

The background is a solid blue color. A large, light-colored key shape is positioned on the left side, extending from the top to the bottom. The key's head is a circle, and its shaft is a long, narrow rectangle. The text 'The Key to English' is written in a black, serif font across the head of the key. The text 'Letter Writing' is written in a white, serif font across the head of a smaller, dark-colored key shape located in the lower right quadrant of the image. This second key is also oriented vertically, with its head at the top and its shaft pointing downwards. The overall design is simple and graphic, using contrasting colors and shapes to highlight the text.

The Key to English

Letter Writing

ENGLISH LANGUAGE SERVICES, INC.

the key to english

Letter Writing

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PREFACE

There is great interest in letter writing among students of English in various countries, and this manual is intended to supply them with the information they need to make their letters conform to the practices that are standard in English-speaking countries. The essential rules for writing good letters do not differ much, of course, from one country to another; it is in the outward form and in formulas of courtesy that the most striking differences exist, and those are the things that are emphasized here.

Numerous sample letters that the student can use as models are included, and there are check-up questions and some letter-writing problems at the end. All the names and addresses used in the sample letters included in this book are fictitious; any resemblance to the names of actual persons, places, or institutions is purely coincidental.

This book is one of *The Key to English* series, prepared for the Collier Macmillan English Program by the Materials Development Staff of English Language Services, Inc., under the direction of Edwin T. Cornelius, Jr., and Willard D. Sheeler.

INTRODUCTION

Letter writing is an extremely ancient art. In fact, it is one of the oldest uses, if not *the* oldest use, to which writing itself has been put. The English word *letter*, meaning both 'character of the alphabet' and 'written communication intended to be read only by the person, or persons, it is addressed to,' shows this history. The two things are so closely associated that we have only one name for them.

Letters have been cut on clay or wax tablets, they have been scratched on birch bark, they have been written with pen or brush on paper, papyrus, parchment, and other materials. At the present time, a great many letters are composed on the typewriter. But the purpose remains the same: to communicate something to another person or group of persons in writing.

In many parts of the modern world, the telephone has had a tremendous effect on letter writing, since it is now possible to *talk* to almost anyone, anywhere, at any time. This means that, in ordinary day-to-day communication, especially in cities and at short distances, letter writing is not as important as it used to be. People no longer write little social notes to each other and dispatch them to other parts of the city or the county by messenger, as nineteenth-century people did, and members of families who are separated from each other spend much less time than their ancestors did in composing and exchanging letters. Nevertheless, because many messages can be better expressed in writing, and because writing has a permanence that speech lacks, millions of letters are sent every day, ranging in importance from the awkward efforts of small children to diplomatic messages of the greatest urgency exchanged between governments.

This would seem to suggest that letter writing is a commonplace activity, something that everybody knows how to do without special guidance. This is not so, of course.

Letter writing, like any other kind of social behavior, is subject to rules that must be learned. Conventions vary from one country to another, and from one period of history to another.

The mechanics of letter writing (what kind of paper, ink, and envelope to use, how to fold the letter, how to address the envelope, where to put the stamp, etc.) are easy to learn. (*See Chapter 2.*) More important is the message that the letter carries. No matter how carefully a letter is prepared, it is no good if its message is poorly expressed; if the ideas in it are unclear or badly organized; if it is awkward and dull; if the rules of etiquette are not followed.

In this manual we will try to guide you to compose good letters, but we must point out at the beginning that there are few clear-cut rules for this. We can give you some general advice and we can show you samples of letters written in various styles and under various circumstances. You can imitate them in writing your own letters. But, except in a few instances, like formal invitations and the replies to them, we cannot tell you exactly what you should say or how you should say it.

The usages described in this book are generally those followed in the United States at the present time, but they vary only in small details from those all over the English-speaking world.

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1. TYPES OF LETTERS

Letters are of several different kinds, and each has its own over-all rules for content and style.

Personal letters

Personal letters are those that concern the writer as an individual person, not as an officer in an organization, a seller or purchaser, a client or a dispenser of professional services. Personal letters range in formality from intimate to very formal, since people have relationships of many kinds in their lives.

Intimate letters do not follow ordinary rules, since they are the expression of private thoughts and feelings between people who are closely related in life. Just as people who are intimate with each other don't pay a great deal of attention to formal rules of etiquette, intimate letters are not bound by many rules. In general, an intimate letter can contain anything that would be said in conversation by the writer to the addressee.

