

LETTER WRITING – A KEY TO SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The paper deals with the characteristics of letter writing in today's Business Correspondence, being essentially focused on the analysis of one particular segment – the letter of application, also known as cover letter, covering letter or application letter. Our topic choice was determined by the growing need of our students to apply for jobs in the English speaking world and therefore, their need to effectively communicate their qualities and strengths to potential employers. We teach our second year students the necessary techniques for writing successful letters of application by clearly explaining the primary aim of such a letter: it represents the opportunity to market their skills, abilities and knowledge.

Keywords: *Business correspondence, communication, cover letter, job application.*

INTRODUCTION

As Richard Worth clearly states, good writing has become rather scarce nowadays. The traditional elements of business writing tend to be thought of as obsolete – due to lack of time, few people consider *prewriting* (determining your subject and main point, analyzing your audience, defining purpose, organizing information), *writing a draft* (writing the paragraphs in a clear way) and *revising the draft* (Worth 2002) before producing a letter.

As a general rule, business letters are short (1-2 pages) and share a specific format – the block style – *i.e.* each component of the letter is placed at the margin or flush left, except for the letterhead, as shown in the example no. 1.

If the company does not use *letterhead stationery*, the name of the organization, full address and contact details should be provided on top of the page. The letter should be written either according to the European/British standards or to the American ones (*e.g.*, the date in BE dd/mm/yy, the date in AmE mm/dd/yy).

Another element is the *Inside Address* – for whom the letter is intended, the recipient's name, title(s), full address, followed by *Salutation*. When writing the *Salutation*, the differences between the American and the British style should be taken into account:

e.g. Dear Mr. Brown: (Am.E – use of colon) *vs.*
Dear Mr Brown (BE – lack of punctuation).

In case the recipient's name is unknown, we may address a department or professional:

e.g. Attn: Customer Service department *or*
Dear HR Manager

The use of the TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN formula is no longer popular especially due to its highly impersonal reference.

The *Subject Line* is the next compulsory element in a business letter; it is important since it represents a concise manner of introducing the theme of the letter. It may either be introduced by *Re (regarding)*, in which case the letter represents a consequence of previous correspondence or simply by *Subject Line*, in which case the letter introduces a new subject.

The body of the letter may comprise 3-5 paragraphs and it provides all the necessary information in order to clarify its purpose. Usually, we use single space within and double space between paragraphs.

The *Closing* relates to the *Salutation*: if we know the name of the recipient, we will close our letter with *Sincerely, Yours truly*. If the name of the recipient is unknown we will close our letter with *Faithfully yours*. The handwritten signature should accompany the typed name and title of the sender. Most business letters comprise additional information which is introduced by *Enclosure*: *e.g. Encl.: Annual Report (Worth 2002)*.

Example no. 1

<p>Name of Sending Company</p> <p>Full Address</p>
<p>Date (mm/dd/yy)</p>
<p>Recipient's title(s)</p> <p>Position held</p> <p>Name of Company CBS Corporation</p> <p>Full address of the receiving company</p>
<p>Salutation:</p> <p>Dear Mr. X:</p>
<p>Subject Line (in bold)</p> <p>Re (Regarding)</p>
<p>Paragraph 1</p>
<p>Paragraph 2</p>
<p>Paragraph 3</p>
<p>Close</p> <p>Sincerely,</p>
<p><i>Handwritten signature</i></p>
<p>Sender's name (typed)</p> <p>Position held</p> <p>Professional e-mail</p>
<p>Mention of Enclosure¹</p>

THE COVER LETTER FORMAT - GENERAL RULES

We will further focus on the cover/ covering/ application letter/ letter of application as a particular type among the multi-purpose business letters. It is primarily aimed at convincing the employer to grant an interview; it may be regarded as a *sales letter* whose main purpose is to market the applicant's skills. For these reasons, it must be written from the employer's perspective and it has to be tailored to the requirements of the job. A cover letter normally accompanies a CV, it is meant to explain why an applicant wants the job by highlighting his/her skills and experience.

Cover letters are written according to the rules of general business letters: they should be as easy to read as possible, they use formal language, and should not be too long (1 page).

In the case of general business letters we have exemplified with an American style format. In this case we are dealing with a British style format. The standard format of a British cover letter is like in example no. 2.

The opening paragraph of a cover letter should provide context, *i.e.* the writer should introduce himself/herself, mention how he/she learned about the job. He/she should also name the job title he/she is applying for and keep an enthusiastic tone:

e.g. I will have completed my... studies by the end of this year and I am very interested in... (*describe the job*). Professor X, who is my tutor, informed me that you offer this position and suggested that I forward my CV to you.

The middle paragraphs should develop the information provided in the CV. The applicant should come up with examples for each detail which qualifies him/her for the job. Each paragraph should be limited to one such point in order to avoid confusion:

e.g. My responsibilities within the programme involved... which has provided me with invaluable experience in the field of... Moreover, one of my key strengths is...

In the final paragraph, the candidate should show willingness to provide further information, express interest in an interview (but restrain from suggesting a date for it), thank the recruiter for their time and say that he/she looks forward to hearing from them:

e.g. All this makes me confident that I could make a valuable contribution to the... (name of department)/ I am eager to find out more about this position and discuss with you in more detail.../ Thank you for taking the time to consider my application.../ I look forward to hearing from you.³

CONCLUSIONS

The particularities of writing business letters in general and cover letters in particular are taught to second year students of Economics and Business Administration. By the time they reach this stage, they have already acquired knowledge related to the field of Economics and Business and have already made up their mind regarding their future career. The ability to write proficiently in a foreign language is nevertheless among the greatest challenges students have to face. Moreover, the study of the job application process (which involves writing business and cover letters) proves to be relevant to their educational needs especially due to the increasingly globalizing business world.

References

1. Alred, Gerald J., Brusaw Charles T., Oliu, Walter E. (2011) *The Business Writer's Companion*, Bedford/ St. Martin's, Boston.
2. Kirchhoff, Petra, Raaf, Bettina, Pledger, Pat (2009) *Career Express*, Cornelsen, Berlin.
3. Worth, Richard (2002) *Business Writing Handbook*, Wiley Publishing, Inc., Indiana.

Endnotes

1. Worth, Richard, *Business Writing Handbook*, Wiley Publishing, Inc., Indiana, 2002
2. Kirchhoff, Petra, Raaf, Bettina, Pledger, Pat, *Career Express*, Cornelsen, Berlin 2009.
3. *Idem*, p. 98.

Example no. 2

	Sender's address:
	Title, full name
	Street address
	Post code and town
	Country
	Telephone
	Reliable/business-like email address
Recipient's address:	
Title, first and last name	
Position of recipient	
Department (optional)	
Company/ organization name	
Postal address	
Post code	
Country	
	Date (dd/mm/yy)
Salutation:	
Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms/Dr/Professor + last name (no punctuation)	
Dear Sir or Madam (if you do not know the name)	
Subject Line (in bold)	
Name the job you are applying for and quote the reference number	
Opening paragraph	
Main body of the letter	
Final paragraph	
Close	
Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms/Dr/Professor + last name - Yours sincerely (no punctuation)	
Dear Sir or Madam – Yours faithfully (no punctuation)	
Your handwritten signature	
Your full name (typed)	
Indicate that you are enclosing your CV	
Enclosure: CV/ Encl.: CV/ Enc.: CV ²	