

# The Language of English Business Letters

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A.B. Kench

Commercial Correspondence for  
Foreign Students of English



Macmillan Education

INTRODUCTION

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# INTRODUCTION

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Apart from the subject-matter, the main difference between business letters and personal letters lies in the language and style. The formal language of the business letter, with its preciseness, propriety, courtesy and restraint, would be as out of place when writing to one's cousin as the affectionate, familiar, colloquial language of the personal letter would be out of place when writing to the sales manager of the Imperial Metal Company.

The stereotyped style of the business letter is not difficult to acquire and comes automatically after a little practice. The language, however, takes rather longer, though here again it is only a question of practice. This book is designed to help the student write this formal English with assurance and fluency. Part 1 is devoted to the structures, phrases and expressions with which the student should be thoroughly conversant before attempting to write letters. They appear in the sample letters, are explained in the accompanying notes and are included in practice exercises. When Part 1 has been assimilated, the student may go on to Part 2 and start writing letters. As he works his way through the book, he will add to and consolidate what he learnt in Part 1 and at the same time become more and more proficient in writing business letters.

A.B.K.

## Notes on writing business letters

### *CLARITY AND BREVITY*

Since a busy executive will often select the shortest and simplest letters in front of him to answer first, it is not difficult to appreciate the value of clarity and brevity in a business letter. While it is not always possible to be brief, one should at least try to be concise and to control the length of a letter. The longer and more diffuse a letter is, the longer the writer often has to wait for an answer.

### *EMPHASIS*

It might almost be said that in business correspondence one cannot emphasise enough the importance of emphasis. A substantial decline in sales is described by the manufacturer as being 'considerable' and by his agent as being 'appreciable'. The degree of emphasis becomes the degree of exaggeration or understatement. When prices are rather high, the seller may admit that they are 'quite' high while the buyer insists that they are 'too' high. The strong tone of a letter of complaint is better achieved through emphasis than through insult. The customer can express his indignation simply by beginning with an emphatic 'Not only': 'Not only did you send the wrong colour, but you sent the wrong size as well!'

### *REPETITION OF WORDS*

It is not necessary to search for synonyms to avoid having to use the same word or expression twice. Apart from the time that may be wasted, there is the added risk of ambiguity if the word found is not exactly synonymous. In a letter about paints, for example, after using the word 'colour' three or four times, the writer may decide to change it for 'shade'. Since 'one of each colour' is not the same as 'one of each shade' this could lead to confusion. Likewise it is not necessary to substitute 'kind' or 'type' for 'sort' merely because 'this sort of paint' has been written once or twice before.

## ADEQUATE REFERENCES

Much time and trouble may be saved by the use of adequate references. Apart from the writer's reference on the letter heading: AR/PW or Ref. 401/st/UN, it is advisable when possible to add the reference of the person to whom the letter is directed. It is also helpful to refer to a previous letter, to quote a date or an order number etc. Some writers habitually use the subject of their letter as a heading and underline it:

Your Order No. 231 – Lambswool Cardigans.

Adequate details add further to clarity since a reference to '18/8 stainless steel frying pans (red handles)' does not require the receiver to check orders or previous letters as he might have to on reading just 'frying pans'.

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## PART 1

Part I consists of ten short sections introducing the structures on which the student will later base his first letters. The sample letters (a) and (b) in each section should be studied in conjunction with the notes so that they are fully understood before doing the practice exercises. The exercises should be written the first time and thereafter done orally.

Each class should begin with a repetition of the exercises done during the previous class, plus one or two selected from earlier sections. These exercises are designed for quick repetition and should each be done eight or ten times before Part I is considered to be finished.

It is advisable to give frequent dictations from the sample letters. The dictations must include all the headings, including the writer's reference.

**Note:** An understanding of the technical details of the goods mentioned in the letters is not essential to the understanding of the letters themselves.

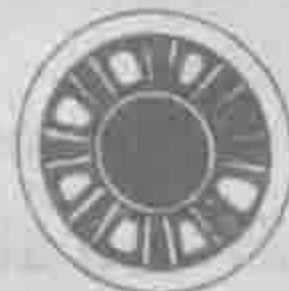
ONE

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(a) An enquiry

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Clarke & Sims Ltd  
High Street  
Ellingham  
Suffolk  
Telephone Ellingham 6708



FH/MC

17th January, 19..

The Sales Manager,  
Motorheat Ltd,  
Walker Road,  
Coventry.

Dear Sir,

We are interested in increasing our range of car heaters and should like to receive information about the various models you are at present producing.

We should be obliged if you would send us your latest catalogue and price list, together with details of the CX4 heater advertised in the current issue of the MOTORING MONTHLY.

Yours faithfully,  
CLARKE & SIMS LTD

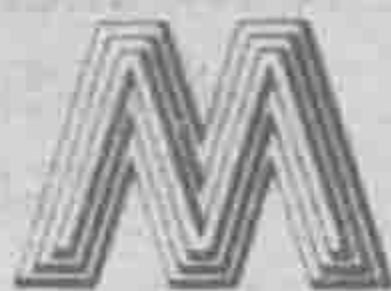
*F. Henley*

F. Henley  
Manager

(b) Reply to (a)

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Motorheat Ltd. Walker Road. Coventry. Coventry 31043



TB/EW

20th January, 19..

The Manager,  
Clarke & Sims Ltd,  
High Street,  
Ellingham,  
Suffolk.

