Structure:
The parts of a letter

As you are reading this chapter, you'll find it helpful to refer to Chapter 4, where various letter formats are discussed. Different formats require different placement of various parts of a letter. Although placement may vary, the content and function of these parts of a letter remain constant. You'll have little difficulty in applying the principles learned here to the formats discussed in Chapter 4.

Dateline

Every letter should have a dateline. The date appears on a single line two to eight lines below the letterhead or the top margin of the page. With the exception of the simplified-letter format, three lines down from the letterhead is the usual space allotted in most letter formats. Because a letter should be well framed on a page, the placement of the dateline is flexible.

The date typed on a letter should be the date on which the letter was dictated, no matter when it is to be typed or mailed, unless, of course, the letter is a standard form letter sent out time and time again (in this case, the date the letter is sent should be used, taking care to use the same typeface as the form letter). The months of the year should always be spelled out, and the day should always be indicated by a cardinal number (e.g., 1, 2, 3), never using "nd," "th," or "st" after the number as you would with ordinal numbers.

The order of the dateline is month, day followed by a comma, and year.

May 5, 20XX

Sometimes foreign correspondence will feature a reversal in the order of day and month, omitting the comma.

17

5 May 20XX

The most standard order, however, for the elements in the dateline is month, day followed by a comma, and year.

The placement of the dateline varies depending upon the letter format used. In the full-block format (see Sample Letter 4.1), the dateline is typed flush with the left margin, or sometimes centered, if centering the date blends well with the letterhead. In the simplified-letter format (see Sample Letter 4.4), the dateline is typed flush with the left margin, six lines below the letterhead.

The dateline in the block (see Sample Letter 4.2), semiblock (see Sample Letter 4.3), official-style (see Sample Letter 4.5), and hanging-indented (see Sample Letter 4.6) formats is usually flush with the right margin. The last figure of the year should never overrun the right margin. However, in these formats the date can also be either centered under the letterhead, if this adds to the balanced look of the letter, or five spaces to the right of the center of the page.

Reference Line

The reference line is optional. It is a number or a series of numbers and letters referring to previous correspondence. It is usually included for the benefit of a person who must file all correspondence dealing with the same issues or topics.

The number is aligned with and typed directly below the dateline. It is usually typed one to four lines beneath the date unless your company policy stipulates that it be placed elsewhere (see Sample Letter 4.1 for an example of a reference line).

If your letter is to be more than one page long, the reference number must be carried over to all continuation sheets. On these sheets, the location of the reference line should correspond to its location on the first sheet, or as indicated by company policy.

Personal or Confidential Note

The inclusion of a personal or confidential note is optional. When you write "personal" or "confidential," however, it should always be because you want the letter to remain confidential between you and the reader. If you use such a notation as a gimmick to attract readers' attention, they will recognize that you are trying to manipulate them; it will most likely backfire.

Except with the official-style format, the personal or confidential note should be located four lines above the inside address. It doesn't need to be underlined or typed in all capital letters. If you feel it necessary to underline or capitalize, you should choose one or the other but not both.

Personal
PERSONAL
Personal

The personal note is rarely used in the official-style format because this format is usually reserved for personal letters. If you decide it's necessary to include a personal note in the official-style format, type it four lines above the salutation.

Inside Address

The inside address must be included in all letters. With the exception of the official-style format, the inside address is typed two to twelve lines beneath the dateline (or reference line or confidential note, should there be such notations). The placement of the inside address is flexible, depending upon the length of the letter, but four lines is the most common.

In the simplified-letter format, the inside address is typed four lines below the dateline or the last previous notation. In the official-style letter, the inside address is typed two to five lines below the last line of the signature block.

The inside address is always typed flush with the left margin of the letter. It should be no longer than five lines. No line should cross over the center margin of the page. If a line is too long, it should be broken in half and continued on the next line, indented two spaces.

The inside address of a letter addressed to an individual should include that individual's courtesy title and full name, professional title, company name, and full address. If a woman's courtesy title is unknown, use "Ms."

> Ms. Nancy Simons
> Production Supervisor
> Bethany Bagel Company
> 25 Francis Avenue
> Boston, MA 02222

If the courtesy title "Mrs." is used in a business letter, use the recipient's first name, not her husband's: "Mrs. Mary Smith," *not* "Mrs. John Smith."

If a person's name and professional title are short enough, they can be separated by a comma and placed together on the first line of the inside address.

