

The plain English guide to writing letters

Setting out your letter

As everyone always says, a letter needs a beginning, middle and end. Much of the time, your letter should start 'Thank you for your letter of 15 April' and certainly not 'I acknowledge receipt of...', 'I am in receipt of...' or 'Further to your recent....'.

The middle will be your points, answers and questions in a logical order. If it is a long letter, you may be able to break it up using sub-headings. Use paragraphing throughout, generally averaging about three or four sentences to each paragraph.

The end does not normally need to be a summary. A suitable final sentence might be 'I hope this has answered your questions', 'Thank you for your help' or 'If you have any questions, please ring me.'

Some of the suggestions in this guide may be very obvious to you while others may go against your own style. They are only suggestions.

The date

It is now common practice to write the date as 7 July 2002 instead of 7th July 2002.

The greeting

If you are on first-name terms with the reader, use 'Dear Jane'. Otherwise use 'Dear Mr Smith', 'Dear Miss Smith' or, if you are writing to a woman and don't know which title she prefers, use 'Dear Ms Smith'. If you don't know the person's name, use 'Dear Sir', 'Dear Madam' or occasionally 'Dear Sir or Madam'.

Headings

These are not usually necessary. However, if you are going to use one, don't use all capitals: just put the heading in bold. And don't use 're'.

Punctuation

Don't put commas after:

- each line of the address;
- the greeting (Dear Jane); or
- the ending line (Yours sincerely).

Also, you don't need full stops in initials - Mr P D Smith, the DSS and so on.

Endings

If you used the name of the person at the start of the letter then end with 'Yours sincerely'.

Otherwise end with 'Yours faithfully'.

If you have a more familiar relationship with the reader then choose whatever ending would be more appropriate ('Kind regards', 'Best wishes', 'Yours truly' and so on).

Contact point

Make sure that your letter clearly says which person the reader should contact and how, with any extension number if necessary.

Emphasising words

If you want to emphasise something, use **bold** type. Don't use long strings of capital letters as they are unfriendly and many people find them much harder to read.

Checking your letter

Always read your letter when you have finished.

Check that:

- you have said everything you wanted to;
- you have answered any questions you had to;
- you have been helpful and polite; and
- the letter is clear and concise.