CHAPTER 4

Appearance of the letter

A friend of ours is the president of a public relations company he founded in Boston. His customers include small businesses, restaurants, and financial services companies throughout New England. He is a superb spokesman for his company and is adept at convincing companies and executives that his organization can serve them better than other public relations firms can.

One reason for my friend's success is the contacts he's built over the several years he's worked as a public relations professional. Another is the good press he has gotten his clients.

But another important reason for his success is his appearance. He is well groomed and dresses well—nothing ostentatious, but when he arrives for a business meeting, the customer can tell that he or she is dealing with a public relations professional who at least appears to be very professional.

In letter writing too, appearance is very important. The message you are sending is obviously the most important aspect of your letter. However, if the reader opens an envelope and finds a note scrawled across a piece of notebook paper, the most important of messages is not going to get through.

There are certain conventions used in letter writing that are fairly well established, yet they are flexible enough to allow you to communicate exactly what you want to your reader. If you take into consideration the appearance of your letter—the stationery, format, length, and envelope—your reader will be drawn to it. Once your reader gives your letter his or her attention, your message is sure to get through.

29

Stationery

Letterhead design varies from business to business, but it usually consists of at least the following items:

- Business logo
- Business full, legal name
- Full street address or post office box number
- City, state, and zip code
- Telephone number
- Fax number
- Email address
- Website address

There are important considerations to make when choosing a letterhead design. The information included should be uncluttered and readable. The design should be simple enough for the reader to find the information he or she needs without being distracted from reading the rest of the letter.

Business stationery is usually white or some other conservative color. The standard size of the stationery is 8½ by 11 inches.

Margins on the typed letter should be consistent. The margins on the top and the bottom of the letter should be the same. The side margins should also be equal to one another. The size of the margins depends upon the length of the letter to be written. Long letters typically have smaller margins than short letters. Margins of one inch for long letters and two inches for short letters is a good rule of thumb to follow.

If a letter is very short, containing a few short sentences or a couple of short paragraphs, then a half-sheet of stationery can be used. The half-sheet measures 8½ by 5½ inches. It is usually imprinted with a smaller version of the letterhead, using the same logo and letterhead design as the normal-size stationery.

The full-block, block, or semiblock letter formats discussed in this chapter can be used on the half-sheet. The principles, techniques, and rules governing letter writing apply to letters written on a half-sheet as well.

Sometime a writer will choose to use an executive letterhead. In addition to the basic elements contained in a letterhead, the executive letterhead features the executive's printed name and title beneath the letterhead.

With all types of letters, the letterhead is always used only as the first sheet of a letter. If the typed letter is more than one page, a plain sheet of paper matching the letterhead should be used for subsequent pages. (See the section on continuation sheets in Chapter 3 for more information.)

One other element to keep in mind: Word-processing programs enable a writer to choose among a myriad of different type fonts and sizes. If your company does not have a standard font it uses in all correspondence, then limit yourself in how many different fonts you use with one letter. In fact, a single font should do the trick. The more readable the font, the better. Consider a font that is easy to read such as Times, Times New Roman, Courier, Arial, or Helvetica. You should choose a font size that is readable, certainly nothing smaller than 10 point, but rarely anything larger than 14-point type.

Formats

The format used for a letter is typically determined by the person writing the letter. Sometimes a company will have a house style for a format in which letters must be written.

The full-block, block, semiblock, and simplified-letter formats presented here can all be used effectively for writing any business letter. Some letter writers find that the simplified letter is not traditional enough for their taste; others find it a perfect solution to the problem of sexist language in letter salutations. Be that as it may, these four formats are the standard ones used for most business letters written today.

The hanging-indented and official-style formats discussed here are not used for everyday business letters. Their use indicates that a particular type of letter is being written. A discussion of the appropriate use of these formats is included in this chapter.

Chapter 3 discusses the placement and function of the parts of each of the letter formats discussed in this chapter. You might find it useful to look back at Chapter 3 for reference when you are studying the various letter formats in this chapter.

Full Block

The full-block format, sometimes called "complete block," is shown in Sample Letter 4.1. In this format, all the lines of the letter, from the dateline to the last notation, are flush with the left margin.

Paragraphs are not indented but rather begin flush with the left margin. Single-spacing is used within the paragraphs, and double-spacing between.