> Mr. Robert Miles, Treasurer

If the professional title and company name are short enough, the title and the company name (separated by a comma) can be placed together on the second line of the inside address.

> Ms. Rebecca Gray
> Editor, The Tower

When a company is being addressed, the inside address should include the name of the company, the individual department desired, and the full address of the company.

> Pauly Industries, Inc.
> Distribution Department
> 79 Grand Forks Drive
> Winnipeg, VA 23444

You should always use the company's official name in the inside address, including any ampersands, abbreviations, or other items the company uses in its name when it is printed.

When the address is too long, the person's title is sometimes omitted. If you are addressing two or more people, you can either list the names alphabetically on separate lines or use the designation "Messrs." (Messieurs) for all men or "Mses." for all women. When using Messrs. or Mses., omit the addressees' first names.

Mses. Cole, Kenney, and Long

or

Ms. Bethany Cole
Ms. Jane Kenney
Ms. Marie Long

If you are unsure of the recipient's gender, it is best to try to do the research to find out. If you cannot determine the gender—for example, because the first name is gender neutral or the individual only uses initials—then you can omit the courtesy title in your letter.

Dakota Shorter
F. R. Dobson

Sometimes a company uses both a street address and a post office box in its letterhead. In this case, be sure to include the post office box number on the envelope. This will ensure that the post office sends your letter to the proper place.

The names of numbered streets should be spelled out for streets numbered one through twelve. Arabic numerals should be used for streets numbered 13 and above.

186 First Street
186 13th Avenue

Arabic numerals should be used for all house, building, or office numbers, with the exception of the number "one," which always should be spelled out.

One Savin Hill Avenue
210 Savin Hill Avenue

When a compass direction appears before a street name, it should be spelled out. If the compass direction follows the street name, it should be abbreviated.

226 West 78th Street
3233 38th Street N.W.

A suite or apartment number following a street address should be placed on the same line as the street address, separated by a comma or two spaces.

25 Huntington Avenue, Suite 408
25 Huntington Avenue Suite 408

Attention Note

If you are addressing a letter to a company but wish to direct it to the attention of a specific person, you may include an attention note. The attention note is typed two lines below the last line of the inside address and two lines above the salutation.

In the full-block, block, or simplified formats, the attention note is typed either flush with the left margin or centered. The attention note is usually not included in the official-style format since this format is generally used for a personal letter and it would already be clear to whom the letter is addressed. The attention note can be included in a hanging-indented letter, but because the format is generally reserved for sales letters, the inclusion of an attention note would not be common.

The attention note can be written with or without a colon following the word "attention." The first letter of the main elements of the attention note should be capitalized.

> Attention: David Marshall
> Attention David Marshall
> Attention: Order Department
> Attention Order Department

Salutation

The salutation appears in all letters but those using the simplified-letter format. It's usually typed two to four lines below the inside address or the attention note (if there is one). A two-line gap is most typical.

In the official-style format, the salutation is typed four to six lines below the dateline, since the inside address appears at the bottom of the letter in this format.

The word "Dear" before the person's courtesy title and name is standard. The phrase "My Dear" is no longer in style. The "D" in the word "Dear" should be capitalized. The word should be typed flush with the left margin. If the letter is informal, you address the person by his or her first name in the salutation.

Courtesy titles such as Ms. and Mr. should be used where appropriate.

> Dear Ms. Joyner
> Dear Mr. Quarrels

But, where the gender is not known:

> Dear Dakota Shorter
> Dear F. R. Dobson

If the recipient has a professional or academic title (e.g., "Dr." or "Professor"), use the title rather than "Mr.," "Mrs.," or Ms."

> Dear Professor Jones
> Dear Doctor Black

The most conventional way to address a letter when you don't know the name of the recipient is to simply use the title of the person you're addressing. For example:

> Dear Editorial Director
> Dear Sales Manager
> Dear Customer Service Representative

The simplified-letter format contains no salutation. As a result, this format can be used when you are unsure about the gender of the recipient.

Subject Line

The subject line identifies the content of a letter and is an optional addition to all but the simplified-letter formats, which always includes a subject line typed three lines below the last line of the inside address.

In the full-block, block, semiblock, or hanging-indented formats, the subject line is typed either two lines above or below the salutation. It is typed either flush with the left margin or centered, and consists of the word "subject" followed by a colon and the subject to be covered in the letter.

