

THE BUSINESS LETTER

W.H.C. Kritzinger

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It is quite conceivable that in modern times a person might go through life, after leaving school, without once being called upon to write a composition or essay. It seems highly probable, however, that in the course of his life such a person will be obliged to write a large number of letters, whether it be ordinary informal or friendly letters, or some of the numerous types of business letters. In this article I shall concern myself only with the various problems that many people encounter in the writing of business letters for these are the letters most frequently written.

The layout of the business letter

The form of the business letter, which has been accepted throughout South Africa, should by this time be familiar to all senior pupils and teachers. I shall nevertheless set out some of the more important points below.

It must be remembered that the layout of the business letter is not the brain-child of some unknown person who has made an arbitrary decision on the matter. It is a form that has evolved over a period of time and has been found to be neat, functional and least subject to error.

The example below should be a useful guide to those who are not yet certain about the form of the business letter.

<p>18 Barker Street Potterville 1007 12 October 1977</p> <p>The Manager Protea Book Shop 27 Market Street Randton 0020</p> <p>Dear Sir Return of damaged and soiled books: your invoice No 008665 dated 14 July 1977. I have received the parcel of books which I ordered from you but unfortunately the books are so badly damaged and soiled that I am unable to accept them. They were returned to you by yesterday's post. The brown paper wrapping and carton in which the books were packed were undamaged so it is reasonable to assume that they were already damaged when they left your shop. In view of our long-standing business association, I accept that the dispatch of these books was due to some unfortunate error. I shall be glad if you will send me undamaged copies of the titles ordered as soon as possible.</p> <p>Yours faithfully B. St. John</p>	<p>Your address</p> <p>Date</p> <p>Open line Addressee</p> <p>Open Line Salutation Open line Subject heading Open line</p> <p>First paragraph Open line</p> <p>Second paragraph (more de- tails)</p> <p>Open line Short final paragraph Open line Ending Signature</p>
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Let us examine the structure of this letter.

(a) **The writer's address**

Two aspects are immediately apparent:

- (i) No punctuation is used. Only in cases where punctuation is part of the spelling, for example in abbreviations such as **St.** or **P.O. Box** is it necessary.
- (ii) The address is written in the so-called 'block' form and is not slanted.

(b) **The receiver's name/title and address**

- (i) The title of the head of the firm or institution such as **The Manager, The Secretary**, etc. must be written above the name of the firm or institution followed by the address. All are written against the margin.

(c) **The salutation**

The only forms allowed are **Dear Sir** or simply, **Sir** (Note the absence of a comma). Avoid such forms as **Greetings** or other informal salutations. Terms of familiarity should never be used in business letters.

(d) **The subject heading**

This is a very important item in business letters and should never be omitted. It enables the addressee to see at a glance what the letters are about and saves the time involved in first reading through all incoming correspondence, which can be quite considerable in large business enterprises and state departments. Such correspondence, bearing a subject heading (which should include reference numbers, if any), can then be sent through to be dealt with by the appropriate sections without delay.

(e) **The first paragraph**

It must be remembered that time in the modern world is a precious commodity and we can no longer afford to proceed at the leisurely pace of our forefathers. This is particularly true in business where every minute wasted, costs money. Long-winded introductions to letters are therefore frowned upon and treated with considerable impatience.

The golden rule is to write **as clearly, as concisely** and **as simply** as possible. In short, come to the point immediately without undue wordiness. Avoid out-dated and pretentious jargon such as:

I am in receipt of your most esteemed communication of the 25th ultimo which I have perused with the utmost gratification.

This should simply have read:

Thank you for your letter of 25 September.

From the example of the business letter it will be seen that the nature of the complaint is stated without preamble, the necessary references having already been given in the heading. The writer probably had good reason to be annoyed but he nevertheless maintains a reasonable and courteous tone. Courtesy is essential in all circumstances, no matter what the provocation. Abusive language or even an abrupt or superior tone have no place in a business letter.

