Business Letters

Business letters are used in many different professional contexts—business, health care, government, nonprofit organization, etc.—for official communication with individuals or a small group of individuals outside of the writer's organization. While they are more formal and more structured than personal letters (or business memos or emails), they are still a form of personal communication. Letters address their readers as individuals, show awareness of the relationship writers have with their readers, and maintain a professional yet personable tone.

The "You Attitude"

To establish the appropriate tone, letters should be *reader-centered*. They should employ a "you attitude," meaning the focus of the letter remains on the reader and his or her concerns rather than on the writer, and shows the reader courtesy and respect.   For example:

"Me Attitude"	*"You Attitude"*
"Our service department is known for its excellence, and we hire only mechanics who are manufacturer certified"	"You can be assured your car will receive excellent service from our manufacturer certified mechanics.
"We cannot issue a refund without the original receipt"	"Return the item with the original receipt to receive a full refund."
"As anyone can see, social media is the way to grow a business these days."	"Tools such as Facebook and Twitter will allow you to reach more customers and establish closer relationships with them."
"You forgot to estimate energy requirements in the proposal."	"The proposal will be complete once you include estimates for energy requirements."

These guidelines can help you achieve a "you attitude":

- Avoid using first person pronouns (I, We) when possible. Address readers directly as "you."
- Think of and focus on readers' interests and needs.
- Be courteous and tactful; avoid being abrupt, terse, or accusatory. Respect readers' intelligence.
- Be clear and specific; avoid making readers guess what you mean with unclear or general expressions.
- Use simple English. Avoid using highly technical language or stilted "letterese" (e.g., "as per request," "contingent upon," "proceed forthwith")

Letter Parts and Format

Letters include these standard elements, in this order:

- Outside address (yours). If you are using paper with a letterhead, you do not need a separate outside address.
- Date
- Inside address (readers)
- Salutation (Dear….)
- Body (one or more paragraphs)
- Complimentary closing (Sincerely, Yours Truly, Respectfully, Best Wishes, Cordially, etc.)
- Signature

If you are enclosing any materials with your letter, type "Enclosure" or "Enc." two spaces below your signature; identify the number of enclosures if there is more than one (e.g., "Enc. 3).   If you are sending copies of the letter to other reciepients, type "cc:" followed by their names two spaces below the enclosure notice OR under your signature if you have no enclosures.   If more than one other reader is receiving copies, list their names vertically. E.g.:

cc: J. Smith
    K. Raines

Line it up!

Letters commonly use block or modified block format. In block format, all letter elements are placed against the left margin. In modified block format, the writer's (inside) address, closing, and signature are placed against the right margin.

Professional letters are single spaced, and paragraphs are not indented.

Start out right

Letters often follow up on other communication: in person meetings, other letters, phone calls, etc. If your letter does so, refer to that previous contact. E.g., "It was a pleasure visiting you in your Atlanta office…" or "We were sorry to learn of the problems you had with your power saw."

Like other forms of business correspondence, letters should make their purpose clear immediately and if possible, deliver their main point at the beginning of the letter. If the letter is giving bad news to the reader, deliver that news in a second paragraph AFTER acknowledging earlier communication and the issue you are addressing, and expressing sympathy.

As you begin your letter

Message up front or later—depends on letter's purpose

Follow up on other communication—verbal comm, other letters. Etc.