The subject line can be typed in all capital letters or with each important word capitalized. Sometimes when just the important words are capitalized, the whole subject line is underlined. When the subject line is typed in all capital letters, don't underline it as well.

> Subject: Proposed Distribution Arrangement
> Subject: Proposed Distribution Arrangement
> SUBJECT: PROPOSED DISTRIBUTION ARRANGEMENT

Use of a subject line is generally limited to letters in which only one subject is covered.

Paragraphs

While most word-processing programs will automatically format the various parts of a letter, it's good to know the basic formatting rules for letter writing nonetheless.

The body of a letter should begin two lines below the salutation or subject line in the full-block, block, semiblock, official-style, and hanging-indented formats. It should begin three lines below the subject line in the simplified-letter format.

The letter should be single-spaced within paragraphs and double-spaced between paragraphs. If the letter is very short, double-spacing can be used within the paragraphs, using the semiblock style of indentation to indicate new paragraphs.

Paragraphs should be indented five or ten spaces in the official or semiblock styles. Five-space indentations are usually standard. In the full-block, block, and simplified-letter formats, no indentation is used.

In the hanging-indented format, the first line of the paragraph is flush left and the rest of the paragraph is indented five spaces. Single-spacing within paragraphs and double-spacing between paragraphs are used in the hanging-indented format.

Numbered material within letters should be indented five spaces or centered. The numbers should be placed in parentheses or followed by a period. Double-spacing should be used between each item. Punctuation is used either after each item listed in the numbered material or after none of the items.

Long quotations should be blocked in the letter, setting off the quotation by indenting all of it five spaces and keeping it single-spaced.

Avoid long paragraphs. Of course, the use of brief paragraphs should not be carried to a ridiculous extreme by writing a letter full of one-sentence paragraphs. Be sensible about paragraph length. Say what you have to say and move on; avoid any padding or inconsequential information.

The first paragraph should introduce a letter's subject or refer to a previous correspondence or conversation to which you are responding. The following paragraphs should elaborate on the subject set up in the first paragraph. The closing paragraph should briefly summarize the topic and close on a positive note, encouraging a positive working relationship with the letter's reader.

Continuation Sheets

The printed letterhead is used only for the first page of a letter. The second and following pages are typed on plain sheets of paper matching the letterhead.

The heading on a continuation sheet is typed six lines below the top of the page and includes the addressee's name, the page number, and the date. The text of the letter begins again at least two lines beneath this heading. At least two lines of text, preferably more, should be carried over for a continuation sheet to be used.

In the full-block format, the information in the continuation sheet heading should be typed flush with the left margin. It should include the page number on the first line, the addressee's courtesy title and full name on the second, and the date on the third.

Page 2
Mr. David Marshall
May 5, 20X5

The block, semiblock, official-style, or hanging-indented formats can use either the flush left continuation sheet heading shown above, or a continuation typed on one line with the addressee's name typed flush left, the page number centered and set off by spaced hyphens, and the date flush with the right margin.

Mr. David Marshall   - 2 -   May 5, 20X5

Complimentary Close

The complimentary close must be included in all but the simplified-letter format. It is typed two lines below the last line of the body of the letter.

In the full-block format, the complimentary close should be flush with the left margin. In the block, semiblock, official-style, and hanging-indented formats, the complimentary

close should start at the center of the page, directly under the dateline, about five spaces to the right of center, or at a point that would put the end of the longest line at the right margin. However, note that it should never cross over the right margin. The simplified letter has no complimentary close.

The first letter of the first word of the complimentary close should be capitalized. The entire complimentary close should be followed by a comma.

The choice of the proper complimentary close depends upon the degree of formality of your letter.

Among the complimentary closes to choose from are:

> Yours sincerely,
> Very sincerely yours,
> Sincerely yours,
> Sincerely,
> Cordially,
> Most sincerely,
> Most cordially,
> Cordially yours,

A friendly or informal letter to a person with whom you are on a first-name basis can end with a complimentary close such as:

> As ever,
> Best regards,
> Kindest regards,
> Best wishes,
> Regards,
> Best,

Signature Block

The signature block goes directly under the complimentary close. Leave four lines below the complimentary close for your actual signature, and type your name (usually the same way you will sign it) aligned with the complimentary close in the full-block, block, semi-block, official-style, and hanging-indented formats. In the simplified-letter format, type your name in all capital letters five lines below the last line of the letter, flush with the left margin.