Letters dealing with personal matters that are exchanged between people not intimately related in life might be called *social letters*. These letters vary in formality, since some personal relationships are less formal than others. In social letters, attention must be paid to the rules of polite conversation, and the writer must be careful to make the appearance of his letter conform to certain standards.

Some social communications, which we will call *formal letters*, are so stereotyped that they follow very rigid rules in their wording and format. Examples are invitations to important social affairs and formal weddings. They may be handwritten, but most often they are printed or engraved in a number of copies and sent out to many people at a time. Examples of these will be given later on in this book.

Business letters

Business letters make up by far the larger part of the letters written and mailed today. These letters deal with matters of an impersonal, official, or public nature, as contrasted with personal letters, which deal with private matters. The writer and the addressee of a business letter may or may not know each other socially; this fact is irrelevant, since the matter being discussed is presumably not affected by the relationship. Business letters are quite often written to persons with whom the writer is not acquainted at all, even by name, and with whom he has no need or desire to become acquainted.

Business letters are of many different kinds, and their level of formality varies according to the particular circumstances and the type of relationship that exists between the writer and the addressee. (They could be brothers, for instance, writing about the sale of a piece of property; or they might be total strangers, like a member of the public writing to a government official.) However, they all have in common an objective quality that is lacking in personal letters: their purpose is to get or give information, to obtain something that one wants from someone else, to persuade or to negotiate.

A business letter may be *private* or *official*. In a private business letter, the writer is speaking for himself or on his own behalf. (An example of this type of letter would be one written to one's personal lawyer.) In official business letters the writer acts in his capacity as an officer in a business or some other kind of organization; usually, he does not speak on his own behalf but on behalf of the organization he represents. Consequently, in private business letters, the writer usually refers to himself as "I" or "me", while in official correspondence he is more likely to say "we" or "us."

When business letters are exchanged between people who know each other personally, the language often be-

comes a great deal less formal than in ordinary business letters, and occasional personal remarks are included, like "Regards to your wife," or "I hope your cold is better." These touches, however, do not negate the impersonal nature of the communication; they are just bits of courtesy such as would be said in a face-to-face business conference.

Other than the variations in formality just mentioned, business letters vary little except in the content—the substance of the letter, the matter being discussed. Examples of several different kinds of business letters will be given later on in this book.

2. THE MECHANICS OF LETTER WRITING

Looks are important

The first impression that a letter makes depends on its appearance. The letter should be neat, well-spaced, and easy to read. It should be written on good paper of the right size and kind.

Kind of paper

Intimate letters can be written on any kind of paper the writer happens to like. Social letters can be written on colored or decorated stationery, chosen according to personal taste. Business letters should be written only on white (or occasionally light-colored) paper of good quality in a standard size (usually 8½ by 11 inches in the United States). Business letters are almost always kept by the addressee, at least for a time, and it is inconvenient for an office to handle letters of many different sizes. Lightweight airmail paper may be used, of course, but it should be of good quality, so that it does not tear easily.

