

## **How to Write a Formal Letter**

When was the last time you actually "wrote" a letter? Follow these tips to write the perfect formal letter.

In today's Internet- and email-driven society, the need to write a formal letter arises less often than in the past. However, it is still occasionally necessary to present a formal letter to obtain information, to apply for an academic program or a job, to write a complaint letter, or simply to express your opinion in an effective and coherent manner.

### **Tips for formal letter writing**

#### **Be concise**

State the purpose of your formal letter in the first paragraph and don't veer from the subject. Try to avoid flowery language or long words. Keep the letter short and to the point. This excerpt from Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* (4<sup>th</sup> edition) provides the perfect rule of thumb:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all sentences short, or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

#### **Use the right tone**

A business or formal letter should be written in a tone that is slightly more formal than your everyday language. Avoid the following: slang or jargon; contractions such as *I'm*, *can't*, *it's*; and vague words such as *good* and *nice*. Be polite and respectful, even if you are complaining. Take a look at our [formal letter example](#) to see what tone is appropriate.

#### **Proofread**

Once you have written your formal letter, check the grammar and spelling carefully. Use the spell-checker on your computer and then read the letter over yourself as the spellchecker will not likely catch every error. Use a dictionary or thesaurus, if necessary. Check the grammar and punctuation for correctness and make sure the sentences are complete. It is usually a good idea to have someone else proofread your formal letter, even after you have done so, as you may have overlooked errors in something that you have read over many times. If this formal letter is important enough for you to take the time to write, don't rush its completion. Errors may diminish the impact of the statement or impression you are trying to make.

#### **Use proper format and presentation**

Remember that the first impression is the one that lasts. Use good quality paper and a matching envelope for your formal letter. Make sure the recipient is addressed properly and that his or her name is spelled correctly. Equally important—don't forget to sign the letter!

## Present your ideas properly: Formatting a formal letter

Adhering to the standard conventions of good formal letter writing and presenting your letter attractively will ensure that your thoughts are seriously considered by the recipient and given the attention and consideration they deserve. Here are a few formatting tips:

### Heading

The heading consists of your address (but not your name) and the date. Telephone numbers and email addresses are not usually included here, but they are acceptable. Using block format, the heading goes in the top left-hand corner of the page.

123 Elm Ave.  
Treesville, ON M1N 2P3  
November 23, 2008

### Inside Address

The inside address consists of the name and address of the person to whom you are writing. You should try to address the formal letter to a specific person, but if you do not know his or her name, at least try to include his or her title. This address is usually placed four lines below the heading if a word processor is used or one line below the heading if the letter is handwritten.

Mr. M. Leaf (*name*)  
Chief of Syrup Production (*title*)  
Old Sticky Pancake Company  
456 Maple Lane  
Forest, ON 7W8 9Y0

### Salutation

Skip one line after the inside address and then type the salutation. Your choice of salutation depends on whether or not you know the intended recipient of the formal letter. The most usual greeting is

*“Dear”* followed by the person's name and punctuated with a colon. If you don't know whether the person you are addressing is a man or a woman, you may begin with

*“Dear Sir or Madam”*, again followed by a colon.

*“Ms.”* may be used if you don't know the marital status of a woman. Furthermore, if the person has a specific title such as *“Dr.”*, make sure that you use it.

Dear Mr. Trunk:

Dear Ms. Root:

Dear Mrs. Branch:

Dear Dr. Acorn:

## Body

Skip one line after the salutation and begin typing the body of the formal letter. This is the main part of the letter. Keep in mind the rules outlined above regarding brevity and coherence. It is best to use short, clear, logical paragraphs to state your business.

## Closing and Signature

This is the end of the letter. Skip one line after the last paragraph of the body of the letter and type the closing. Only the first word of the closing should be capitalized. It is punctuated with a comma. Leave several lines after the closing and type (or print) your signature. Your actual handwritten signature is to be inserted between these two printed lines, written in ink.

**Yours sincerely,**



Ezra Twig

## **Writing a Letter to a member of Congress**

So, you're going to write a letter to Congress? Good idea. Make it a good letter.

People who think members of Congress pay little or no attention to constituent mail, are plain wrong. Concise, well thought out personal letters are one of the most effective ways Americans have of influencing law-makers. But, members of Congress get hundreds of letters and emails every day. Whether you choose to use the Postal Service or email, here are some tips that will help your letter to Congress have impact.

### **Think Locally**

It's usually best to send letters to the representative from your local Congressional District or the senators from your state. Your vote helps elect them -- or not -- and that fact alone carries a lot of weight. It also helps personalize your letter. Sending the same "cookie-cutter" message to every member of Congress may grab attention but rarely much consideration.

### **Keep it Simple**

Your letter should address a single topic or issue. Typed, one-page letters are best. Many PACs ([Political Action Committees](#)) recommend a three-paragraph letter structured like this:

1. Say why you are writing and who you are. List your "credentials." (If you want a response, you must include your name and address, even when using email.)
2. Provide more detail. Be factual not emotional. Provide specific rather than general information about how the topic affects you and others. If a certain bill is involved, [cite the correct title or number](#) whenever possible.
3. Close by requesting the action you want taken: a vote for or against a bill, or change in general policy.

