

Everyday Letters *for* Busy People

Hundreds of Sample
Letters You Can
Copy or Adapt at
a Minute's Notice

**INCLUDING BUSINESS, JOB SEARCH, AND
PERSONAL LETTERS, RANGING FROM
THE COMPLAINT TO THE CONDOLENCE**

Debra Hart May



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or Adapt at a Minute's Notice.



By
Debra Hart May

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To my husband, Mark.

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Who Needs This Book?

This book can help you write better letters. From letters that help you accomplish personal business (for instance, a complaint letter, a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, or a letter to your child's school principal), to letters for strictly social purposes (letters that invite, announce, or express sympathy, for instance). Especially if writing any letter is a task you don't enjoy or find challenging, you've picked the right book.

Many books give you advice on how to write a good letter. There's plenty of good advice out there. Others offer sample letter after sample letter you can borrow lines from or even use in their entirety, though rarely do their sample scenarios really fit your particular writing situation.

That's why this book is different. Sure it offers you lots of sample letters designed not to be terribly flowery or clever—but to help you accomplish your letter's purpose. I figure if you're taking the time to pull a letter together (or just the time to find the right ready-made letter), you want it to get results for you. But then this book offers more than samples, which, let's face it, might not always work for you. It helps you fly solo.

Whether you need to compose all or just a part of your letter yourself, this book can help in four ways:

1. It provides templates, or recommended strategies, for approaching different types of letters. Whatever your situation, the corresponding template can help you decide how to begin, develop, and end a truly effective letter.
2. Marginal comments help demonstrate how the sample letters have been written using these templates.
3. Checklists help you make sure you've covered aspects critical to succeeding with each type of letter.

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4. Extensive step-by-step guidelines help you quickly decide—before you begin writing—what you want your letter to accomplish and what the recipient will most want to read.

Please note that the names (including names of government officials), addresses, zip codes, phone numbers, and scenarios used in the sample letters are fictitious—except for U.S. government agency *addresses*: They're real. Also note that the samples appear in the format appropriate when you're not using stationery with letterhead. If you are using stationery with letterhead, omit the heading (your name and address) when the sample has one.

Whether you decide to use pieces of the sample letters provided in this book or start from scratch, the advice that follows can help you get the most out of the time you spend writing a letter.

Why Bother to Write a Letter?

Who writes letters anymore? Most of us, when we need to voice a complaint, express appreciation, or handle almost any personal business matter, simply pick up the phone. Typically placing a call takes less time and effort than sitting down to compose a letter. Electronic mail, too, is fast becoming a common means for communicating quickly with product manufacturers, government agencies, and organizations of all sorts.

Social situations, too, simply call for a telephone call or, at most, a card, right? After all, hardly a social situation exists for which we can't find a card these days at the neighborhood card shop.

The disadvantages of using the phone or e-mail

For starters, handling personal business by phone doesn't always work.

- ✍ Often one call becomes several, as you're passed from one person (or worse, voice mail message) to the next, stating your need or complaint multiple times. Then you wait for a return call from that one person who is the only one allowed to help you (and she's out of the office....
- ✍ In some situations and with some organizations (regardless of the situation) no number of phone calls will result in the action you need. Government entities, for instance, often require a form or letter to document the issue at hand prior to their taking any action.
- ✍ A call can be impractical and inconvenient when the business at hand is important, but not urgent. Again, some forms of government business come to mind.

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- ✍ A call can be troublesome when the information is complicated and likely to be misunderstood, lost, or miscommunicated. When a complicated situation fails to be resolved with a first or second phone call, you're typically better off putting pen to paper.
- ✍ Past experience with an organization may tell you that only a formal letter, less easily ignored than a phone call, will result in action. And a letter is typically the only way to make your appeal to anyone even close to the CEO.
- ✍ A call can be intrusive for a stressed recipient, for instance, someone struggling with a business deadline.
- ✍ A call can be intrusive or inappropriate when someone is grieving the loss of a loved one or is dealing with personal tragedy.
- ✍ A call may not be best when you are angry or suspect a recipient might respond with defensiveness (as with a complaint) or embarrassment (as with a compliment or congratulations).

And neither a phone call, e-mail message, or even a card is formal or lasting enough for expressing some messages, whether of a business or social nature.

- ✍ A call or e-mail message expresses too casual a message when your purpose is formal or your intent deeply heartfelt. Only a letter or note may really work for an invitation to a charity event you wish to promote, a thank you for an overnight stay, or an expression of sympathy when someone dear to you has died. A card can sometimes express the sentiment you're looking for, but often only something more elaborate—a letter—will do.
- ✍ Neither a call nor e-mail provides the formal documentation you or your reader may want for future reference: order or confirmation numbers; details on a complaint or service request; a reference or formal introduction to a colleague; a job application cover letter; a job acceptance, rejection, or resignation; successive attempts to collect money or obtain compensation.