Dear Sir,

We thank you for your letter of 17th January, asking for details and prices of our car heaters.

We have pleasure in enclosing our latest price list and catalogue, together with details of Model CX4.

Please do not hesitate to write if you require further information.

Yours faithfully,  
MOTORHEAT LTD

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Browning'. The signature is stylized with a large initial 'T' and a flourish at the end.

T. Browning  
Sales Manager

Enc.

## Notes on letters (a) and (b)

1. In each case the reference consists of the initials of the person who dictated the letter and the person who typed it:
  - (a) FH/MC stands for Frank Henley and his secretary Mary Coy.
  - (b) TB/EW stands for Thomas Browning, the writer, and Elizabeth Wimpole, the girl who typed the letter.
2. Note the position of the address of the person to whom the letter is directed.
3. Note the use of the gerund after a preposition:

We are interested in increasing . . . (a)  
We have pleasure in enclosing . . . (b)
4. Note the expression in (a):

We should be obliged if you would send us your latest catalogue.

Similarly:

We should be obliged if you would arrange for shipment.  
We should be obliged if you would sign the enclosed document.
5. Note the expression 'together with':

. . . catalogue **and** price list, together with details of the CX4 . . .  
. . . a **copy of the** contract, together with the plans for . . .
6. Note the use of the past participle:

. . . CX4 heater *advertised* in the current issue of . . . (a)  
. . . the prices *quoted* in your letter . . .  
. . . the goods *imported* before the restrictions . . .  
. . . the model *shown* on page 10 of your catalogue . . .

7. Note the use of the present participle:

We thank you for your letter of 17th January, *asking* for . . . (b)

We thank you for your letter of 3rd March, *enclosing* . . .

We thank you for your letter of 1st May, *requesting* . . .

We thank you for your letter of 15th June, *informing* . . .

8. Note the expression 'further information' in (b).

'Further information' means 'more information'. Note also:

Further details — more details

Further orders — more orders

9. Note the position of the abbreviation *Enc.* This is used when there are enclosures with the letter.

### EXERCISE 1

Rewrite the following using the past participle construction, e.g.

The prices that you quote in your letter of 2nd April are much too high.

The prices quoted in your letter of 2nd April are much too high.

1. The goods that were imported last month have already been sold.
2. All invoices that we receive after 30th June will have to be passed for payment to our head office in London.
3. Lines that we have marked with a cross are at present out of stock.
4. The patterns that we chose during our last visit did not include summer cottons.
5. The four separate deliveries that you specify in your letter will have to be invoiced separately.
6. There is no charge for packing on goods that are despatched by rail.
7. The model that is shown on the cover is the Mark IV.
8. They want to abolish the discount that is given on goods that have been reduced in price.

## EXERCISE 2

Rewrite the following using the present participle construction, e.g.

Thank you for your letter of 5th April, in which you enclose a copy . . .

Thank you for your letter of 5th April enclosing a copy . . .

1. Thank you for your letter of 10th August, in which you state your terms for special deliveries.
2. Thank you for your letter of 4th May, in which you give details of new designs for the storage depot.
3. Thank you for your enquiry of 23rd March, in which you request information about our 908 mechanical digger.
4. Thank you for your postcard of 4th September, in which you confirm the delivery date of order 322.
5. Thank you for your letter of 21st June, in which you set out your terms for the agreement.

## EXERCISE 3

Rewrite the following beginning with 'We are interested in . . .'

1. We wish to increase our range of garden tools.
2. We wish to export to countries in Africa and Asia.
3. We wish to extend our field of operations to cover the south of Europe.
4. We wish to reach agreement as soon as possible.
5. We wish to open a new branch in the north.

## EXERCISE 4

Rewrite the following beginning with 'We should be obliged if you would . . .'

1. Please forward a copy of the contract to our London agents.
2. We should like you to arrange for immediate shipment . . .
3. We should like you to send two sets of samples to our Madrid office.
4. Please sign the enclosed agreement and send it back by return.
5. Please despatch by rail the items marked in red pencil.



## EXERCISE 5

Rewrite the following beginning with 'We have pleasure in . . .'

1. We enclose herewith our new price list, together with a copy of the revised terms.
2. We are pleased to advise you that your order 376 is now ready for shipment.
3. We are pleased to confirm the date of arrival of our representative.
4. We are pleased to inform you that your terms have been accepted.
5. We enclose herewith a copy of the letter received from our agents.

## CONSTRUCTION EXERCISE 1

Combine the following pairs of sentences using the construction 'We are interested in . . . and should like to . . .'

We wish to import 20 of your 'Dorset' tractors. We want to know the best terms you can offer us.

We are interested in importing 20 of your 'Dorset' tractors and should like to know the best terms you can offer us.

1. We want to increase our range of kitchen furniture. We wish to visit your showrooms.
2. We want to export to Italy. We wish to ask you to act as our agents.
3. We wish to represent British textile firms. We want to know if you already have agents in this country.
4. We want to extend our field of operations to cover the north of Scotland. We wish to contact a well-established firm to act as our representatives.
5. We want to buy a consignment of tinned fruit at a special price. We wish to know if we could take 500 cases at 7½%.
6. We wish to participate financially and executively in a project to market Spanish leather goods in this country. We want to have your advice on the prospects of selling goods of the type shown in the enclosed catalogue.