The dateline is most often typed three lines below the letterhead. Depending upon the length of the letter, however, it may be typed anywhere from two to six lines below the letterhead. If there is a reference line, it should be typed directly below the dateline.

The inside address is most often typed four lines below the dateline (or reference line if there is one) but may be typed anywhere from two to twelve lines below the dateline depending upon the length of the letter. If there is an attention line it should be typed two lines below the address and two lines above the salutation.

Sample Letter 4.1. Example of full-block format letter.

[date]
A-354-29

Mr. Alexander Campbell
Bethany Bagel Company
14 Pendleton Road
Scots, PA 15012

Dear Mr. Campbell:

The records you requested are enclosed. Due to the technical difficulties we have in processing microfilm, I am unable to provide better quality copies.

I am sorry for any inconvenience this may cause. If I can be of any further assistance, please call me or another customer service representative on our toll-free number 1-800-555-1212.

Sincerely,

Ambrose Kemper
Customer Service Representative

jls

Enclosure

As you see in Sample Letter 4.1, the salutation has been typed two lines below the inside address; had there been an attention line, the salutation would have been two lines below that. If there had been a subject line, it would have been typed two lines above or below the salutation. The body of the letter begins two lines below the salutation or subject line if there is one.

The complimentary close was typed two lines below the last line of the letter and the signature block was typed four lines below the complimentary close.

An identification line was typed two lines below the signature block. All other notations (e.g., enclosure, distribution) are typed two lines below the identification line.

All letters in the full-block format will look like this one.

Block

The block format, sometimes called "modified block" to distinguish it from the full-block format, is shown in Sample Letter 4.2. This format differs from the full-block in the position of the dateline (and reference line if there is one) and of the complimentary close and signature block.

The dateline is usually aligned with the right margin, although sometimes it is centered in relation to the printed letterhead if this presents a more balanced look. In the samples in this book, the dateline is flush with the right margin.

The complimentary close and signature block can correctly be placed in any of several locations (see Chapter 3). Whatever position you choose for the complimentary close must be used for the signature block.

Paragraphs are not indented. The spacing of various parts of the block-format letter is the same as for the full-block format.

Sample Letter 4.2. Example of block ("modified block") format.

[date]

Mr. Jacob L. Martin
Investigative Management Magazine
25 Huntington Avenue, Suite 408
Boonton, NJ 07005

Subject: Membership of Bill Senyl

Dear Mr. Martin:

As we feared, Mr. Senyl is no longer a member of the Investment Managers Society of America. He was a member for just one year from May 20X6 through May 20X7, at which point he allowed his membership to lapse.

In his application, he indicated licenses and registrations in accounting, life insurance, law, real estate, and securities. He also indicated he was a registered investment advisor with the Securities and Exchange Commission. He indicated his highest level of education was a Ph.D., not a Masters degree, as you mention he suggested to you. He also stated that he had memberships in the American Bar Association, American Society of Certified Life Underwriters, and the Million Dollar Round Table.

We certainly appreciate your interest and assistance. Your information will be lodged with the membership department of the Investment Managers Society of America.

Sincerely,

Lisa Antolini
General Counsel

la/js

The block format is sometimes used because of the balanced look it gives to a letter. Since everything is flush with the left margin in the full-block format, it almost appears as if the letter might tip over to the left. In the block format, since the date is flush right and the complimentary close and signature block are *toward* the right, the letter is balanced in place and not tipped to either side.

Semiblock

The semiblock format is shown in Sample Letter 4.3. The only difference between this and the modified block format is that the paragraphs in the semiblock format are indented.

Sample Letter 4.3.   Example of semiblock format letter.

[date]

Mr. Roger Perkins
95 Belltoll Road
Ketchum, ID 83340

Dear Mr. Perkins:

Thank you for sending your work samples and discussing your views about the editor's position we have open. I've reviewed your work and reflected at length on our last conversation, particularly your hesitancy to take on an assignment to demonstrate your editorial approach to analytical topics. Since we talked I've interviewed several other candidates with substantial editorial credentials and have become convinced that proven analytical skills or technical knowledge of the investments area are important prerequisites for the job.

My conclusion is that your background is not appropriate for the position and, frankly, that you would not enjoy the job during a necessary period of training. If, however, you are interested in establishing a freelance relationship with our publication, I'd be happy to consider using you.

Thanks again, Roger, for your interest in the job.