Sometimes composing a good letter is both the most effective and the most expedient way to express a message or get something done. What's more, a well-crafted letter can allow you to express yourself more carefully and clearly than you're probably able to on the fly (whether on the phone, in a card, or by e-mail). And letters, without equal, make a strong impression: Your words—when put in letter form—carry more weight than those conveyed either by phone, card, or computer.

The benefits of a well-written letter

So once you've decided to write a letter, **take the time to write it well.** Poorly written letters are often guilty of putting off their readers:

- ✍ Letters of complaint tend to ramble through a long chronology of events and often bury or fail to even express the writer's point: the action wanted of the reader!
- ✍ Letters on emotionally-charged topics often wallow in emotion and fail to clearly express their point.
- ✍ Letters written with the slightest hint of anger or sarcasm—even when the writers feel fully justified in their positions—divert attention from the real issue, confuse the facts of a situation with feelings and personal attacks, make cooperation less likely, and can jeopardize long-standing relationships.
- ✍ Letters saying no often offend readers by containing one-sided, excuse-ridden, or politely elusive explanations.

Well-written letters, on the other hand, can go a long way to build relationships, assist others in solving problems, ease tense situations, clarify or verify important information, and motivate others to act!

Tips for Drafting a Letter Quickly!

Writing a good letter takes thought. But it needn't be difficult or take a lot of time. Whether you decide to use pieces of the sample letters I've provided in this book or to start your letter from scratch, you'll want to start the letter in a way to increase your likelihood of success.

British political scientist Graham Wallas (1858-1932) once said, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" Through writing about a subject, we become clear about what we think about that subject.

So before you draft the first word of your letter—or begin to identify a suitable sample letter—start by doing some advanced thinking on paper.

If you don't, the sample letter you pick on which to model your letter may miss your mark. Also, if you're drafting from scratch, your draft will probably be more difficult to write and, chances are, it will drag your reader through your thought process until your point, or purpose for writing in the first place, evolves on paper. And there's no surer way to make someone crazy—or at least impatient with what you have to say.

Think about the last piece of junk mail that you actually read that took forever to get to the point. If you did choose to continue reading (perhaps you had nothing better to do at the moment), did you feel your time was being respected? Were you motivated to cooperate or buy the product? Or did you feel impatient, frustrated, even insulted?

Say you're thinking of writing a complaint letter. Your first impulse may be to start it by spinning out your sad story, event by event. But what's your real goal here? If you're like most people, you want the wrong made right. Perhaps you even want an apology. That's where your letter should start: asking for what you want. After all, this is what you most need to communicate (this is typically the point behind this type of letter), and this is what the

reader of your letter first wants to know! Think about it: If you were in his or her place, would you really want to blindly start reading a chronological listing of sad events? You'd want to first know why this person was writing to you; then perhaps you'd be ready for the details.

To summarize: Both you and the recipient of your letter need to get the letter's point, its bottom-line message, up front. And you can get to your point quickly in a letter only after you've thought through what your point is!

Getting started—especially if you don't like to write!

Doing some advanced thinking on paper can also help make the writing go more easily and quickly, even if you don't like to write!

Some people have no difficulty throwing together a basic letter, especially when the letter's objective is straightforward, noncontroversial, and easy to get on paper quickly. You want to return a defective product, get information about a charity you're interested in, document stop-payment on a bank check. These letters take little time or effort for many people who draft them quickly using an easy, free-flowing process.

But other letters are tougher to write. Maybe you need to write that complaint letter about receiving poor service from a favorite store, disappoint a good friend by declining an offer, or resign your position at work. These letters are harder to write and take more thought to write well. Many people struggle with these types of letters.

And some people find the entire process of writing a letter, any letter, nothing short of painful. If you ever find writing difficult, unpleasant, or just too time-consuming, consider for a moment *how you're approaching it*.

How are you going to write a letter? Is your approach to simply start with the first line, first word, and struggle along until it's done, in basically one draft? Are you thinking you want that draft to be as close to finished as possible so rewriting won't take up even more time and energy? Many people spend entirely too much time struggling to write a perfect first draft (an impossible task!). Writing a solid, well-thought-out letter—especially when the subject's a tough one—involves several advanced-thinking steps, none of which should take much time.

Or maybe your approach is to scan a book like this for the perfect sample after which to model your letter. Certainly using a sample may save you some writing time—if you pick the best sample. But, again, do some advanced thinking first. You'll be clearer about where you want the letter to go, and you'll pick the best-suited model.

Your goal here is to change *the way you begin to write* to save yourself time *and* produce better letters. One trick comes in spending more time doing this advanced thinking on paper and less time—yes, less time—drafting.