(f) **The second and following paragraphs**

The number of paragraphs in a letter will, of course, depend on the nature of the subject. These paragraphs usually set out the details in connection with the reason for writing. Note that

only the essentials are stated without circumlocution. The writer anticipates the receiver's probable reaction, that the books were damaged in transit and very **briefly** supplies him with the facts which will make further correspondence on this point unnecessary.

- (g) **A brief conclusion** might be added in the interests of courtesy. This, again, must be very brief and to the point. Although a respectful tone is important particularly when applying for employment, the falseness of exaggerated expressions of humility is apparent in endings such as the following:

Assuring you of my best services,

I am, Sir,

Your most humble and obedient servant

Such expressions of obsequious servility are more likely to harm the applicant's chances than to win him favour. The most acceptable ending is simply **Yours faithfully**.

It has already been pointed out that the contents of a business letter should be stated **clearly, simply and concisely**. It is important that we should examine each of these requirements in turn.

Clarity

A prerequisite for clear writing is that the writer

- (a) must know exactly what he wishes to convey to the addressee; muddled thinking is not conducive to clarity of expression.
- (b) must make sure that he has formulated his ideas in correct English which will be understood without difficulty by anyone who has a reasonable knowledge of the language.
- (c) must include all the facts in his letter which will enable the receiver to supply him with the desired material or information, without being obliged to conduct further correspondence in order to obtain particulars which, with a little thought, could have been supplied in the first place. Failure to include all the relevant information in a letter of application for employment will immediately disqualify any applicant. It is therefore a good practice to consider, before writing the letter, what information you would require if you were in the receiver's place, and then to make a list of all the facts that you should mention. Let us assume that you are seeking employment: Your list would include the following:
 - (i) age
 - (ii) schools attended, with dates
 - (iii) examinations passed and subjects studied
 - (iv) present employment (if any)

- (v) name of employer
- (vi) reason for seeking other employment.

Simplicity

Younger people are often tempted to display their learning by embellishing their writing with impressive-sounding words and expressions which only serve to obscure the meaning of what they wish to convey. This type of writing has no place in any letter, least of all in a business letter for time is wasted and clarity suffers.

Use only those words and phrases which will convey your meaning clearly and without ambiguity.

Conciseness

This means that all relevant facts must be stated as **briefly** as possible. This, of course, goes hand in hand with simplicity.

Recently a reader of a popular magazine wished to complain about the lack of news on certain kinds of sport. This is how he began his letter:

I hate to be a thorn in your neck, however, I find it necessary to draw your attention to the absence of news pertaining to such sporting activities such as tennis, rugby, baseball and cricket ...

Surely the editor would have understood his complaint better if he had simply written:

I notice that you seldom publish any news about tennis, rugby or baseball matches ...

It is obvious that where brevity and simplicity are of the utmost importance, proverbial or figurative expressions (even if used correctly) should be avoided altogether.

In conclusion an example of a letter applying for employment is given below.

P.O. Box 24
Catshill
1011
5 October 1977

The Manager
Protea Insurance Co. Ltd.
P.O. Box 1075
Randton
0020

Sir

Post of Junior Clerk

I should like to be considered for the post of Junior Clerk as advertised in the 'Catshill News' of 3 October 1977.

The details of my personal history are as follows:

Age: 20 years.

Educational Attainments: Senior Certificate.

Subjects: English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Accountancy, Economics, Mathematics and Biology.

School attended: Hildene Secondary School (1971–1974). I am at present employed as a Junior Clerk by the Gijima Cartage Co., P.O. Box 48, Catshill, for which I have been working since January 1975.

The reason for my application is that the vacancy you advertise is for a position that offers promotion to me should I be successful.

Enclosed please find two testimonials, one from the principal of the Hildene Secondary School and the other from my present employer.

Yours faithfully

B. Mtetwa