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STYLE AND STRATEGY OF THE BUSINESS LETTER

JACQUELINE TRACE

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PREFACE

This little book is written for all those people—young and old, rich and poor, unskilled and professional, employed and unemployed—who want to improve their lives by making business letters work for them. Whether this is your introduction to the mysteries of the formal letter or an attempt to bring yourself up to date with the latest customs in business writing, you will find that you can increase control over the daily events of your life by following the principles laid out in this book.

Some of these rules may seem arbitrary—and they are. Traditions die hard, and you will have to master some writing practices that are, in fact, nothing more than arbitrary conventions. But once you have mastered these conventions, exciting challenges begin, and you will be faced with tasks that demand creativity, discretion, good judgment, and a respect for humanity.

If you have your own secretary, you may wish to skip by the format principles outlined in the first chapter. On the other hand, you may not. Times change, and letter format practices change with them. Even your secretary may be unaware of acceptable contemporary usage in letter construction.

Consideration of the reader's needs and how best to satisfy them—as well as your own needs to get what you want—is the subject of Chapters 2 through 7. Many letters fail because business writers refuse to accept the challenge posed by their problems. By viewing

every letter-writing assignment as a problem to be solved, you will learn how to carefully plan your message to persuade the reader to understand and accept your point of view. These chapters on strategy examine organization, tone, and empathy.

Finally, in Chapter 8 you will learn how to make your language interesting to hold the reader's attention. An understanding of sentence and paragraph style, visual techniques of presentation, and word choice all serve to keep the reader alert to your message.

These basic principles of style and strategy are illustrated through the pen of Robin Redgrave, as she moves from New York to Texas, manages a business, coordinates a fund drive, and looks for employment.

I hope you will enjoy her story.

JACQUELINE TRACE

CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER 1

FORMAT

THE FIRST REQUIREMENT of any business letter, something your readers expect to see before they read the letter, is a professional *look*. Every business letter creates an instant impression in the mind of its reader by its overall appearance on the page. If a letter is handwritten or sloppily typed, you can destroy your credibility in an instant. No one, businessperson or consumer, will be receptive to the ideas of someone who hasn't taken the time to present those ideas in an attractive way. If you want your letter to bring results, it must be carefully designed.

Whether you type your own letter or have someone type it for you, give it good visibility on the page by making sure you have a fresh ribbon in the typewriter. Readability is the key to all good writing, and no piece of writing is readable unless you can see the words. The visual appearance of your letter will be enhanced, therefore, by using a standard pica typeface rather than the smaller elite or script type. When the words are bigger, the ideas stand out better.

It will be to your advantage, especially in a very important letter, to compose a draft, or trial run, before typing the final copy. Very few people, and only those who have had long experience at it, can sit down and type or dictate an effective, well organized letter the first time around.

Writing is a three-step process. First you plan, then you write, then you revise. The planning stage, covered in Chapters 2 through

7, involves thinking through your strategy: What are you trying to achieve by your letter? What is the best way to go about it? Once you have determined this strategy you can begin to put words down on paper.

The process does not stop there. You will then need to reexamine those words to ensure they are organized logically and presented clearly. In this final, revising stage, you will want to examine every paragraph, sentence, and word to make sure your message will be interpreted correctly. You will also need to check with a good dictionary, so that no misspellings detract from your credibility as a writer.* Only then is your letter ready to send out.

If you want your ideas to work for you, accept this three-step method. Draft your letter before you type it.

You may handwrite or type your first draft. Most people, excluding professional writers, are less inhibited when they think with pen or pencil. If you are one of these people, compose your first draft on lined paper. On the other hand, if you are agile and comfortable at a typewriter, or if your handwriting is sloppy, you may find it easier to mark up and work from a typewritten page. Moreover, a rough draft that is typed will give you a better idea of how the letter will space out on the page, so that the second time around the letter will be ready to sign. If you have any experience at all with typewriters, try this method. You may be able to save some time in the long run.

When you are ready to type your final copy, start with a letterhead or piece of plain white paper of the standard $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$ " size. Colored paper may give an unbusinesslike impression. Worse yet is stationery with floral designs running through the entire page. Regular bond paper is preferable to the erasable type, which smudges easily on contact with a ballpoint pen or sweaty palm. Though type is harder to erase on a good bond paper, a "white out" correction fluid will do the job neatly.

One further warning: Use onionskin, which is thin, transparent paper, only for your carbon copies, not for the original letter. In other words, don't do anything to distract your reader from your message, which you want to come through loud and clear.

Buy a box of carbon paper and some onionskin, so that you can make carbon copies of all your correspondence. Never send anything

*I recommend *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976) and *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982).

through the mail without keeping a copy for yourself. You may need proof later of when you sent your letter and exactly what you said. Hold on to the evidence.

With a rough draft in front of you and your paper in the typewriter, you are ready to go. Many letter formats are available to the professional letter writer. Most common today, however, is the full-block style. It is preferable to other styles because it is easiest on the typist. The full-block format is explained on the following pages and used for all the letters in this book. (See Figure 1-1 for an illustration of the layout of an average-length letter in full-block style.)

MARGINS

If your letter is of average length (two to four paragraphs), set margins of 15 spaces on each side. For longer letters you will need to use 10-space margins so that you can get the whole letter on one page. Very short letters of two or three sentences call for wide margins of 20 spaces at the right and left.

