

**The McGraw-Hill**  
**HANDBOOK OF**  
**BUSINESS LETTERS**

**Roy W. Poe**

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# **HANDBOOK OF BUSINESS LETTERS**

**Roy W. Poe**

**McGraw-Hill Book Company**

**New York St. Louis San Francisco Auckland  
Bogotá Hamburg Johannesburg London Madrid  
Mexico Montreal New Delhi Panama Paris  
São Paulo Singapore Sydney Tokyo Toronto**

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Poe, Roy W., date.

The McGraw-Hill handbook of business letters.

Includes index.

1. Commercial correspondence—Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Title. II. Title: Handbook of business letters.

HF5726.P55 1983

808'.066651021

82-18017

ISBN 0-07-050367-2

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1234567890 HAL/HAL 89876543

ISBN 0-07-050367-2

The editors for this book were William A. Sabin and Christine Ulwick, the design supervisor was Mark E. Safran, the designer was Dennis Sharkey, and the production supervisor was Thomas G. Kowalczyk. It was set in ITC Bookman Light by University Graphics, Inc.

Printed and bound by Halliday Lithograph.

Layout by Small Kaps Associates, Inc.

# ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

Nearly everyone with writing responsibilities occasionally faces a problem of composing “just the right letter” in a situation that he or she has not met up with before. This statement can be verified by librarians, bookstore proprietors, communication specialists, and others who frequently receive requests for a certain model that will guide the writer in framing the appropriate letter.

Over the years I have conducted letter-writing clinics in various companies and at several universities for front-line supervisors, department managers, business owners, and others with a wide variety of managerial responsibilities. Some came with virtually no letter-writing experience; others were veteran communicators who felt the need for refresher training. Because such programs rarely extended beyond 24 classroom hours, I was forced to concentrate on basic principles and hope that the students could apply them successfully to any problem they faced on the job. And, generally speaking, they could. Yet I learned that a surprising number of situations arose when these people were really stuck; they needed to see an actual model—not necessarily to copy but to trigger ideas.

That, in short, is the reason why this handbook was written. In it you’ll find the answer to the question, How do I go about writing a letter to:

- “Congratulate” an individual who is retiring from the company involuntarily because of age or health?
- Respond to an irate and thoroughly abusive critic of my company’s policy or stance on a particular issue (employment, service, prices, advertising, etc.)?

- Explain to good customers that when returned merchandise is unsalable, it cannot be accepted for credit?
- Express grave concern to a usually reliable supplier who botched the same order four times in a row?
- Answer a request for information about a former employee who was fired for incompetence?
- Resign from a position because a promise of promotion was not kept?
- Request special favors from people who have little, if anything, to gain by granting them?
- Warn a valuable employee of termination because of indiscretions in dealing with company secrets?
- Deny a request for information that the company considers confidential?
- Prepare an impressive job résumé and an accompanying application letter when I need or want to change jobs?

And so on. All these situations—plus more than 150 others covered in this handbook—were selected because they are the ones you are most likely to encounter, no matter where you work or what you do.

## **WHY THIS HANDBOOK?**

Letter-writing handbooks have been around for a very long time, so the idea is not new. Most of those in paperback seem to be written for people outside the business arena and concentrate heavily on “bread-and-butter” notes and other social communications. (Some even have models of love letters.) Those published for business people deal almost exclusively with sales and promotion letters, with a hefty swipe at collection letters. Besides being highly specialized, the handbooks that I know about are too antiquated in language, style, and tone to be really useful to today’s business letter writer.

In preparing this handbook, I chose those letter-writing situations that are commonly faced by all people in business, independent of their job title or job function. I deliberately avoided highly specialized situations. In the first place, it would be impossible in one volume to thoroughly cover the job-specific situations that would be encountered by a controller, personnel or PR director, purchasing executive, manufacturing manager, marketing director, company attorney, credit manager, and so on. Moreover, many organizations have their own policies and manuals to guide their personnel in writing letters of a specialized nature. For example, food and beverage distributors know exactly what to say to people who write to them complaining about impurities found in their products;

utility companies have form letters to answer the thousands who criticize them for poor service and exorbitant rates; airlines have developed models for dealing with complaints from passengers whose luggage has been irretrievably lost or who choked from cigarette smoke during a trip; and so on. Such communications are handled by highly trained personnel (often with the aid of the company attorney). Therefore, I chose only those models that will be of the greatest help to the greatest number.

