



LETTER WRITING

for students
of English

OXFORD

L · A · HILL

LETTER WRITING

L. A. HILL

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INTRODUCTION

Overseas students of English are often puzzled about how to write a letter in an acceptable form in English. Even if they have already learnt a lot of English, they are uncertain about forms of address, salutations at the end of a letter, the punctuation of the address, the sort of topics to mention in a letter, and the way to express such things as condolences. This book attempts to give such students simple guidance on these matters, without going into all the possible alternatives. Chapter I deals with the layout of letters; Chapter II gives useful sentences on a variety of topics suited to the writing of private letters; Chapter III gives general advice on the writing of business letters; Chapter IV gives useful sentences on a variety of topics connected with business correspondence; and Chapter V gives suggestions for telegrams. Obviously, Chapters II and IV cannot cover all the possible sentences a student might want. But by selecting sentences dealing with the topics he wants, and then modifying these sentences, he will be able to convey what he has to say in normal, idiomatic English. For example, if he wants to write to Mr Johnson to condole with him on the death of his sister, he will find a sentence dealing with the death of a father, but not with that of a sister. It will, however, be a simple matter for him to substitute 'sister' for 'father' in the sentence given and then to copy it into his own letter.

INTRODUCTION

A few words about style. Flowery letters full of compliments are out of fashion in English-speaking countries these days. We do not thank an acquaintance a million times and express to him our undying gratitude because he has asked us to lunch. We just write: 'Thank you very much for the enjoyable lunch'.

As for business letters, avoid jargon such as, 'Your esteemed communication of the 15th ultimo is to hand'. Such stuff is quite out of date, although you still find some business firms using it. Instead write, 'Thank you for your letter of the 15th June'; or, 'I have received your letter of 15th June', or something similar *written in simple, everyday English*.

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I

LAYING OUT THE LETTER

I. BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

A letter to a fiancé(e), a husband or wife¹:

Wimborne.

15th May

John, my dearest²,

With all my love³,

Mary

¹ *Letters to brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers and other members of the family are not dealt with in this book, since they are normally written in the student's mother-tongue.*

² *Or My dearest John,/My darling John,/John, my darling,/John, my sweetheart,/My darling,/My sweetheart,; or with a woman's name (e.g. Elizabeth, my dearest,/My dearest Elizabeth, etc.).*

³ *Or With best love,/ With fondest love,/Affectionately yours,*

LAYING OUT THE LETTER

A personal letter to a friend:

	13, Morley Road, Wimborne, Dorset. 15th May, 1973
Dear John ⁴ ,	
	Best wishes. Yours sincerely, Bill

A personal letter to an acquaintance or business associate whom you know personally and well:

My dear Robinson⁵,

Best wishes.
Yours sincerely,
Bill Jones

⁴ Or My dear John,; or with a woman's name (Dear Mary,/My dear Mary,).

⁵ Or (for a married woman) Dear Mrs Robinson,; or (for an unmarried woman) Dear Miss Robinson,

PERSONAL LETTER*

A personal letter to an acquaintance or business associate whom you know personally but not very well:

Dear Robinson⁵,

Yours sincerely,

W. H. Jones⁶

An informal private letter to a person you do not know personally:

Dear Mr Robinson⁵,

Yours sincerely

W. H. Jones⁶

A formal private letter to a person you do not know personally:

Dear Sir⁷,

Yours faithfully,

W. H. Jones⁶

⁶ The name can be typed underneath the signature. If the letter is signed by a man, he should not put Mr or Esq before or after his name. A married woman should put Mrs in brackets before her typed name, and an unmarried woman should put Miss.

⁷ Or, if the letter is addressed to a lady (married or unmarried), Dear Madam,

LAYING OUT THE LETTER

A business letter to someone whom you wish to write to in a friendly manner:

Messrs Jones & Co.,
13, Morley Road,
Wimborne,
Dorset.

Ref. L/O/WHJ⁸

15th May 1973

J. H. Robinson, Esq.⁹,
21, High Street,
Hayle,
Cheshire.

Dear Mr Robinson,

Yours truly¹⁰,

W. H. Jones

⁸ See 3.1., (page 24) below.

⁹ Or, when writing to a married woman, Mrs J. H. Robinson (using her husband's initials, unless she has indicated that she wishes her own to be used); when writing to a widow, Mrs M. I. Robinson (using her own initials); when writing to an unmarried woman, Miss M. I. Robinson (using her own initials); and when writing to a boy of school age, either Master L. F. Robinson, or Lawrence Robinson.

¹⁰ Yours very truly is even more friendly.

BUSINESS LETTER

An ordinary business letter:

Dear Sir¹¹,

Yours faithfully,

W. H. Jones¹²

A very formal letter (e.g. to a Government Department):

13, Morley Road,
Wimborne,
Dorset.

15th May, 1973

Sir¹³,

The Under-Secretary of State,
The Foreign Office,
Whitehall,
London, S.W.1.

I am, Sir¹³,
Your obedient servant,
W. H. Jones⁶

There are, of course, other ways of doing these things, but the above are safe ways to follow, and it would introduce unnecessary complications if we gave more.

Those who have to write to Lords, Mayors, Privy Councillors and other such dignitaries should consult Black's

¹¹ Or Dear Madam,/Dear Sirs,/Dear Mesdames, (the last when writing to more than one lady).

