

The form of the letter in English

The following investigation was prompted by numerous enquiries. Its purpose is to find some order in the conflicting advice offered to businesses, schools and the general public about the form of the letter in English. We were fortunate in receiving immediate response and detailed advice from the five Departments of Education approached. By means of comparison and elimination we have tried to arrive at a reasonably accurate compendium of their requirements. Since pupils who are at present being taught under these departments constitute the future body of businessmen, teachers and other members of the public, it seems reasonable to assume that in time consensus of opinion at educational level may facilitate the often irksome exercise of letter writing.

In Volume 7, number 1 of May 1976, this journal published an article by R. Goodman entitled: 'The Business Letter' (pp. 22–23). From the article we have abstracted the salient points on which Mr Goodman obviously clashes with the general current credo of the Departments of Education. The reader is invited to make his own comparisons. Mr Goodman takes a moderately conservative stance, maintaining, *inter alia*, that:

1. *The Abbreviation of 'Street' is 'St'¹... and any such abbreviation (e.g. Ave, Rd) need not be indicated by a full-stop.*
2. *Each line of the address should end with a comma, including lines which end with abbreviations (e.g. 25 Garden Rd,), except the last line which ends with a full-stop.*
3. *The date may follow the indentation of the address.*
4. *The date is not written solely in numerals (e.g. 18/12/74), but the day is, with the addition of 'st', 'nd' or 'th' being optional.*
5. *The month should be written out in full, and be followed by a comma ... The year ... should not be abbreviated ... and should always be followed by a full-stop.*
6. *In writing the name and address of the recipient ... 'stepped' * indentation is optional.*
7. *The salutation is followed by a comma.*
8. *'Yours faithfully' is followed by a comma.*

¹ Our italics throughout.

* Our coinage.

The practices outlined above are, on the whole, frowned upon under 'the new dispensation', according to the dictates of the educational authorities. We shall now, by means of an unashamed but, we hope, judicious culling of points from these directives, try to establish in broad outline what their instructions are.

It is evident that there has been collaboration among the departments. Some of them furnish, as an introduction to their directives, a helpful and persuasive 'motivation', an incentive which is clearly common to all these bodies. The aim has been to simplify and modernise the form of the letter and to prescribe, where possible, a uniform approach to it. It was felt that this would eliminate confusion among pupils taking different courses, 'such as commercial and academic subjects'. In the past, for example, typing pupils were taught a completely different form of approach to the letter from that in their language courses. This is understandable, since commerce, industry and official organizations came increasingly to use those forms which were not taught in the general part of the school curriculum. This divergence is ascribed to the use of the typewriter and 'other considerations'. The forms of the letter now prescribed correspond more closely to those in public and commercial use and are calculated to obviate confusion once the pupil enters the business world.

To avoid uncertainty, only forms that can be justified grammatically and linguistically have been chosen by the authorities. Points that are chiefly grammatical in nature have been decided on the basis of usage, but forms that depend mainly on taste and usage have been changed to suit modern demands.

THE INFORMAL LETTER

1. The writer's address and date:

Only one department makes the use of 'stepped' indentation and its concomitant, punctuation, optional in writing the sender's address and date (as well as in the conclusion). The trend seems to be towards the block format which dispenses with indentations and punctuation. Spokesmen justify this method by explaining that the use of punctuation marks, which is to enable the reader to understand more easily, falls away: since the name of a house or farm, the house number and street, and the date are all written on separate lines, punctuation is not required for clarity. Abbreviations such as 'P.O.' are allowed.

2. The names of farms, blocks of flats, etc., are not written within quotation marks.
3. The number of the house should precede the name of the street. 'Road', 'Street', 'Avenue', 'Lane' should preferably be written out in full.
4. Name of town: when this is written, the first letter is a capital, the rest lower case; capitals when typed.
5. Order of items in the date: day, month, year, with the day written as a cardinal number, not as an ordinal, and no comma placed after the name of the month (e.g. 25 March 1970). The names of months should preferably be written in full, but may be abbreviated.

The salutation

1. Skip a line between the address on the right and the salutation on the left of the page. (Here there is some disagreement: the spokesman for one department directs: 'Only in the case of type-written letters is a line skipped between the date and the salutation'.)
2. Begin the salutation against the left margin and with a capital letter: *Dear Uncle John/Dear Mr Gardner/Dear Mum and Dad.*
3. No comma is used after the salutation. (One department argues: 'The salutation ends with a comma – this is the only punctuation mark outside the body of the letter'.)