#### **FOUR UNIQUE FEATURES**

Four features of *The McGraw-Hill Handbook of Business Letters* make it a unique reference:

1. A wide variety of letter-writing situations are covered—from asking for special favors to saying no with the least possible offense to terminating an employee by mail.
2. The situation that precedes each model tells the reader why the letter is written and what the writer hopes to achieve in composing it.
3. The analysis that runs alongside each communication explains its organization, style, tone, and underlying psychology.
4. The number and title of each communication make it easy to locate the precise model that you're looking for.

Although this is primarily a reference book, I strongly encourage you to give careful attention at the outset to the general discussions—all of Part One and the kick-off material for each of the remaining parts and sections. It is here that the basic principles of good letter writing are emphasized. These principles will provide you with a solid foundation for communicating effectively and help you create your own letters with greater confidence and independence.

#### **A FINAL WORD**

No two people will or should approach a letter situation in the same way. The letter that is actually written will depend on who the writer is, who the reader is and what relationship he or she has to the writer, what the problem (if any) is, and what the writer expects to accomplish. There are as many different ways of writing a good letter as there are letter-writing problems. My principal objective in this handbook is to stimulate your thinking and, based on the models given, help you to write letters that accomplish what you want to accomplish.

Roy W. Poe

# CONTENTS

## **About This Handbook      xiii**

### **PART 1 THE LETTER WRITER'S CRAFT**

#### **Section 1   What a Good Business Letter Is— and Is Not      2**

#### **Section 2   Don't Waste Words      7**

#### **Section 3   Keep the Language Lively and Simple      13**

#### **Section 4   Personalize Your Letters      20**

#### **Section 5   Emphasize the Positive      28**

#### **Section 6   Use Correct Letter Form      35**

### **PART 2 REQUEST LETTERS**

#### **Section 7   Sales-Opportunity Request Letters      48**

##### **REQUESTS TRIGGERED BY ADVERTISING**

- 7-1   Asking for Free Materials      49
- 7-2   Taking Advantage of a Trial Offer      50
- 7-3   Requesting the Name of a Dealer      51
- 7-4   Requesting More Detailed Information About an  
Advertised Product      52
- 7-5   Requesting Information About Availability of a  
Product      53

- 7-6 Requesting Information About Uses of an Advertised Product 54

## **REQUESTS FOR SALES INFORMATION**

- 7-7 Inquiring About Training Materials 55  
 7-8 Inquiring About Performance Awards 56  
 7-9 Requesting Information About Conference Accommodations 57  
 7-10 Inquiring About Discounts on Quantity Orders 58  
 7-11 Asking About Discounts and for Other Information 58

## **Section 8 Special-Request Letters 60**

### **REQUESTS FOR APPOINTMENTS**

- 8-1 Requesting Information—For Possible Mutual Benefit 61  
 8-2 Requesting Advice and Product Inspection—For Definite Mutual Benefit 62  
 8-3 Requesting Information and a Special Favor—For Requester's Benefit 63

### **REQUESTING FAVORS**

- 8-4 Requesting Special Assistance by Letter 64  
 8-5 Requesting Special Assistance by Questionnaire 65

### **REQUESTS FOR SPEAKERS**

- 8-6 Requesting a Professional Speaker 69  
 8-7 Requesting a Speaker—No Funds Available 70  
 8-8 Inviting a Panel Participant—Payment Offered 71

### **REQUESTS TO REPRODUCE MATERIALS**

- 8-9 Requesting Magazine Reprints or Permission to Reproduce 73  
 8-10 Asking for Free Reproduction Privileges of a Book Illustration 74  
 8-11 Requesting Reproduction Privileges for Commercial Use 75  
 8-12 Requesting Permission to Reproduce Noncopyrighted Materials 76

