

Purpose of this Handout

This handout will help you write business letters required in many different situations, from applying for a job to requesting or delivering information. While the examples that are discussed specifically are the application letter and cover letter, this handout also highlights strategies for effective business writing in general.

Principles to Keep in MindBusiness Writing is Different

Writing for a business audience is usually quite different than writing in the humanities, social sciences, or other academic disciplines. Business writing strives to be crisp and succinct rather than evocative or creative; it stresses specificity and accuracy. This distinction does not make business writing superior or inferior to other styles. Rather, it reflects the unique purpose and considerations involved when writing in a business context.

When you write a business document, you must assume that your audience has limited time in which to read it and is likely to skim. Your readers have an interest in what you say insofar as it affects their working world. They want to know the “bottom line”: the point you are making about a situation or problem and how they should respond.

Business writing varies from the conversational style often found in email messages to the more formal, legalistic style found in contracts. A style between these two extremes is appropriate for the majority of memos, emails, and letters. Writing that is too formal can alienate readers, and an attempt to be overly casual may come across as insincere or unprofessional. In business writing, as in all writing, you must know your audience.

In most cases, the business letter will be the first impression that you make on someone. Though business writing has become less formal over time, you should still take great care that your letter’s content is clear and that you have proofread it carefully.

Pronouns and the Active vs. Passive Voice

Personal pronouns (like *I*, *we*, and *you*) are important in letters and memos. In such documents, it is perfectly appropriate to refer to yourself as *I* and to the reader as *you*. Be careful, however, when you use the pronoun *we* in a business letter that is written on company stationery, since it commits your company to what you have written. When stating your opinion, use *I*; when presenting company policy, use *we*.

The best writers strive to achieve a style that is so clear that their messages cannot be misunderstood. One way to achieve a clear style is to minimize your use of the passive voice. Although the passive voice is sometimes necessary, often it not only makes your writing dull but also can be ambiguous or overly impersonal. Here’s an example of the same point stated in passive voice and in the active voice:

PASSIVE: The net benefits of subsidiary divestiture were grossly overestimated.
[Who did the overestimating?]

ACTIVE: The Global Finance Team grossly overestimated the net benefits of subsidiary divestiture.

The second version is clearer and thus preferable.

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule. What if you are the head of the Global Finance Team? You may want to get your message across without calling excessive attention to the fact that the error was your team's fault. The passive voice allows you to gloss over an unflattering point—but you should use it sparingly.

Focus & Specificity

Business writing should be clear and concise. Take care, however, that your document does not turn out as an endless series of short, choppy sentences. Keep in mind also that “concise” does not have to mean “blunt”—you still need to think about your tone and the audience for whom you are writing. Consider the following examples:

After carefully reviewing this proposal, we have decided to prioritize other projects this quarter.

Nobody liked your project idea, so we are not going to give you any funding.

The first version is a weaker statement, emphasizing facts not directly relevant to its point. The second version provides the information in a simple and direct manner. But you don't need to be an expert on style to know that the first phrasing is diplomatic and respectful (even though it's less concise) as compared with the second version, which is unnecessarily harsh and likely to provoke a negative reaction.

Business Letters: Where to Begin

Reread the description of your task (for example, the advertisement of a job opening, instructions for a proposal submission, or assignment prompt for a course). Think about your purpose and what requirements are mentioned or implied in the description of the task. List these requirements. This list can serve as an outline to govern your writing and help you stay focused, so try to make it thorough. Next, identify qualifications, attributes, objectives, or answers that match the requirements you have just listed. Strive to be exact and specific, avoiding vagueness, ambiguity, and platitudes. If there are industry- or field-specific concepts or terminology that are relevant to the task at hand, use them in a manner that will convey your competence and experience. Avoid any language that your audience may not understand. Your finished piece of writing should indicate how you meet the requirements you've listed and answer any questions raised in the description or prompt.