¹² Or for Messrs Jones & Co.—W. H. Jones

¹³ Or Gentlemen,/Madam,

LAYING OUT THE LETTER

Titles and Forms of Address or some other such work, as the average Englishman and Englishwoman has to do, to find the correct forms of address.

Note that in private letters it is not usual to put the address of the person one is writing to at the top or bottom of the letter. Business letters usually have this address at the top left of the letter, under the reference number, though it may appear at the bottom. Government Departments and Universities, on the contrary, have the practice of putting the receiver's address at the bottom left.

If you want to put your telephone number on your letter, put it under your address and above the date, like this:

<p>13 Morley Road, Wimborne, Dorset. Tel. 54329 15th May, 1973</p>
--

Carefully note the punctuation in the above beginnings and endings. Do not abbreviate such things as Street, Road and Square. Put commas, full-stops and capitals where you see them in the above letters.

2. ENVELOPES

In Britain, we put the name of the person we are writing to first; then the number of his house, followed by the name of the road, on the same line; then the village or town in which he lives; then the county; and lastly the country, if the letter is an international one.

ENVELOPES

If I was writing to Mr W. H. Jones from India, for example, I would write on the envelope:

W. H. Jones, Esq.,
13 Morley Road,
Wimborne,
Dorset,
ENGLAND.

If I was writing from inside England, I would put:

W. H. Jones, Esq.,
13 Morley Road,
WIMBORNE,
Dorset.

Esq. is short for Esquire, an old title which has now become a polite form of address. You can very well use Mr instead, if you do not know the man's initials, but don't use both at the same time, and remember that Mr goes before the name, whereas Esq. goes after it. Do not use Mr or Esq. when you are using some other title, such as Dr or Professor.

For ways to address women and children, see Note 9, (page 4).

There are lots of orders, decorations, medals and societies in Britain which have initials that can be placed after a person's name (examples are V.C., K.C.M.G., D.S.O., M.M. and F.R.S.). Any good dictionary will give such abbreviations with their meanings. They should always be placed after Esq., when both are used (e.g. W. H. Jones, Esq., M.B.E.), in order of importance.

LAYING OUT THE LETTER

When writing to a husband and wife, address the envelope as follows:

Mr and Mrs W. H. Jones,

Do not use Esq.

When writing to two unmarried ladies with the same name, write:

The Misses W. and F. Jones,

When the receiver's address is put at the beginning or end of the letter itself, it should be the same as the address on the envelope.

When writing to a firm or Government Department, copy its address carefully from its own stationery, from a reference book or from an advertisement.

If you want a letter to go by air mail, write BY AIR MAIL in the top left-hand corner of the envelope, or stick on one of the blue labels marked BY AIR MAIL provided by the post office.

For printed material to be sent by surface mail, put PRINTED PAPERS in the top left-hand corner of the envelope.

If you want your letter to be sent on to the person you are writing to (because you do not know his new address), mark the envelope PLEASE FORWARD in the top left-hand corner of the envelope.

If you are sending photographs in your letter and you do not want them to be damaged, put PHOTOGRAPHS: PLEASE DO NOT BEND in the top left-hand corner of the envelope.

2

PERSONAL LETTERS

I. HEALTH

This is a subject that is often referred to in private letters. Here are some useful remarks about it that can be put into a letter:

About the health of the person addressed: How are you? • How is your cold? • I hope you have got over your cold • I hope you are well • I hope you are quite well again now • I hope you are feeling better • I hope you are better soon • I hope you get better very soon • I wish you a speedy recovery.

About the health of others whom the person addressed knows about: How is your mother? • How is your father now? • Is John any better? • I hope Mary has got over her cold • I hope your wife is quite well • I hope the children are both well • I hope your brother is feeling better now • I hope your sister gets better very soon • It must be a great worry for you having Jim in hospital • I wish your brother a speedy recovery.

About the health of the writer: I am fine • I am feeling fine • I am well • I am quite well • I have a bit of a cold • I have a cold • I have a bad cold • I am feeling a bit better now • I am feeling better • I am feeling a lot better • I am feeling quite well again now • I have got over my cold completely • I have a sprained ankle • I had to go and see the doctor today about my tonsils • I shall have to go into hospital for an operation soon • I am going into hospital

PERSONAL LETTERS*

next Thursday • I am in hospital with pneumonia, but it is nothing serious • I have just come out of hospital.

About the health of others whom the writer knows about:

I am glad to say that the family are all well • The children are fine • My wife has a bit of a cold, unfortunately • John has a cold • My father has a bad cold • Mary is feeling a bit better now • Mother is feeling better • Mother is feeling a lot better • My children are feeling quite well again now • Julius has got over his fever completely now • Fred has a broken collar-bone • My wife had to go and see the doctor yesterday about her asthma • Aunt Anne will have to go into hospital for an operation soon • Uncle George is in hospital with lumbago • My wife has just come out of hospital.

2. THE WEATHER

This is a frequent subject of comment in Britain, because the weather is so irregular there.

Telling about the weather: We are having lovely weather • We are having plenty of sun this month • We are having a heat-wave • It is unusually warm for this time of the year • We have had a lovely summer • We are having a lovely autumn • We have been having a lot of rain recently • We haven't had much sunshine during the past few days • It has been cloudy for several days • We are having a lot of rain and dark skies • It is cold outside • We are having a lot of wind • We had frost last night • We have had some snow recently • We have had a terrible summer this year • It has been unusually cold this month • We have had floods in some parts of this area.

Asking about the weather: What sort of weather are you