## **PART 3 TRANSMITTAL AND CONFIRMATION LETTERS**

## **Section 9 Transmitting Payment 78**

- 9-1 Transmitting Payment on Account 79  
 9-2 Transmitting Payment—Discrepancy Explained 80  
 9-3 Transmitting Payment to an Outstanding Speaker 80  
 9-4 Transmitting Payment to a Disappointing Speaker 81



**PART 4  
SALES  
COMMUNICATIONS**

**Section 10 Transmitting Other  
Materials 82**

- 10-1 Transmitting a Contract 82
- 10-2 Transmitting a Draft for Approval 83
- 10-3 Transmitting Materials Separately 84
- 10-4 Transmitting Results of a Questionnaire Study 85
- 10-5 Transmitting Printer's Proofs 86

**Section 11 Confirmation Letters 87**

- 11-1 Confirming a Supplier's Oral Instructions 88
- 11-2 Confirming Prices and Quantity Discounts 89
- 11-3 Confirming Arrangements for a Speaker 90
- 11-4 Confirming an Appointment 91
- 11-5 Confirming a Telephone Conversation 92
- 11-6 Confirming a Telegram 93

**Section 12 Responding to Sales-Opportunity  
Request Letters 96**

- 12-1 Short Printed Response for a Mass Mailing 98
- 12-2 Printed Letter With a Personal Note 99
- 12-3 Supplying the Name of a Dealer 100
- 12-4 Supplying More Detailed Information About an  
Advertised Product 101
- 12-5 Supplying Information About Availability of a  
Product 102
- 12-6 Supplying Information About Uses of an Advertised  
Product 103
- 12-7 Responding to a Product Inquiry—Training  
Materials 104
- 12-8 Responding to a Product Inquiry—Performance  
Awards 105
- 12-9 Responding to an Inquiry About Conference  
Accommodations 106
- 12-10 Responding to an Inquiry About Quantity  
Discounts 107

**Section 13 Sales Letters 108**

- 13-1 Selling a Product 113
- 13-2 Selling a Subscription to a National Publication 115
- 13-3 Selling an Educational Course 118

**Section 14 Sales, Service, and Promotion  
Communications 120**

- 14-1 Promoting a Special Sale 120
- 14-2 Acknowledging a First Order 122

14-3	Introducing a New Sales Representative	123
14-4	Invitation to an Open House	124
14-5	Formalized Invitation to a Special Exhibit	125
14-6	Announcing New Products and Services	126
14-7	Announcing a New Location	127
14-8	Follow-Up After Services Have Been Rendered	128
14-9	Follow-Up on a Previous Order	129
14-10	Follow-Up Letter to an Exhibit Visitor	130
14-11	Welcoming a Newcomer to the Community	131
14-12	Winning Back an Inactive Customer	132

## **PART 5 LETTERS TO CUSTOMERS**

### **Section 15 Letters of Appreciation and Congratulation 135**

15-1	Thanking a Customer for Courtesies to a Sales Representative	136
15-2	Thanking a Customer for Payment and for an Order	137
15-3	Expressing Appreciation for Past Support	138
15-4	Congratulating a Customer on a Professional Achievement	139
15-5	Thanking a Customer for a Referral	140

### **Section 16 Apologizing for Delays and Errors 141**

16-1	Delayed Shipment	142
16-2	Unexpectedly Out of Stock	143
16-3	Wrong Merchandise Shipped	144
16-4	Wrong Size Shipped Twice	145
16-5	Error in an Invoice	146

### **Section 17 Handling Misunderstandings With Customers 147**

17-1	Wrong Merchandise Shipped—Customer Primarily to Blame	148
17-2	Customer Takes Unearned Discount	149
17-3	Unauthorized Return of Merchandise	150
17-4	Damaged Stock Returned for Credit	151
17-5	Unauthorized Use of Service Personnel	152
17-6	Damaged Shipment—Carrier to Blame	153
17-7	Damaged Shipment—Customer to Blame	154
17-8	Suggesting a Substitute	155