You should double space your message only in brief letters comprising two or three sentences. Letters of normal length should always be single-spaced, with double spaces between paragraphs. (See Figure 1-1.) The margins and vertical spacing you choose for your letter are important to its professional appearance. Your goal should be to place the message of your letter as close to the center of the page as possible. Short messages require lots of white space both horizontally and vertically, while long ones need to use up most of the space on the page.

HEADING

Most companies and organizations have their own printed letterheads, and consequently no return address needs to be typed in. On most letterheads the company name and address is centered on the page close to the top like this:

The American Heritage Bookstore

250 Central Avenue

Lyndon City, TX 75236

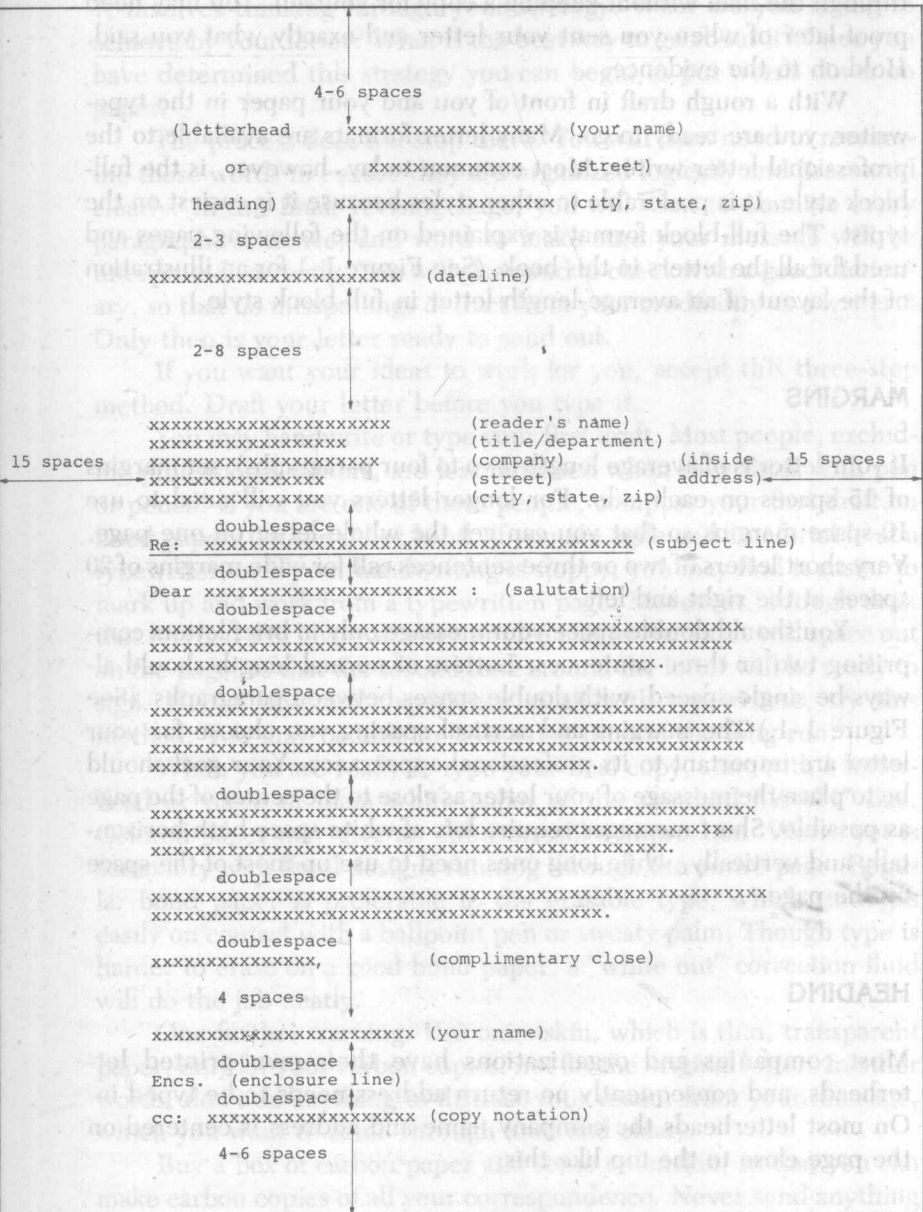


FIGURE 1-1. An average-length letter in full-block style.

When you write letters about your personal business rather than your company business, type your name and home address at the top of the page. Don't use company letterhead for your personal correspondence. Of course, if you have the funds, you can order your own letterhead from a printer. Personal letterhead generally follows the same format as company letterhead, with your name and address centered at the top of the page. Personal stationery can be expensive, however. In addition, it is unnecessary. If you do not have personal stationery, it won't detract from the professionalism of your message. Just type your name and address four to six spaces from the top of a sheet of plain bond paper, centering each line and typing your name in capital letters:

ROBIN REDGRAVE

Lincoln Meadows, Apt. 4B
320 Sterling Street
Lyndon City, TX 75212

Although some established usage would put the writer's street and city address just above the dateline, and the writer's name only at the end of the letter, the method suggested here is better for two reasons:

1. It looks more like real stationery.
2. It enables readers to see at one glance, instead of two, all the information they need for the inside address of the return letter.

DATELINE

The date is typed two or three spaces below the heading flush with the left margin in the order of month, day, and year. Although the military and some formal organizations, such as law firms, sometimes type the day before the month, this is not standard American usage. Use cardinal numbers (1, 2, 3), not ordinal numbers (1st, 2nd, 3rd).

Right: September 12, 198__

Wrong: Sept. 12th, 198__

Wrong: 9-12-8__

Don't use: 12 September 198__