Cordially,

Gloria Hoagland
Publisher

GH/ec

Simplified Letter

The format of the simplified letter departs significantly from the formats described thus far; an example appears in Sample Letter 4.4.

Sample Letter 4.4.   Example of simplified-letter format.

[date]

Professor Alan Campbell
Lazarus College
43 Lorraine Terrace
Plattsburgh, NY 12901

OPINION LETTERS ON MARKETING TEXTBOOK

Enclosed is a group of opinion letters for your text, *Marketing: A New Approach*. We hope these letters will be of considerable interest to you and help you in making revisions to the second edition of the book.

As more of these letters come in, I will send groups of them along to you so that you may read the comments your colleagues have made about your book.

OTTO SCOTT—EDITOR

OS/js
Enclosures

The most obvious variation in the simplified-letter format is its lack of salutation and complimentary close. In addition to addressing a known recipient, the simplified-letter format is a good way to address an unknown audience that may consist of both men and women or only one of these two groups.

In a simplified letter, all lines are flush with the left margin, including the dateline, reference line (if there is one), and the signature block. The dateline is typed six lines below the letterhead. The inside address is typed four lines below the dateline or reference line.

A subject line always is included in the simplified-letter format. Type it in all capital letters, three lines below the inside address and three lines above the body of the letter.

Paragraphs are not indented in the simplified-letter format. Five lines below the body of the letter, the signature block is typed in all capital letters. Your signature goes above the signature block. If there is an enclosure notation it is typed a single space below the identification line. Any other notations are typed two lines below the enclosure notation.

If a continuation page is needed, the heading should be the same as used with the full-block format. The addressee's name should appear six lines from the top of the plain sheet, flush with the left margin. The page number should be typed directly below the name, and the date directly below the page number.

Official Style

The official-style format is used mostly for personal correspondence and is often written by executives on their personalized business stationery. This format is the same as the semi-block format with the exception of the placement of the inside address, which is typed two to five lines below the signature block. See Sample Letter 4.5 for an example of an official-style letter.

If there is an identification line in the official-style format, it is typed two lines below the inside address. Any enclosure notations are typed two lines below the identification line.

Sample Letter 4.5.   Example of an official-style format letter.

[date]

Dear Ambrose:

Your article that appears in December's *Guam City Magazine* made good reading. It was informative and well written for the layman like me.

On behalf of Alan, Mike, and Gus, whom you cited in the article, as well as the whole crew here at Natick Nautical, I want to thank you for including us in the article. The exposure is great, especially in such a well-written and widely read piece.

Thank you again.

Regards,

Paul Pendelton

Mr. Ambrose Kemper
Guam City Magazine
One Symphony Place
Guam City, AZ 85001

PP:js

Hanging Indented

The hanging-indented letter format is reserved for sales or advertising letters. This unorthodox format, shown in Sample Letter 4.6, is believed to attract the attention of the reader.

The first line of each paragraph of the hanging-indented letter is flush with the left margin. The remaining lines of that paragraph are indented five spaces. Single-spacing is used within paragraphs and double-spacing between.

The dateline is flush with the right margin and typed three lines below the letterhead. The inside address and salutation are flush with the left margin and blocked exactly as in the block format ("modified block") discussed earlier in this chapter. The complimentary close, signature block, and all subsequent notations are also positioned similarly to the way they are placed in the modified-block and semiblock letter formats.

The main difference between the hanging-indented format and the semiblock format is the difference in the indentation of paragraphs. If there is a postscript, it is also typed with the first line flush left and the remaining lines indented five spaces.

Sample Letter 4.6.   Example of a hanging-indented format letter.

[date]

Ms. Jane Kenney
1978 Malden Place
Summit, NJ 07901

Dear Ms. Kenney:

For a very limited time—and only to a select, qualified group—I'm authorized to send
the next issue of *The Armchair Reader's Review* absolutely free.

Reply by March 1, 20X5, and you'll receive—without risk or obligation—the one publi-
cation dedicated to giving the inside knowledge on the latest in economic devel-
opments.

Mail the enclosed postage-paid reservation card by March 1, 20X5, and the next issue of *The Armchair Reader's Review* is yours free. At the same time, we'll reserve in your name a full year's subscription at a special introductory rate.

When you receive your free issue, read it and then decide. If you can do without *The Armchair Reader's Review*, write "cancel" on the bill when it comes. You'll owe nothing. Your first issue will be your last. Or you can pay just $11.95 for 11 more issues—saving $24.05 off the newsstand price—and enjoy the insight that each monthly issue of *The Armchair Reader's Review* delivers.

Remember that this is a special offer good for a limited time only. Please reply today.

Cordially,

Alan Sitton
Publisher

AS:JS

Enclosure

Well, that's an awful lot of information, isn't it? Don't despair! You don't have to try to memorize each of these styles. Choose one that you feel comfortable with, and get that down pat. Be aware that there may be occasions when a personal note in the official-style format would be appropriate, or the more impersonal simplified-letter format. And when that time comes, you'll turn to the chapter and refresh your memory.

We, too, have a favorite style. You will find that 99% of the sample letters in Part II are presented in the full-block format, because that's the one *we* happen to like best.

Envelopes

The appearance of the envelope adds to the overall professional appearance of your letter. The address should be typed in the approximate horizontal and vertical center of the business envelope. The address on the envelope should appear exactly as in the inside address of the letter (see Chapter 3), although it must also include the P.O. box number if there is one.

The addressee's name should be typed on the first line. If there is space, the addressee's title can be typed next to the name on the first line, separated by a comma. On the second line, a single-space down, the person's title is typed if it did not fit on the first line. If the company's name will also fit on the second line, type it next to the title, separated by a comma. The complete street address or post office box number is typed on the next line. The city followed by a comma, the two-letter state abbreviation, followed by two spaces, and the zip code are typed as the last line of the address.

If you are addressing a company rather than an individual, type the company's name on the first line and the department name or attention line on the second line.

Your full name and address should appear in the upper-left corner of the letter. Usually the business name is imprinted on the envelope. If it isn't, add it in that same corner, just below your name and above your address.

The stamp is placed in the upper-right corner of the envelope. Any special mailing notations ("SPECIAL DELIVERY," "CERTIFIED MAIL," or "AIRMAIL") should be typed in all capital letters directly below where the stamp is to go. On-arrival notations ("PRIVATE" or "CONFIDENTIAL") should be typed in all capital letters about nine lines below the top left of the envelope, aligned with the end of the return address. Italics and script writing should not be used because they might confuse the postal service.

Memorandums

More often than not, memorandums are written as interoffice correspondence. Different businesses use different formats for their memos. Businesses often have preprinted memo forms that resemble the company's stationery. Usually these forms will feature the following information at the top:

TO:
FROM:
DATE:
SUBJECT:

In many word-processing software packages, a memo feature allows you to call up one of many templates, all of which include the above headings.

When a business does not have preprinted memo forms available, you can use the above format on a blank piece of stationery. You should begin the memo's message two to four lines below the subject line.

When you consider writing a memo, remember:

1. Write a memo only when it is necessary. Professionals are already drowning in a sea of paper. Don't compound the problem by adding unnecessary missives to the flood. If you don't really need to write the memo, don't.

2. Keep your memos as brief as possible. The memo is the ideal place for you to show how competent a writer you are. Be sure the memo is clear, concise, and to the point. The reader must be able to grasp the message quickly and clearly. Memos can run on to more than one page, but only when absolutely necessary.

Memorandum 4.1 shows these considerations in action.

Memorandum 4.1. Memo to employees about new benefits.

TO: Employees Participating in Disability Insurance Plan
FROM: Etsuko S. Yukki, Benefits Administrator
DATE: August 13, 20X4
SUBJECT: Long-Term Disability Plan

Your long-term disability insurance carrier until now has been Security of America. The cost to you for this coverage has been $.30 per $100.

As of August 1, we are pleased to announce that we have changed long-term disability carriers. As a result, your costs have been reduced by 25%. The new carrier on the long-term disability plan is Sambuki General Life Insurance Ltd.

Plan benefits through Sambuki General will remain the same, but rates have been reduced retroactive to August 1. As a result, you will see a rate reduction in your August paycheck. Your cost will be reduced to $.22 per $100 in monthly earnings. The company will continue to pay 50% of the cost of your plan.

Please call me in the New York office if you have any questions.

Email

Email—in part because it is simpler, faster, and less expensive—has taken the place of memos, faxing, and even casual hallway conversation in many businesses. It has also replaced traditional letter writing in many cases.

The immediacy of email makes it very tempting. It's all too common for someone to bang out an email on the computer or a smartphone, and then fire it off. Try to treat email with the same thoughtful consideration that you do letters or memos you send out. While it's tempting to send off an email in response to something that has angered or disappointed you, resist the urge. Sure, type out the email if you want to, but then use the "save draft" function. When you're calmer, go back and read the email to see if you really want to send it. When using email in any business or professional setting, you should follow the same rules about grammar, usage, and the construction of your thoughts as you would if you were writing a well-crafted business letter. While it may be faster to type everything lowercase and not bother with periods or other punctuation, it's best to take the time to reread your email and to make sure it is correct, clear, and concise. While it's a good practice to do this with interoffice email, it's even more important with email sent to outside parties. Just as a letter will give an impression of your company, so too will the emails you send. Remember: what may be your practice in a text message to a friend may not be appropriate for the business world.

Many of the sample letters provided in Part II of *The AMA Handbook of Business Letters* can easily be sent as an email. Sample Letter 6.41, for example, is a letter accompanying enclosed materials requested in a phone call and confirming the appointment made in that call. It was easily adapted to email format, as shown below, by simply copying the text of the letter in the message field of an email and modifying it slightly—the author only needed to change "enclosed" to "attached" in the opening sentence.

From: Mack Nilton <MNilton@nespr.com >
To: Walter Jingle <Walter_Jingle@clp.com>
Sent: Thu Sept 14 07:18:12 20X1
Subject: Follow-up to our conversation

Dear Mr. Jingle:

I've attached a copy of our press kit, which you requested when we spoke on the telephone yesterday. Among other things, the press kit contains articles I've written, stories in which I've been quoted, biographies of me and our senior staff, and a client list.

I look forward to meeting you the week of October 5. Thank you very much for your interest in NES Public Relations. I'll speak with you soon.

Yours truly,

Mack Nilton

With more formal or longer letters, you're likely to decide to write the letter in traditional format and either mail it or include it as an attachment to an email. But for shorter, less formal letters, you may decide that using email provides a more immediate way of getting your message to your recipient.

From a legal perspective, there's been little argument over the fact that companies have the legal right to monitor email sent over the company's computer network on company time. Employees may argue that monitoring their email is an invasion of privacy, but companies can also make a compelling case that if they don't monitor the email going out over their systems, they could be exposing themselves to internal problems related to employee misconduct as well as to outside legal liabilities.

It's important then to remember when using email within a company that what you write becomes a written record that can be subpoenaed should the company be sued. In some cases, for example, claims of sexual harassment because of off-color jokes being sent around the office have led to the dismissal of not only the employee who originated the email but also those who forwarded it on throughout the company. One such case at the St. Louis brokerage firm of Edward Jones & Company resulted in the dismissal of 19 employees, 1 resignation, and 41 warnings.

Because of its immediacy and ease of use, people sometimes forget that unlike a telephone conversation or chat at the water cooler, emails composed on company networks

become written records that get stored. That alone offers a compelling reason why you should be thoughtful about the emails you write.

Some basic rules of thumb for email usage in business:

- Make sure the subject line of your email is descriptive and short—no more than four or five words. Because readers receive many emails every day, using a short, descriptive subject line helps ensure that your recipient will know right away what to expect from your email. It can also help a reader determine the importance of your email and when he should respond.
- Keep the email itself short and focused as well. Many people scan through their emails not just on their desktop or laptops, but also on their cell phones and other devices. The more focused you can make your emails, the more likely they'll get fuller attention from their readers.
- Use the same good grammar and spelling that you would use in a letter.
- Avoid cute abbreviations (e.g., imho for "in my humble opinion") and emoticons in your business email; it's just not professional, and says you aren't either.
- Never write in all capital letters. It gives the impression you're shouting at the recipient. If you need to stress a word, underline it or make it italic.
- Don't be too informal. Remember that your message still reflects your professionalism.
- Avoid spamming recipients by sending out mass emails about your business.
- Consider setting up a consistent signature that goes out with each email that gives your contact information. (Email programs and Web-based services allow for an easy set-up of a signature.)
- Don't forward chain emails or the latest jokes that you receive from friends.
- When you reply to an email, if your program permits, don't return the entire e-mail that you were sent. If you need to refer to select parts of it, then just include those. Otherwise, the email can become long, confused, and difficult to follow.
- Only send attachments that are necessary and make sure those you do send are free of any viruses by regularly running a virus check on your computer files.