---

**PART 6  
CREDIT AND  
COLLECTION  
LETTERS**

**Section 18 Credit Letters 158**

- 18-1 Requesting Commercial Credit 160
- 18-2 Requesting Information From a Commercial Credit Applicant 161
- 18-3 Requesting Information From References Supplied 162
- 18-4 Accepting an Applicant for Commercial Credit 163
- 18-5 Turning Down a Consumer Credit Applicant 164
- 18-6 Turning Down a Commercial Credit Applicant 165

**Section 19 Collection Letters 166**

- 19-1 First Reminder After Monthly Statement 167
- 19-2 Second Reminder 168
- 19-3 Third Reminder 168
- 19-4 Fourth Reminder—Telephone Call 169
- 19-5 Fifth Reminder—Telegram 169
- 19-6 Sixth Reminder—First Personal Letter 170
- 19-7 Seventh Reminder—The Final Letter 171

**PART 7  
LETTERS TO  
SUPPLIERS**

**Section 20 Placing Orders By Letter 174**

- 20-1 Placing a Cash Order 175
- 20-2 Placing a COD Order 176
- 20-3 Placing a Credit Card Order 177

**Section 21 Problem Letters to Suppliers 178**

- 21-1 Poor Service on a Special Order 179
- 21-2 Poor Performance on a Service Contract 180
- 21-3 Receipt of an Unacceptable Substitute 182
- 21-4 Receipt of Unsatisfactory Merchandise 183
- 21-5 Suspected Error in an Invoice 184
- 21-6 Complaint About a Supplier's Sales Representative 185

**Section 22 Appreciation Letters to Suppliers 186**

- 22-1 Praising a Supplier's Sales Representative 187
- 22-2 Thanking a Supplier for Service and Support 188

**PART 8  
PUBLIC RELATIONS  
AND PERSONNEL  
LETTERS**

**Section 23 General Public Relations  
Letters 191**

- 23-1 Handling a Special Request 192
- 23-2 Refusing a Request to Buy Advertising 193
- 23-3 Acknowledging a Request for a Donation 194
- 23-4 Turning Down a Request for a Donation 195
- 23-5 Responding to a Friendly Critic 196
- 23-6 Responding to an Outraged Critic 197
- 23-7 Turning Down a Request for Confidential  
Information 198

**Section 24 Personnel Letters 199**

- 24-1 Responding to a Qualified Applicant—No Position  
Available 200
- 24-2 Responding to a Qualified Applicant—Position  
Available 201
- 24-3 Writing an Applicant Who Failed to Qualify 202
- 24-4 Responding to a Partially Qualified Applicant 203
- 24-5 Requesting Information About a Job Applicant 204
- 24-6 Offering an Executive Position to a Qualified  
Person 206
- 24-7 Announcing an Important Appointment—News  
Release 208

**PART 9  
EMPLOYEE  
RELATIONS  
LETTERS**

**Section 25 Letters of Congratulation and  
Appreciation 210**

- 25-1 Congratulating an Employee for a Job Well  
Done 211
- 25-2 Congratulating an Employee on a New Idea 212
- 25-3 Congratulating an Employee for an Outstanding  
Report 213
- 25-4 Congratulating an Employee on an Anniversary 214
- 25-5 Congratulating a New Member of the Twenty-Five-Year  
Club 215
- 25-6 Congratulating an Employee for Community  
Recognition 216
- 25-7 Congratulating Your Boss on a Promotion 217

**Section 26 Letters on Retirement 218**

- 26-1 Congratulating an Employee on Retirement—A Happy  
Occasion 219
- 26-2 Extending Good Wishes to a Reluctant Retiree 220
- 26-3 Writing an Employee Retiring for Health  
Reasons 221

## **Section 27 Letters of Sympathy 222**

- 27-1 Death of an Immediate Supervisor and Close Friend 223
- 27-2 Death of the Spouse of a Former Colleague 224
- 27-3 Sympathy on the Event of a Serious Illness 225