Return Address

Date

[one space]

Inside Address / Addressee

[one space]

Salutation: Always use a colon. Also, always use an addressee's name. If you don't know the name, learn the name. "Dear Members of the Selection Committee" is only a last resort, and sometimes a resort that ousts you.

[one space]

Opening Paragraph: Your first paragraph functions like an introduction for an essay in that you forecast what you will elaborate on in the second and third paragraphs. Also, when forecasting the skills and educational attainment that qualify you for the position, choose wording that invokes and/or replicates wording provided in their job description. You want employers to immediately see that you are qualified for the position in this paragraph. Your readers are impatient and very focused on seeing if you are qualified or not. Some readers may even discard your cover letter after reading this first paragraph.

Second Paragraph: While the intro can be a determiner (as just said), the second paragraph is arguably the most important paragraph in your cover letter. Some employers may only read this paragraph. Make sure that you meet the required qualifications in the first one or two sentences. Then show that you meet the preferred qualifications. Here is where you provide *proof* for your claim that skill X, Skill Y, and/or education X qualify you for the position. Your goal is to provide proof rather than make claims. One pitfall is making claims, such as "I have strong communication and marketing skills." Don't use self-flattering adjectives ("strong") and don't make unjustified claims. Instead, provide proof, such as "Because of my collaborative experience making marketing decisions about New Balance shoes with managers I am prepared to promote the missions of your store as an assistant manager." You also have an opportunity in this paragraph to provide a specific example of how you're qualified, such as "I helped create a unique promotional campaign by modeling store clothing along with my coworkers, which shows that I'm prepared to help design innovative campaigns." Provide concrete evidence and specific examples in this paragraph, and choose language that invokes and/or replicates wording in their job description.

Third Paragraph: Your second and third paragraphs should be similar lengths, and so often you need this third paragraph to avoid a bloated, second one. An effective, detailed second paragraph requires a third one. "Save" time here to further describe how you meet the preferred or secondary qualifications of the job. Provide proof that you're the person for the job: "My experience taking inventory for the New Balance store and assisting my managers with scheduling show that I can handle the other important duties for this position." Again, prove that you are ready to handle the duties of the job right now.

Closing Paragraph: Be brief, and use the word, "would": "I would look forward to the opportunity of interviewing for this position. If you have any questions about my application or desire more materials please contact me via phone or email . . ." Keep this part to a maximum of three sentences.

[one space]

Sincerely,

[three spaces]

(Signature)

Your typed name

Rory Jones
1113 Codel Way
Laurel, MT 59044
February 5, 2014

Archer Daniels Midland Company
4666 Faries Parkway
Decatur, IL 62526

Dear Melissa Miller:

I am applying for the summer internship position of ADM Accountant at Archer Daniels Midland Company that was advertised on CollegeRecruiter.com. My knowledge of GAAP and other accounting standards, and my managerial experience enable me to effectively perform the duties for your firm. In addition, my experience with Microsoft Office and Excel prepare me to use those programs efficiently.

With a special interest in the accounting industry, I have successfully completed over fifty credit hours in courses directly related to accounting and business. The knowledge I have gained in these fields of study has shown me the intricate policies of GAAP, and has exposed me to the ethical and social standards that are important to Archer Daniels Midland Company. Furthermore, earning a master's degree has given me the practice of communicating empathetically with peers and organizing a heavy workload to prepare me for the demanding work of accounting. My knowledge in computer science and programming languages is another valuable tool that qualifies me for the accounting software your company uses.

As my enclosed resume states, I have management experience that gives me the ability to handle fast paced, high-stress environments, manage time effectively, and ensure job completion. My military experience leading and motivating others also enables me to meet your company's professional standards. These two demanding occupations have given me a strong work ethic that I would bring to this position.

I would look forward to the opportunity to discuss my qualifications for the ADM accounting position with you in person. If you have any questions about my application please contact me by phone or email. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Rory Jones