

Business Letter Writing: General Rules

- **ORGANIZE**

1. Know your purpose and state it early
2. Identify any secondary purpose(s) of the letter
3. List all the points that need to be made
4. Organize the material in the most efficient or persuasive manner
5. Review the list, and eliminate any that can be omitted without sacrificing completeness or understandability

- **TONE**

1. Keep your reader in mind; ask yourself (if you received this letter):
 - (a) Would I be glad to receive this letter?
 - (b) How would I respond or react?
 - (c) Would I be glad to hear the “news”?
2. Select a tone that is appropriate for the reader and the business you are writing about. Your tone might be friendly but firm, insistent while being tactful, empathic but clear.
3. Your tone must always be courteous.
4. Use a style that is relaxed, natural, and easy to read. Avoid words and phrases that are stiff, technical, or overused.
5. Use a positive tone with positive words.
6. After your letter is written, re-read it for psychological impact. Is the message clear? Is it written in a sincere, courteous, and natural tone?

- **WORD SELECTION**

1. Written work cannot rely on nonverbal cues to carry the message; therefore, word choice is important.
2. Use positive words. *Delighted, immediately, I will, excellent, and thank you* communicate a positive tone.
3. Use active voice in writing. Active voice is lively and direct. The subject plays the active role in active voice. (i.e- “*The secretary typed the letter*” is active voice. “*The letter was typed by the secretary*” is passive voice.) Notice the helping verb in passive voice. When you see the helping verb, think about how you might rephrase the sentence. Use passive voice when you want to emphasize a key word by making it the subject.
4. Build words into phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that come together as a coherent message to the reader.

5. Keep it short and simple. Drop the verbose, the overly-done, the trendy expression, and the cliché. Use *because of* rather than *in view of the fact that* . . . *separately* rather than *under separate cover* . . . *soon* vs. *in the near future*.
6. Writing can be grouped in three styles . . . formal, personable, and chatty. Formal comes off as stiff, and chatty is too casual. The preferred style is personable, since it sounds more conversational, but maintains a professional quality.

Next letter you write, ask yourself:

- Did I clearly state the purpose?
- Did I think through the psychological considerations?
- Did I write all the key points in a logical fashion?
- Did I write naturally . . . “talked” instead of writing.
- Did I project a positive attitude?
- Did I consider the reader’s viewpoint?
- Did I save the compliments for when they are deserved?
- Did I avoid slang, technical jargon, flowery expressions, trendy sayings?
- Did I check all numbers and spelling for accuracy? (Hint: read backwards to check spelling.)
- Did I check the overall appearance of the letter. Is the format correct? Is the stationery the right color. Is it neat and clean?

Adapted from: Writers Inc, Sebranak, Myer, and Kemper and Business Letter Writing, Lindsell-Roberts