## **Section 28 Letters of Recommendation 226**

- 28-1 Unqualified Letter of Recommendation for a Former Employee 227
- 28-2 Qualified Letter of Recommendation for a Former Employee 228

## **Section 29 Unfavorable Reference Letters and Warnings to Employees 229**

- 29-1 Response to a Request for Information About an Unsatisfactory Former Employee 230
- 29-2 Warning Letter to an Employee 231
- 29-3 Terminating an Employee by Letter 232

## **PART 10 JOB-GETTING LETTERS AND OTHER EMPLOYMENT COMMUNICATIONS**

### **Section 30 Job-Getting Communications 234**

#### **THE RÉSUMÉ**

- 30-1 Job Résumé—Middle Management Position 240
- 30-2 Job Résumé—Change of Career 242
- 30-3 Job Résumé—High-Level Position 244
- 30-4 Job Résumé—Little Related Job Experience 246

#### **THE APPLICATION LETTER**

- 30-5 Application Letter for Job Résumé 30-1, Page 240 249
- 30-6 Application Letter for Job Résumé 30-2, Page 242 250
- 30-7 Application Letter for Job Résumé 30-3, Page 244 251
- 30-8 Application Letter for Job Résumé 30-4, Page 246 252

### **Section 31 Other Employment Communications 253**

#### **LETTERS PERTAINING TO REFERENCES**

- 31-1 Requesting Permission to Use a Person as a Reference 254
- 31-2 Thanking a Reference 255

## **FOLLOW-UP LETTERS**

- 31-3 Follow-Up for Reason of Elapsed Time 256
- 31-4 Follow-Up to Present Additional Information 257

## **ACCEPTING AND REFUSING JOB OFFERS**

- 31-5 Accepting a Job Offer 258
- 31-6 Rejecting a Job Offer—Better Opportunity 259
- 31-7 Rejecting a Job Offer—No Interest in the Position 260

## **LETTERS OF RESIGNATION**

- 31-8 Letter of Resignation—Dislike for Travel 261
- 31-9 Letter of Resignation—No Opportunity for Growth 262
- 31-10 Letter of Resignation—Bypassed for Promotion 263
- 31-11 Letter of Resignation—Better Job Offer 264
- 31-12 Letter of Resignation—Personal Conflict 265

## **PART 11 SOCIAL CORRESPONDENCE**

### **Section 32 Formal Invitations and Responses 268**

- 32-1 Formal Invitation to Honor a New President 269
- 32-2 Formal Invitation to an Annual Banquet 270
- 32-3 Accepting a Formal Invitation 271
- 32-4 Accepting a Formal Invitation With a Qualification 272
- 32-5 Expressing Regrets to a Formal Invitation 273

### **Section 33 Informal Invitations and Responses 274**

- 33-1 Informal Invitation to Dinner 275
- 33-2 Accepting an Informal Invitation 276
- 33-3 Expressing Regrets to an Informal Invitation 277

### **Section 34 “Bread and Butter” Letters 278**

- 34-1 Expressing Thanks for a Personal Favor 279
- 34-2 Expressing Thanks for Generous Hospitality 280

### **Index 281**

# PART 1

## THE LETTER- WRITER'S CRAFT

Over the years, a lot of fuss has been made over the high cost of business letters. And with justification. When you think about such elements as stationery and postage, the writer's time, the secretary's time, and overhead expenses—the cost of a single letter can boggle the mind. Each time a new study is made by cost-conscious executives, there's usually a mad scramble to trim this expense. It seems impossible that an average letter might cost \$5, \$10, or even \$15 to put in the mail, so when one of these figures is arrived at, out goes the pronouncement: Write fewer letters! Write shorter letters! Use form letters more often! And so on.

We are frank to admit that letter-writing costs are much too high in many companies. A few people do write too many letters. Many, many individuals write letters that are a good deal longer than they need to be. And form letters, in some instances, can save money without tarnishing the organization's image.