The body of the letter

1. Skip a line after the salutation.
2. The opening paragraph and all successive paragraphs are started against the margin, vertically below one another, without indentation.
3. Skip a line between all paragraphs.
4. The opening paragraph after the salutation begins with a capital letter.

(Starting paragraphs against the margin not only enables the machine to be set easily when a letter is typed, but also prevents irregular indentations of paragraphs. The separation of paragraphs by one line helps to accentuate the unity of thought of each paragraph.)

The conclusion

1. Skip a line between the final paragraph and the conclusion ('close').

2. Skip a line between the actual close

e.g. *Yours sincerely*
John

and a brief greeting or some similar concluding passage,

e.g. *Please give my regards to your parents.*

This sentence is not regarded as part of the conclusion.

3. Begin the conclusion against the left margin and retain the block form.
4. *Yours affectionately* is not followed by a comma.
5. No full-stop after *John* (see above).
6. *I am* and *I remain* are no longer in current usage. If you were therefore still to say, in their absence:

Hoping to see you again
Your sincere friend
William

you would be left with a hanging phrase which is grammatically incorrect. Turn the dangler into a sentence, e.g. *I hope to see you all soon.* Give it a full-stop so that it forms part of the body of the letter, and leave a line open between it and the close.

7. When your conclusion reads:

With best wishes
yours sincerely
Marilyn

there is no line left open between the first and second line of the conclusion and *yours* is written in the lower case. The first line is part of the close.

THE FORMAL LETTER

Writer's address and the date (see under **INFORMAL LETTER**)

Address of recipient

1. Skip one line between the date on the right and the recipient's address on the left. (Again, one department limits the skipping of a line to typewritten letters.)
2. Begin against the left margin, without slanting or indenting.
3. Write the name of the addressee and details of his address one under the other without punctuation marks.

4. The addressee's name or designation must precede his address. Letters are never written to a firm as such, but to the person in charge of, or responsible for, answering letters, e.g. *The Secretary, The Manager, The Managing Director, The Town Clerk, The Principal.*
5. Skip a line between the recipient's address and the salutation.
6. If a reference code is used, it is written against the left margin on the same line as the date. If the correspondence is addressed to *The Director*, but follows on a telephone conversation with a particular member of his staff, the phrase *For Attention: Mr Smith* is added below the Reference Code against the left margin, with a line skipped above and below it. (This phrase is usually underlined to make it conspicuous.)

EXAMPLE

| | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| | North Linen Company |
| | 19 Arden Street |
| | EAST LONDON |
| | 5201 |
| Our Reference: WJ/hj/13/5 | 20 October 1973 |
| <i>For Attention: Mr Smith</i> | |

The Director
 United Cotton Manufacturers
 Paarden Eiland
 7405

Dear Sir

The salutation

1. Start against the left margin, without indentation. Skip a line between the recipient's address and the salutation.
2. Use the correct form of salutation:
Dear Sir/Dear Sirs/Dear Madam (Dear Sir/Madam when the sex of the addressee is unknown). When the surname of the addressee is known, use Dear Mr Smithers and end the letter with Yours sincerely.
3. No comma after salutation.
4. Skip a line between the salutation and the Subject Line.

The subject line (This indicates the subject or topic of the letter.)

1. This is written after the salutation; a line is skipped above and below it; it is written against the left margin without indentation and the first letter should be a capital.
2. The Subject Line must be underlined. (In typed letters the entire Subject Line is written in the upper case without underlining.)
3. There is no full-stop.
4. *Re* or *in re* must not be used.

The body of the letter

1. Skip a line between the subject line and the opening paragraph.
2. All paragraphs should be started against the margin without indentation.
3. Skip a line between each paragraph.
4. A formal letter must get straight to the point and be written in simple, unambiguous language. Avoid outmoded *business* forms (e.g. *ul.*, *inst.*, *at your earliest convenience, we would esteem it a favour, attention is directed, please find enclosed herewith*).
5. There is no need to number paragraphs in a concise business letter. In lengthy letters this may be necessary.

Conclusion

1. Skip a line between the closing paragraph and the conclusion.
2. Start the conclusion against the left margin.
3. Use no punctuation marks in the conclusion.
4. If the writer is an adult male, he simply signs his name. (A young boy should write *Master* in brackets before his signature, and a woman *Mrs* or *Miss*.) [The educational authorities have apparently not yet given official recognition to the Women's Liberation Movement; hence the omission of *Ms.*]
5. Print the initials and surname clearly, and immediately below the signature.
6. If the writer has an official title, it is added immediately below the signature (e.g. *Secretary/Accountant/Deacon/Manager/Principal*).
7. The conclusion should be brief:

(a) *Yours faithfully*
 A.J. Smith

(b) *Yours sincerely*
 A.J. Smith

If the writer has
addressed the recipient
by name.

- (c) *Yours faithfully*
 A.J. Smith
 SECRETARY If typed.
- (d) *Yours faithfully*
 A.J. Smith
 Secretary If hand-written.

It is recommended that forms such as *Your obedient servant* and *Yours very truly* be avoided.

LETTERS TO THE PRESS

The Editor
 The Cape Argus
 P.O. Box 42
 Cape Town
 8000

Sir

PUNISHMENT IN SCHOOLS

I wish to draw your attention to ...

Yours faithfully
 Anxious Parent

P. Smith
 3 Lover's Lane
 Wynberg
 7800
 25 February 1972

FORMAL INVITATIONS AND REPLIES

Invitation

Mr and Mrs Charles Johnson request the pleasure of Mr James Brown's company at dinner on Sunday 30 November 1978 at 7.30 p.m.

R.S.V.P. Grant House
 Newlands Drive
 Newlands
 7700

Acceptance

Mr James Brown is pleased to accept the kind invitation of Mr and Mrs Charles Johnson to dinner on Sunday 30 November 1978.

78 Campground Road
Rondebosch
7700

Refusal

Mr James Brown thanks Mr and Mrs Charles Johnson for their kind invitation to dinner on Sunday 30 November 1978 but regrets that owing to a prior engagement he is unable to accept.

78 Campground Road
Rondebosch

Because of the evident agreement revealed in the various Departmental directives, we have come to the conclusion that the examples on pages 18 and 19 will probably be the 'form letters' of the future.

While conservatives may do their utmost to 'conserve' the traditional form, they seem to be losing the battle. Radicalism, which used to be in the air, has now made a safe landing and we shall have to accept its presence as part and parcel of South Africa's written mode of communication. However, since usage does not invariably oust taste, the decision on whether or not to conform still rests with the adult writer.

Readers may possibly disagree with the educational authorities and with our interpretation; we welcome constructive criticism and discussion of our assessment of a seemingly controversial issue.

M.H.
A.D.A.

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EXAMPLE 1: INFORMAL LETTER

Emilia Thau
 28 Bonanza Drive
 Seaforth
 7995
 South Africa
 3 December 1973

Dear Colin

Thank you for your air letter. It took only four days to reach me. How small a place the world has become!

Today's date is a significant one for both of us. Exactly three years ago we became penfriends and exchanged our first letters. I have learned a great deal about Canada from the postcards, stamps and pressed flowers you have sent me. I hope you have learned something about my country, too, from those I have sent you from time to time.

Next year a new form of the letter will be taught in our schools. I have already begun to practise it and this letter follows the new pattern. Notice how the writer's address is set out in block form, without indentation and punctuation. Were I to write it in run-or form, however, it would read as follows:

Emilia Thau, 28 Bonanza Drive, Seaforth 7995, South Africa

Please convey my kind regards to your parents. I hope that they are well and that your Dad's business continues to flourish. I send you Xmas greetings and good wishes for 1974.

Yours sincerely
 Raymond

EXAMPLE 2: FORMAL LETTER

4 Elizabeth Avenue
Barklands

7405

21 January 1972

The Manager
Provincial Booksellers
Wale Street
Cape Town
8001

Dear Sir

Complaints *

There has been an unfortunate mistake in the carrying out of the instructions in my letter of 5 January 1972.

I clearly requested you to send a copy of the book *Raising Good Animals* by R. Greenwood to my aunt Mrs H. Brown of 14 Melner Road, Sea Point for her birthday, and to charge the cost of the book to my account. When I visited her yesterday I was most upset to find that you had sent her the book *Raising Good Animals* and, what is worse, that you had sent it C.O.D. As my aunt has no interest at all in animals of any kind, she thinks that I did this as a joke, and one she does not find the least amusing.

I am returning the book sent in error and would be obliged if the book on gardening could be sent instead.

I trust this letter will receive your full and prompt attention.

Yours faithfully
R. D. G. Miles

* A more specific heading would be helpful in most business letters. (Eds)