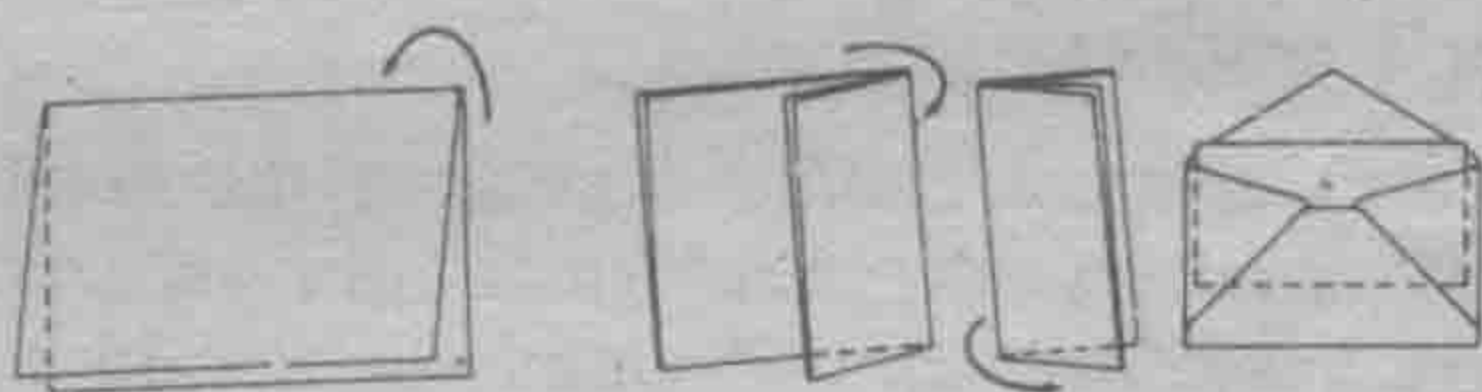
Handwriting versus typewriting

Most people who have typewriters and can type well, prefer to type their letters nowadays. There was a feeling a generation ago that typewriting was not quite proper in social correspondence, but, in the United States at least, the prejudice against typewriting much social correspondence has disappeared. Many people, as a matter of fact, prefer that letters written to them be prepared on the typewriter, since it makes them easier to read. On the other hand, the objections to the typewriter are that it is less personal and that it suggests that the writer was in too much of a hurry to sit down and write in longhand. One's

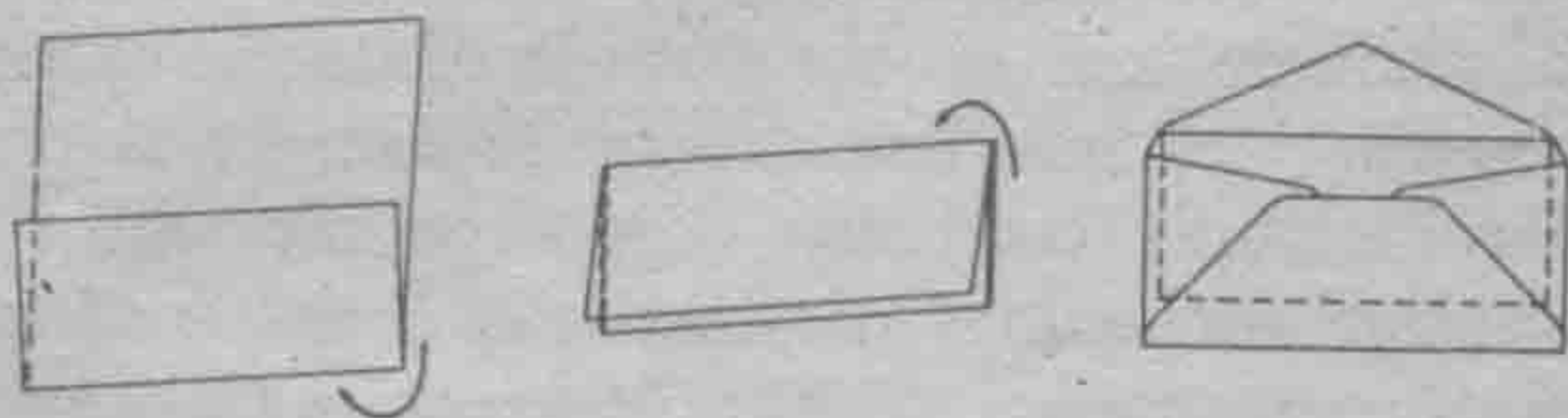
handwriting is in some ways as much an expression of his personality as his voice, and in correspondence between friends a great deal of the writer is missing if he uses a typewriter. Therefore, the typewriter is often avoided in letters which express friendly and personal sentiments.

Folding the letter

Fancy letter paper is usually cut so that only one or two folds are required in order to fit the letter into the envelope. If the writer uses plain $8\frac{1}{2}$ -by-11-inch paper, he will find that there are two types of envelopes in general use in the United States. One, often called "short," is about $3\frac{1}{2}$ by 6 inches, and requires the paper to be folded as shown below.

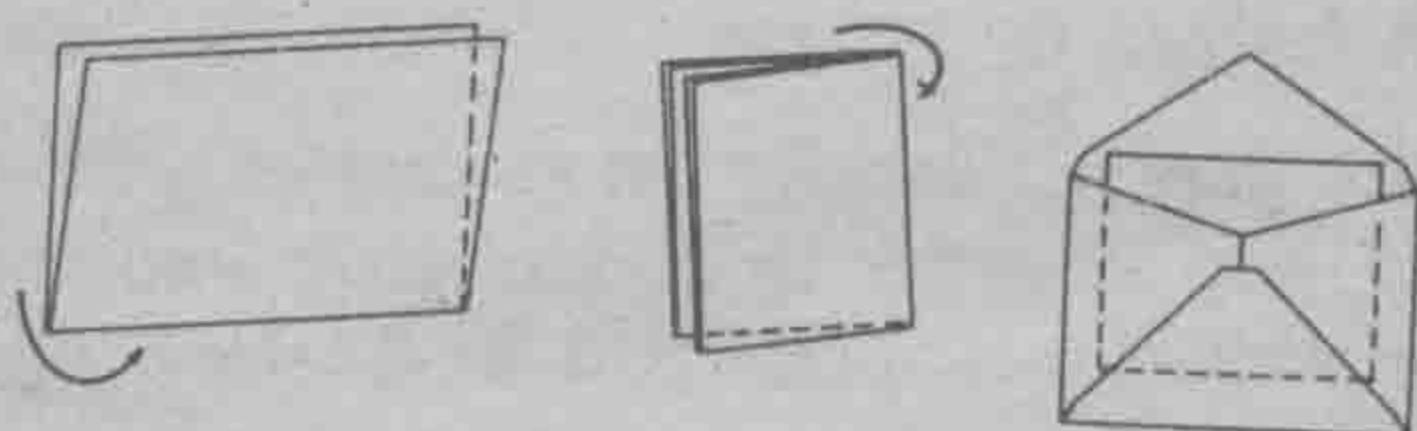


The paper is folded in half from top to bottom and then sideways twice. The other envelope, called "long," is about 4 by 9 inches. Paper to be fitted into it is folded in thirds, horizontally, as shown below.



Fold the top one-third down, and then fold the bottom one-third up over it.

Very few envelopes in use in America fit paper folded in half twice, as is often the case in other parts of the world.



The writer's address

The writer's address should appear at the head of the first page of all letters except informal ones written to people who are very familiar. The address should have the same form it would have on the outside of an envelope addressed to the writer. That is, extremely short forms should be avoided. The New York City telephone directory, to save much-needed space and to avoid repeating obvious information, writes addresses like "325W227" (meaning 325 West 227th Street) or "2319 17Av"* (meaning 2319 17th Avenue), but these forms should not be used in letters. The addressee may not be familiar enough with the city to translate the abbreviated form into the proper form for use on the outside of an envelope; if the writer gives him insufficient information, he is unable to address his reply correctly. Often people who live in a city shorten the names of streets, avenues, and so forth, saying, for example, "3000 Massachusetts" instead of "3000 Massachusetts Avenue" or "9200 15th" instead of "9200 15th Street." The word *street*, *avenue*, *boulevard*,

* The normal abbreviation for "Avenue" in English is "Ave."

etc., should always be included in the address inside the letter. The sender's name does not appear at the top of the letter, unless he is using stationery with his name and address printed on the page. (His name always appears at the *end* of the letter.)

In business letters, as we will see later, the name and address of the addressee appear at the head of the letter, in the same form that they have on the outside of the envelope.

There is a discussion of the correct way to write addresses in Chapter 4.

The date

All letters should be dated. Informally, designations like "March 23" or "Saturday" can be used, but in other cases, the full date should be given. The day of the week is usually not included.

The date generally appears at the beginning of the letter; old-fashioned practice puts it at the end, and there are still a few people who imitate this style today, but this would be judged eccentric by most writers.

The preferred American English style is

- (1) month name, spelled out in full or in the form of an abbreviation (*Jan., Feb., Mar.,* etc.);
- (2) day of the month, in digits, without *th, nd,* etc., followed by a comma;
- (3) year, in digits.

Examples: June 16, 1965; July 4, 1776; August 25, 1962. The day of the month is read, of course, as an ordinal (*sixteenth, fourth, twenty-fifth*), but contemporary American practice omits writing the ordinal suffixes. (In Great Britain and in some American personal correspondence, people write *June 16th, July 4th,* etc.) Likewise, many American speakers insert *the* in reading the dates (*June the sixteenth, July the fourth,* etc.) but this word is never written, except in formal invitations where all numerals are spelled out.