But let's be realistic. The dollars *spent* to put a letter in the mail can be inconsequential when compared to the dollars *lost* by writing a bad letter (or no letter at all). A terse, quickly tossed-off message to a highly valued customer may delight the cost accountant with its economy, but could result in a diminution or total loss of that customer's business. Thus it could be an incredibly expensive "inexpensive" letter.

Letters are not merely mediums of communication. They are effective substitutes for face-to-face visits, making and keeping friends, attracting and holding customers, and building a favorable image for your company.

In this part, we offer several suggestions on how you can make your letters do all these things, with emphasis on triggering greater profits by writing effective messages.

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# SECTION 1

## WHAT A GOOD BUSINESS LETTER IS—AND IS NOT

If you have ever taken a course in business letter writing, chances are you learned that a good letter is brief, friendly, conversational, tactful, unfailingly courteous, clear, and interesting. You were probably also told that every letter you write is a sales letter; that is, you're always selling something—a product, a service, a company image, yourself, or simply an idea. And you were cautioned to handle responses to all communications promptly, meaning within a day or two.

It's hard to quarrel with these rules because most of them make good sense for most letters. But watch that phrase, *for most letters*.

It's easy to make lists of rules for doing things, and anybody can do it. Rules for writing good letters are no exception. Many large companies publish manuals for letter writers that are essentially rulebooks. Unfortunately, the rules supplied don't always work. The reason is that they are usually established to fit ideal conditions, and unfortunately communication situations are not always ideal. If you're answering an inquiry from a potential customer who is genuinely interested in your company's products, you can simply grab your list of rules and you're off and running. Your letter is friendly, tactful, personal, courteous, sales-structured, and the rest. But what if you're a credit manager and you have to write a fifth letter to a dealer who appears to have no intention of paying the \$2500 that is now sixteen months past due? What happens to your warmth, friendliness, tact, courtesy, and so on? Here you can close your rule book. Nothing in it is going to work; you've used up all the "good" rules in the first four letters. Now you're going to have to write an "or-else" letter that will sound about as friendly as a wounded grizzly.

One more example why rules don't work. You've been told since you were 3 years old that you never cross the street against a red light. That seems like a good, safe rule for everyone. But now you're a lot older. You are in a big city trying desperately to get a cab to take you to an important meeting. It's

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pouring rain. Finally, the driver of an empty taxi across the street sees you, but notes that you have a red light and is about to move on. We won't say what you would do, but we're willing to bet that you will glance quickly at the traffic picture, and if it's okay you'll sprint. Goodbye rules!

## **WHAT IS A GOOD LETTER?**

Maybe you think we've started off this discussion negatively, talking about the unpleasant side of letter writing. Certainly we don't want to give the impression that letter writers are Simon Legrees at heart. But we're just as anxious that you don't get the impression that good letters are always tidings of great joy. Many excellent letters are not brief or friendly or interesting or salesy or even courteous. Letters are simply human contacts on paper. You know that, in your daily dealings with people, there are sometimes strong differences of opinion, that some individuals are cranky and unreasonable, that tempers flare when stupid mistakes generate agonizing crises. The true utopia is not likely to be found in any organization where there are pressures for performance, profits, or productivity. So why should it exist *between* organizations?

On the other hand, most employees are intelligent enough to know that it's a lot more fun to work in a place where there is harmony and an atmosphere of good cheer, that surliness and bickering affect not only attitudes, but productivity. So, thank goodness, most workers bring their "company manners" (learned at home) to the workplace.

Thus it is with business letters. Those who write them should display their "company" behavior, striving very hard to make or keep friends, generate goodwill, and enhance sales opportunities.

Maybe now we're ready for an informal definition of a good business letter. *A good business letter is one that obtains the results the writer hoped for.* To make this definition work, we have to assume that the writer wants what is best for (1) the organization he or she works for and (2) the individual to whom the letter is addressed.

## **READER-WRITER RELATIONSHIPS**

The definition we've just given you sounds simple and workable. But don't be misled; a good letter can be very difficult to write. One reason is that people are so different.

Let's say you were several days late getting a contract in the mail (it was accidentally filed instead of mailed), and you wrote something like this to John Doe in response to his inquiry about the contract: