bad news: a broken computer keyboard cannot be replaced, or an individual cannot be hired. Such bad news can be conveyed in a tactful way. Doing so reduces the chances that business relations with the recipient of the bad news will end. To convey bad news positively, avoid such words as "cannot," "forbid," "fail," "impossible," "refuse," "prohibit," "restrict," and "deny" as much as possible.**

**Problem:** Because of the amount of information you request in your letter, simply cannot help you without seriously disrupting my work schedule.

**Revision:** In your letter you ask for a good amount of information which I would like to help you locate. Because of my work commitments, however, I am going to be able to answer only a few of the questions....

# 9

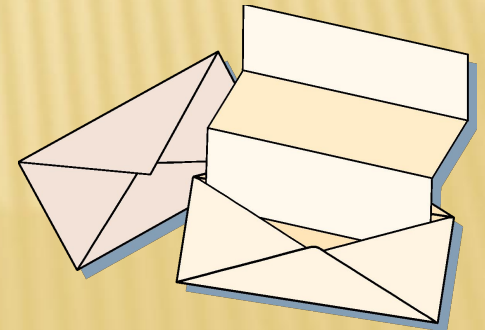
## FOCUS ON THE RECIPIENT'S NEEDS, PURPOSES, OR INTERESTS INSTEAD OF YOUR OWN

- Avoid a self-centered focusing on your own concerns rather than those of the recipient. Even if you must talk about yourself in a business letter a great deal, do so in a way that relates your concerns to those of the recipient.

This recipient-oriented style is often called the "you-attitude," which does not mean using more yours but making the recipient the main focus of the letter

**Problem:** For these reasons, our new policy, effective September 1, 19XX, will be to charge an additional 15% on unrinsed tableware and 75% of the wholesale value of stained linens that have not been soaked.

**Revision:** Therefore, in order to enable us to supply your large party needs promptly and whenever you require, we will begin charging 15% on all unrinsed tableware and 75% of the wholesale value of stained linens that have not been soaked. This policy we hope will encourage our customers' kitchen help to do the quick and simple rinsing and/or soaking at the end of large parties that will ensure faster and more frequent service.



# 0

## AVOID POMPOUS, INFLATED, LEGAL-SOUNDING PHRASING

- Watch out for puffed-up, important-sounding language. This kind of language may seem business-like at first; it's actually ridiculous. Of course, such phrasing is apparently necessary in legal documents; but why use it in other writing situations? When you write a business letter, picture yourself as a plain-talking, common-sense, down-to-earth person (but avoid slang).



The Capital Improvements Project (hereinafter to designated as CIP) for the fiscal year 1982-1983 stipulated budget allocations in the amount not exceeding \$20,000 to be designated for utilization by a program under the nomination of the 23rd Street Renaissance Market. The purpose and aim of the aforesaid program is to provide and permit basic pedestrian amenities and conveniences for a marketplace devoted to the commerce of arts and crafts to the maximum extent possible. In consideration of these dictates, the CIP has mandated that there be a geographical extension of the sidewalk no greater than 15 feet in a northerly direction. The said extension would continue to permit an opening of approximately 15 feet for the orderly flow and passage of vehicular traffic. The City Council in 1982 issued directives that mandated the temporary closure of the above named street for a period not to exceed one calendar year. In April of the ensuing year it was directed by the City Council that this closure remain in full effect for a period not exceeding an additional six months.

*Problem version: pompous, officious-sounding prose style. People in authority positions don't have to sound like this (they might get questioned).*

*Revised version: this version states the case in plain and simple language.*

The Capital Improvements Program (CIP) in 1982-1983 included the amount of \$20,000 for the 23rd Street Renaissance Market to provide sidewalks for an arts and crafts marketplace. The detailed plans of the CIP called for an extension of the sidewalk 15 feet north, with a 15-foot opening for automobiles.

In 1982, the City Council temporarily closed 23rd Street for a one-year period. In April of 1983, the council extended that closure for an additional six-month period which will end October 1983.



# 1 GIVE YOUR BUSINESS LETTER AN "ACTION ENDING" WHENEVER APPROPRIATE

- An "action-ending" makes clear what the writer of the letter expects the recipient to do and when. Ineffective conclusions to business letters often end with rather limp, noncommittal statements such as "Hope to hear from you soon" or "Let me know if I can be of any further assistance." Instead, or in addition, specify the action the recipient should take and the schedule for that action. If, for example, you are writing a query letter, ask the editor politely to let you know of his decision if at all possible in a month. If you are writing an application letter, subtly try to set up a date and time for an interview

As soon as you approve this plan, I'll begin contacting sales representatives at once to arrange for purchase and delivery of the microcomputers. May I expect to hear from you within the week?

I am free after 2:00 p.m. on most days. Can we set up an appointment to discuss my background and this position further? I'll look forward to hearing from you.