As an alternate, there is the international style, in which the day of the month is given first. This is the style followed everywhere except in the United States, and many agencies, especially in governmental and military circles, have adopted it in America. In this style, the day of the month is given in digits, followed by the month name and the year, but without any punctuation whatever: 16 June 1965; 4 July 1776; 25 August 1962. (British usage generally inserts *th*, *nd*, etc., but this is not done in the U. S.) These dates are read "the sixteenth of June," "the fourth of July," etc., or occasionally "sixteen June," "four July." (The latter style is not colloquial and is heard mostly in official circles.)

Either style of date is correct, but the overwhelming majority of American writers prefer the first, since it writes the date in the order in which they usually speak it.

Dates are often written in all digits, especially in informal circumstances, with the months represented by the numerals 1 to 12. Non-Americans must keep in mind that, in the U. S., "3/2/64" means "March 2, 1964," and not "3 February."

3. BEGINNING AND ENDING THE LETTER

It is at the beginning of the letter, in the *salutation*, and at the end, in the *complimentary close*, that etiquette becomes particularly important in letter writing. Just as it is extremely impolite to call a stranger by his first name or use familiar language with him, it is a bad mistake to use an inappropriate salutation or complimentary close in a letter. Fortunately, the situation is not quite as complicated as it used to be. Old-fashioned letter-writing manuals list a dozen or more formulas for opening and closing letters, according to the degree of formality and the relative social status of the writer and the addressee. Social relations are less formal now, and there are fewer formulas to remember. It is still important to choose the right one, however.

Kinds of salutations

In all except the most formal and stereotyped letters in English, it is proper to begin with the word *Dear*, followed by the name of the person as you would say it in speaking to him directly. This means that it consists of his first, or "given," name (the name by which his family and friends call him), or else a courtesy title and his last name. For example,

Dear Mr. Smith:

Dear John:

Dear Betty:

Dear Miss Evans:

Dear Mrs. Hendricks:

Notice the use of the colon. In informal letters, commas are sometimes used after the salutation, but, since the colon is required in all business letters and is correct every-

where, most people use it all the time. A dash (—) after the salutation is old-fashioned, and the exclamation point (!), which is customarily written after greetings in some languages (e.g., German and Russian) is never used in English. British usage employs a comma.

Mr. ("mister") and *Mrs.* ("missis") are always written as abbreviations when they occur just before names or titles. *Dr.* ("doctor") is usually abbreviated before a name, but does not have to be.

In formal communications addressed to persons in their official capacity, the word *Mr.*, or *Madam* in the case of a woman, is followed by the person's title, without the name:

Dear Mr. President:

Dear Mr. Governor:

Dear Madam Secretary:

Dear Mr. Congressman:

Notice that *Madam* is spelled without a final *-e*.

Titles other than those just mentioned should be spelled out in full.

Dear Professor Blanc:

Dear Senator Clay:

Dear Ambassador Franklin:

A letter addressed to a person whose name is not known, or to a person in his official capacity, may begin

Dear Sir:

or, if the recipient is known to be a woman,

Dear Madam:

A letter addressed to an organization begins

Gentlemen: (note the absence of *Dear*)

or, occasionally in the U. S., often in Great Britain,

Dear Sirs:

An extremely formal salutation omits *Dear*. This either shows great respect (as in a letter addressed to a high official of the government) or it indicates that the com-

munication to follow is of an official nature (as in a legal document announcing an action or decision):

Sir:

In certain formal circumstances, the word *My* is placed before *dear* in the salutation. This salutation is rather old-fashioned.

My dear Mr. Smith:

My dear Sir:

Notice that *dear* is written with a small *d* in this case.

When used informally, the salutation beginning "My dear" connotes affection and would probably be used most often by a member of the older generation addressing someone younger—a niece, nephew, grandchild, etc. Here are examples:

My dear granddaughter,

My dear Patty,

Ways to end the letter

Letters, like conversations, must end gracefully. All languages have formal expressions that are used when people take leave of each other, and it is always important to choose the one most appropriate to the circumstances. In earlier times, people writing letters in English closed with long sentences like, "Believe me, sir, to be your most humble and obedient servant," and many languages today still retain similar complimentary formulas at the ends of letters. Such language in English today, however, is as old-fashioned as 18th-century wigs and knee-breeches. All that is left of it is the word *yours*, which figures in almost all closing phrases in use today.

In the United States, "Sincerely yours" is by far the most frequently occurring formula. It is used in personal letters, business letters, official letters—formal and informal. It is appropriate almost anywhere except in intimate letters, where it would sound overly formal.