LETTER WRITING BASICS

Wherever you are today as a letter writer — good, bad, or indifferent — you can take your level of skill to the next level in a relatively short time.

The benefit of doing so is that you will write more effective letters: Letters that get your message across without the reader calling you for clarification. Letters that persuade your readers to accept your point of view, or take the actions you want them to take. Letters that get you the results — business and personal — you desire.

In this part, we cover some rules and tools for effective letter writing. They may seem like a lot of work right now — and maybe they will be, for now. But soon they will become a reflexive part of your letter-writing process. You won't have to think about most of them; you will just use them to make your letters sharper, clearer, and more convincing than ever.

Prewriting Planning

You would not start building an addition onto your home until you had an architect make a drawing to show you what it would look like, would you? And a manager in charge of a division or product line would not start marketing the products without a marketing plan, would she?

In the same way, doing some preliminary preparation — rather than just turning on the PC and starting to type, can help you craft better letters. Of course writing a letter is not as big a job as planning a marketing campaign or building a family room. But it is important. As the saying goes, "Anything worth doing is worth doing well."

Besides, the "planning" you do for a small writing job, like a letter, need not and should not be elaborate or time-consuming. A few minutes spent thinking and following the steps that follow can help you write a better letter, and may actually save time rather than take more time.

Here are some simple steps to take when planning a letter or other communication of any significance:

1. Do a SAP (subject, audience, and purpose) analysis as outlined in the sections that follow.
2. Gather the information you need and do whatever additional research is required to complete the letter.
3. Make a simple 1-2-3 outline of the points you need to cover, in the order you want to present them.
4. Now sit down, and start writing!

SAP: Subject, Audience, Purpose

SAP analysis is a process that quickly enables you to pin down the content and organization of your letter. The process requires you to ask and answer three questions:

- What is the subject (topic) of your letter?
- Who is your audience? (Who will be receiving your letter?)
- What is the purpose of your letter?

Subject

What is the subject (topic) of the letter? Make it as narrow and specific as possible. For instance, "marketing product X" is too broad for a letter; you'll need a report or other longer document to cover it. But "approving copy for product X in our next catalog" is narrow and specific; there's room in a letter to cover it.

Audience

Who is your reader? Well, you know who your reader is, but do you know what he or she thinks, likes, and worries about? Or what he or she wants, hopes, dreams, and desires? Most of us spend too much time thinking about what we want, and not enough time thinking about what the reader wants. Written communications are most effective when they are *personal*. Your writing should be built around the needs, interests, desires, and profit of the reader. The better you understand the other person, the more effectively you can communicate with him or her.

Crafting a letter that fits the reader is relatively easy when you are writing a personal letter to a friend or relative you know well. In the case of a business letter, it makes sense to ask yourself, "Who is my reader? What does he or she know about this subject? What is my relationship with the reader — subordinate, superior, colleague, or customer? How can I get the message across so that the reader will understand and agree?" When writing business letters, here are some things you want to know about your reader:

- **Job title.** Mechanics are interested in your compressor's reliability and serviceability, while the purchasing agent is more concerned with cost. A person's job colors his perspective of your product, service, or idea. Are you writing for plant engineers? Office managers? CEOs? Shop foremen? Make the tone and content of your writing compatible with the professional interests of your readers.
- **Education.** Is your reader a PhD or a high-school dropout? Is he a chemical engineer? A doctor? A carpenter? A senior citizen? Write simply enough so that the least technical and educated of your readers can understand you completely. When in doubt, err on the side of simplicity. You will never have a recipient of your letter complain to you that it was too easy to read.
- **Industry.** When chemical producers buy a reverse-osmosis water-purification system for a chemical plant, they want to know every technical detail down to the last pipe, pump, fan, and filter. Marine buyers, on the other hand, have only two basic questions: *What does it cost? How reliable is it?* The weight and size are also important, since the system must be carried onto and bolted onto the floor of a boat.
- **Level of interest.** A prospect who has responded to your ad is more likely to be receptive to a salesman's call than someone who the salesman calls on "cold turkey." Is your reader interested or disinterested? Friendly or hostile? Receptive or resistant? Understanding the reader's state of mind helps you tailor your message to meet his needs.

Often, however, when writing business letters and longer documents — articles, papers, manuals, reports, and brochures — you are writing for many readers, not an individual. Even though you may not know the names of your readers, you still need to develop a picture of who they are — their job titles, education, industry, and interests.

Purpose

What is the purpose of your letter? You might be tempted to say, "to transmit information." Sometimes merely transmitting information is the letter's sole purpose, but often it is more than that. Is there a request you want the reader to comply with, or a favor you are hoping they will grant? Keep your goal in mind as you write, so that you may persuade the reader to agree with your point of view.

GATHER INFORMATION

In order to write an effective letter and save time in doing so, you need to have all your information at hand, such as copies of previous correspondence on the topic, customer records, service orders, and so on. If you don't have all the information you need, do the necessary research. For instance, if you are answering a technical question for a customer, and you do not know the answer, ask someone in engineering to explain it to you. Or if you are writing a letter to your insurance company explaining

The 3-Step Writing Process

Often when people write, they're afraid to make mistakes, and so they edit themselves word by word, inhibiting the natural flow of ideas and sentences. But professional writers know that writing is a process consisting of numerous drafts, rewrites, deletions, and revisions.

Rarely does a writer produce a perfect manuscript on the first try. The task ideally should be divided into three steps: writing, rewriting, and polishing.

1. **Writing.** Most professional writers go through a minimum of three drafts. The first is this initial "go with the flow" draft where the words come tumbling out.

   When you sit down to write, let the words flow freely. Don't worry about style, syntax, punctuation, or typos — just write. You can always go back and fix it later. By "letting it all out," you build momentum and overcome inhibitions that block your ability to write and think.

2. **Rewriting.** In the second draft — the rewriting step — you take a critical look at what you've written. You edit for organization, logic, content, and persuasiveness. Using your PC, you add, delete, and rearrange paragraphs. You rewrite jumbled passages to make them clear.

3. **Polishing.** In the third draft, you give your prose a final polishing by editing for style, syntax, spelling, and punctuation. This is the step where you worry about things like consistency in numbers, units of measure, equations, symbols, abbreviations, and capitalization.

why you think they were wrong in refusing to pay for your treatment, it really helps to have all the facts in front of you — dates and costs of your exams, test results, doctors seen, and a copy of your policy, so you can reference the part that supports your argument.

MAKE A SIMPLE OUTLINE

For any document longer than a short e-mail, an outline can make the writing easier and ensure that all key points are covered. The outline also helps you keep your points in a logical order and transition smoothly between them. A letter requesting a scholarship or financial aid, for instance, might be organized along the following lines:

1. Describe your educational goals and ambitions.
2. Explain why you need financial aid to attain these goals.
3. Say why you deserve to be given the aid.
4. Cite specific evidence (e.g., community service, extracurricular activities, grade point average, honors and awards).
5. Ask for the specific amount of money you need.

Here's the outline for a memo requesting budget approval from your supervisor at work:

1. List what you want to buy.
2. Describe the item and its function or purpose.
3. Give the cost.
4. Explain why you need it and how the company will come out ahead (e.g., how much time or money will it save?).
5. Do a cost/benefit analysis showing projected return on investment and payback period.
6. Ask for authorization or approval.