Type your title one line below your typed name, unless it's short enough to fit on the same line as your name after a comma.

If the letterhead includes your business title and the business's name, these are not typed again in the signature block. If a letterhead is not used and your letter is a formal one requiring the business name, type the business name in all capital letters two lines below the complimentary close and aligned with it; in the case of the simplified-letter format, it should appear two lines below the last line of the letter.

The typed business name should appear two lines below the signature. Four lines below the typed business name, the letter writer's name should be typed. If the business name is long, it can be centered beneath the complimentary close in the block and semiblock format letters.

Yours truly,

BETHANY BAGEL COMPANY

Louis Leigh

Louis Leigh, President

If a woman wishes to use a courtesy title before her name, then "Ms." should be enclosed in parentheses before the typed name. This is the only title that may precede the name in the signature block. Academic degrees (e.g., Ph.D., M.B.A.) or professional designations (e.g., C.L.U., C.P.A., C.F.P.) follow the typed name and are separated by a comma.

A person signing the letter for someone else should initial just below and to the right of the signature.

Yours truly,

Louis Leigh js

Louis Leigh, President

If an assistant signs a letter in his or her name for someone else, the assistant's name and title are typed below the signature.

Yours truly,

Edward Cole

Edward Cole
Assistant to Mr. Leigh

Identification Line

The identification line is an optional addition to any letter. It consists of the initials of either the typist or the writer and the typist, and is typed flush with the left margin two lines below the signature block.

The identification line can be typed in a variety of ways. The typist's lowercase initials may be typed alone.

js

The writer's initials may be typed uppercase followed by a colon or virgule (forward slash) followed by the typist's lowercase initials.

MN:js
MN/js

The writer's initials and the typist's initials can both be uppercase, or both lowercase.

MN:JS
MN/JS
mn:js
mn/js

Any version of the identification line above can be used as long as it serves the purpose of identifying the typist of the letter.

In the unusual case that a letter should be dictated by one person, typed by another, and signed by a third, the identification line should include the signer's uppercase initials followed by a colon, followed by the dictator's uppercase initials, followed by another colon, followed by the typist's lowercase initials.

MN:JS:ms

Enclosure and Attachment Notations

If an enclosure is included with the letter, one of the following should be typed two lines below the identification line or the signature block if there is no identification line:

Enclosure
Enc.
Encl.
enc.
encl.

If there is more than one enclosure, use the plural of one of the above notations and indicate the number of enclosures before the notation, or after it in parentheses.

Enclosures (2)

2 Enclosures
encs. (2)
2 encs.
Encs. (2)
2 Encs.

The enclosures should be placed behind the letter in order of importance. If a check is one of the enclosures, it should be placed in front of the letter.

The enclosures can be numbered and listed next to the enclosure notation, one per line. If they are to be returned, indicate such in parentheses next to the item.

encs. (2)   1. Credit analysis worksheet (please return)
              2. International financing brochure

If you're sending a letter via email and plan to include several attached documents, you should note within the text of your email that your email contains attachments.

Distribution Notation

If you would like the recipient of the letter to know to whom you are sending copies of the letter, a distribution notation is used. Sometimes distribution notations appear only on copies of the letter. (On an email, you are automatically directed to place such names in the "cc" field of the email you are writing.)

The distribution notation consists of the words "Copy to" (or "Copies to") or the abbreviation and colon "cc:" followed by the recipient's or recipients' names.

Copy to Louis Leigh
cc: Louis Leigh

Multiple recipients are listed alphabetically by full name or by initials, depending upon the letter writer's preference or company policy.

Copies to: Louis Leigh
             David Marshall

If other information about the recipient is useful (e.g., a company's name) it should be placed next to the person's name in parentheses.

Copies to: Louis Leigh (Bethany Bagel Company)
             David Marshall (The David Marshall Agency)

cc: LL (Bethany Bagel Company)
             DM (The David Marshall Agency)

If space is tight and a distribution notation is essential, it can be typed a single-space above either the enclosure notation or the identification line.

Postscript

A postscript is rarely used in a business letter unless it is in a sales letter to emphasize a point or to make a special offer. It is typed flush with the left margin two to four lines below the last notation in a letter. The writer should initial the postscript. The abbreviation "P.S." should *not* be used before a postscript.