The best letters are courteous, to the point, and include specific supporting examples.

### **Addressing Members of Congress**

#### **To Your Senator:**

The Honorable (full name)  
(Room #) (Name) Senate Office Building  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

#### **To Your Representative:**

The Honorable (full name)  
(Room #) (Name) House Office Building  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

The above addresses should be used in email messages, as well as those sent through the Postal Service.

## Finding Their Addresses

Senate and House of Representatives

[U.S. Senators \(web sites and mailing addresses\)](#)

[Write Your U.S. Representative](#) (A service of the House that will assist you by identifying your Congressperson in the U.S. House of Representatives and providing contact information.

## U.S. Supreme Court

[Contact Information - US Supreme Court](#)

The Justices do not have email addresses, but they do read letters from citizens.

## To Conclude

Here are some key things you should always and never do in writing to your elected representatives.

1. Be courteous and respectful without "gushing."
2. Clearly and simply state the purpose of your letter. If it's about a certain bill, [identify it correctly](#). If you need help in finding the number of a bill, use the [Thomas Legislative Information System](#).
3. Say who you are. Anonymous letters go nowhere. Even in email, include your correct name, address, phone number and email address. If you don't include at least your name and address, you will not get a response.
4. State any professional credentials or personal experience you may have, especially those pertaining to the subject of your letter.
5. Keep your letter short -- one page is best.
6. Use specific examples or evidence to support your position.
7. State what it is you want done or recommend a course of action.
8. Thank the member for taking the time to read your letter.

## Never

1. Use vulgarity, profanity, or threats. The first two are just plain rude and the third one can get you a visit from the Secret Service. Simply stated, don't let your passion get in the way of making your point,
2. Fail to include your name and address, even in email letters.
3. Demand a response.

## Identifying Legislation

Cite these legislation identifiers when writing to members of Congress:

House Bills: "**H.R.**\_\_\_\_"

House Resolutions: "**H.RES.**\_\_\_\_"

House Joint Resolutions: "**H.J.RES.**\_\_\_\_"

Senate Bills: "**S.**\_\_\_\_"

Senate Resolutions: "**S.RES.**\_\_\_\_"

Senate Joint Resolutions: "**S.J.RES.**\_\_\_\_"

**Sample of a Formal Letter:**

123 Elm Ave.  
Treesville, ON M1N 2P3  
November 23, 2008

Mr. M. Leaf  
Chief of Syrup Production  
Old Sticky Pancake Company  
456 Maple Lane  
Forest, ON 7W8 9Y0

Dear Mr. Leaf:

Let me begin by thanking you for your past contributions to our Little League baseball team. Your sponsorship aided in the purchase of ten full uniforms and several pieces of baseball equipment for last year's season.

Next month, our company is planning an employee appreciation pancake breakfast honoring retired employees for their past years of service and present employees for their loyalty and dedication in spite of the current difficult economic conditions.

We would like to place an order with your company for 25 pounds of pancake mix and five gallons of maple syrup. We hope you will be able to provide these products in the bulk quantities we require.

As you are a committed corporate sponsor and long-time associate, we hope that you will be able to join us for breakfast on December 22, 2008.

Respectfully yours,

*Derek Jeter*

Derek Jeter

**Sample of a Letter to a Congress Member:**

Date

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_

Office Address

United States House of Representatives/United State Senate

City, State, Zip

Dear Representative:

As a scientist and a constituent, I urge you to support an increase in funding for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) bringing funding to at least \$32 billion for FY14. NIH research is the foundation for future medical breakthroughs, which will save lives and money. The federal government's investment in research must be sustained in order to translate today's scientific findings into tomorrow's bedside treatments. NIH funding supports my research on <insert a summary of your research and the potential benefits of this research>. Recent discoveries, such as those listed below, are a direct result of robust funding for the NIH.

- The death rate for heart disease, the leading cause of death in the United States, has dropped 60% since 1940.
- Through research to better understand the underlying molecular causes of cancer, NIH research has cut cancer deaths. In 2007, for the first time in history, the number of cancer deaths in the United States decreased.
- In the 1950's, 1 in 5 people died within 20 years of diagnosis of type 1 diabetes. Today, those with type 1 diabetes are living longer and healthier lives.
- The discovery of a type of antibody that neutralizes and protects against several subtypes of the flu. This super-antibody may be the key to protecting millions from influenza breakouts.

The money invested in NIH is redistributed to communities across the nation, including our district/state to create jobs and stimulates the local economy. In my lab we have <insert number of current and/or former technicians, postdocs and students> who are learning the technical and intellectual skills required for the high-paying jobs of the future. A federal investment in basic research is an investment in the health and economic future of our nation. Please make medical and health research a higher priority for our nation by continuing the investment in the NIH. Thank you for your consideration and please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss this issue further.

Sincerely,

*Derek Jeter*

Your Name

Your Title

Your Address

Your City, State, Zip

Your Phone Number