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# The Complete Book



Written by Strategic Communications

Edited by Stephen P. Elliott

Round Lake Publishing  
Ridgefield, Connecticut

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## Preface

Many bright people, perhaps you're one of them, go to great lengths to avoid writing letters. Even when it means losing sales, alienating customers, or missing opportunities to present themselves in the best light, the threat of facing a blank page or a bare computer screen can be more powerful than the need to write a letter.

Just the thought of getting started can strike terror! "How should I open the letter?" "Just what information do I need to include?" "Am I communicating in the best tone for the situation and is my approach the most effective one?" "What closing will bring the action or reaction I want?" Sometimes the challenge of all these factors so overwhelms the writer that no letter at all is ever sent, or the letter that is finally composed misses the mark completely or subverts the writer's purpose.

All of this is most unfortunate because, in fact, armed with some simple guidelines to follow, and some excellent models from which to learn, business letter writing can be a relatively easy, extremely rewarding task.

Every piece of business correspondence is a sales tool. When you write to a customer, even about such a simple matter as confirming a delivery date, your correspondence is telling him about you and your company—about your professionalism, your interest in serving him, the style with which you conduct business. The same is true of an internal memo. Here your market is your associate, your boss, your subordinate. A weak or confusing communication represents you poorly, sending the message that you are inept or that you exercise poor judgment.

This book gives you your very own "file" of concise, crisp letters, memos,

proposals and other business documents covering all of the major areas of business. Each one is designed to provide a model for effective communication. Of equal significance are the comments accompanying each document, which highlight the important features and help you to customize it.

**Before you begin, decide whether you should be writing at all.** This might seem like a foolish point, but it isn't. Writing is too time-consuming to engage in frivolously. The key question is "What do I want the reader to do after he or she reads this?" If you can't answer this question, you might reconsider whether you should write at all.

**Don't write** under the following conditions:

- When a quick phone call will do the job just as well as a letter, *and* a written record is *not* required.
- When you want to congratulate yourself. If your sole reason for writing is to let people know how great you are, think again. It's always better to *show* people you're competent than to tell them.
- When you're emotionally upset. If you're in a rage because someone on your staff failed to do what he was supposed to do, take some time to cool down before you begin to write. The letter will be better thought out, and you'll avoid saying things you may regret later on.

**Do write**, however, if any of the following apply:

- When the reader needs time to understand and absorb the message—for example, the material is complex and technical.
- When a permanent record is necessary to guard against misinterpretation or to protect the writer and the reader from the memory lapses that come with the passage of time.
- When you need a polite way to get someone's attention. For example, when you've been trying to reach a potential customer by phone, to no avail.
- When writing a letter can demonstrate that you've made a special effort.

**Be prepared!** It is impossible to write a well-reasoned letter or memo without preliminary thought. You need to focus on the decision maker, the person who will take action on what you are writing, and write with that person's needs in mind. Whether that person is a customer, a supplier, a creditor, a member of your staff, or your boss, aim your letter at the intended reader. The best way to achieve this is to picture the person in your mind as you write.

**Get to the point.** Establish what the main point of the letter is to be by asking yourself, "What is the one thing I want the reader to remember?" Start with a sentence that compels the reader to continue reading, and then quickly make the main point or points. Don't save important information for late in the document. Many readers will never get that far.

**Be brief.** If your letter is well organized, you won't be tempted to run on.

Most readers are just as busy as you are. They won't read pages and pages of explanation or analysis. Keep your letters, memos, and executive summaries to one page, if possible. Keep your paragraphs short.

**Say what you mean.** Hedging fools absolutely no one. Many people fall into the habit of qualifying their sentences in order to avoid categorical statements that may later be proven false. As a result, their documents are loaded with sentences starting with "There is a possibility that" or "There is some potential that." Lopping off these phrases will improve most prose. Use the active voice (he completed the project) rather than the passive voice (the project was completed by him) for the same reasons—it's shorter and more forthright.

**Be positive.** If you can state something positively, do so. Saying "We can't fill your order" is honest enough, but saying "We'd like to substitute Product X, a superior version of the product you ordered" is much better. People are much more receptive to the positive approach.

**Be natural.** Letter writing doesn't have the stilted, formal sound it once did. Don't use slang, but do write in a conversational style, similar to the way you speak. Even contractions like "I've" and "let's" accurately reflect the way people converse, and are perfectly acceptable in written communications today. People have been so used to Victorian phrasing in business correspondence that they find it hard to resist phrases like "Per your letter of August twenty-first" or "Enclosed herewith please find." Read your letter or memo aloud. If it sounds stiff, it probably is! Change it so that it sounds more natural.

## How to Use This Book

This book provides an easy-to-access file of model letters for every category of business. Using the chapter openers as background and the comments accompanying the letters as a guide, you should find it easy to customize any document to suit your particular needs.

**Accessing the letters.** The documents fall within 13 major areas, or chapters, as spelled out in the table of contents, and then into more specific areas within each chapter. Each document has a descriptive title as well as a reference number, which identifies the chapter in which the letter can be found and, separated by a hyphen, its numerical placement within the chapter. In addition, there are two indexes from which to select the letter you need, one alphabetized by letter title and one by subject. After using the table of contents and indexes a few times you may find that, for your purposes, one of them proves more helpful to you than the others in locating the documents you want to use.

**Customizing the letters.** Once you've chosen the letter you wish to customize, you may want to make a copy of it on which you can do the editing. Keep the book open to that page, so you can refer to the original letter and the comments under it. The comments alert you to the important features of the letter—and assure that all essential information will be included.

In addition to the content of the model letters, pay particular attention to their tone and style. These factors determine the strength and effectiveness of your written communications.

Many of the letters and other documents in the book require very little

customizing to make them appropriate for other situations, while some will need additional editing. The more complex letters provide excellent examples of how to handle particularly difficult situations.

When creating your own documents, consider combining paragraphs from several letters within the same category. This is particularly helpful when your needs fall somewhere between two model letters.

Review the letter when you finish to be sure you have changed all the information necessary to make the letter correct for your purposes. And, of course, proofread it to be sure there are no typographical errors or misspelled names.



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