



Unit 10

Writing Business Letters

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Understand what the proper format for letters is.

Unit 10

Writing Business Letters

Steps to Writing Business Letters

There are times when a telephone call cannot replace a letter. Perhaps you want a permanent, written record of a transaction, a commitment, a complaint, or a congratulatory note. Perhaps you know it will be difficult to catch busy people in the office and with time to talk on the phone. They are faced with hundreds of e-mails a day and may pass them by. However, you know they read their paper mail.

Business letters represent a direct communication between one person and another. You have an opportunity to make a good impression for you and your company; to take the reader's needs into account; and to be courteous, positive, and professional.

The following steps will help you to write more effective business letters.

Determine the Appropriate Length

Keep your letters short and efficient. Most things we send are only scanned because our reading piles are so high. If you really want your letter read thoroughly, keep it short.

Assess the Situation and Your Objective(s)

Why are you writing? Assess your reader and your relationship with them. Then assess how you want to appear to the reader and what you want to happen. Time spent on preparation is time saved later, and helps ensure a more effective letter.

There are three important parts to this step:

- Ñ Decide the purpose of the letter. What do you want to achieve? Have action taken about a complaint? Have an instruction carried out by a deadline?
- Ñ Decide who to write to if it is not obvious, e.g., if you are initiating a complaint.
- Ñ Obtain all the information/facts you need before starting to write.

Decide What to Say

Only when it's clear in your mind can it be clear in the reader's mind. The reader might be tired, busy, or distracted. Try dealing with one point at a time and in a logical order. Make sure that you give the letter a structure. The beginning sets the scene for the reader (such as a reference to a previous letter and explanation of the purpose of the letter); the body of the letter sets out the key points; and the end of the letter indicates the next step that should be taken, by whom, and by when.

Put Your Thoughts in Sequence

Divide your thoughts into groups, with a clear paragraph for each thought. This will tell the reader when the writer has finished one thought before going on to the next. Long paragraphs are hard to read and

hard to digest. If you need to use a longer paragraph, consider using numbered sub-paragraphs to help with clarity.

Identify Your Subject

Address the letter correctly. Whenever possible, use the person's name in both the address and the salutation. That's one way of making your letter more personal.

End By Pointing the Way Ahead

Make it easy for the reader to comply with your request with a statement that's aimed at telling the reader what comes next.

Ensure the complimentary close matches the salutation. For example, "Dear Dr. Holt:" is formal so you will want the end of the letter to end equally formally, as in, "Yours truly," and your full name. However, if you began your letter with, "Dear Ted," you may close your letter with a more informal, "Sincerely," and your first name.

Test Your Knowledge

What types of letters might you have to write in a one-month period? List at least five different reasons you might have for writing letters over that time.

How do you let someone know you have received a piece of correspondence?

Correspondence is often routinely delegated. How do you begin a letter when you are answering for somebody else?

Parts of a Business Letter

Here is a sample business letter. Each number is identified on the following pages.



- 1. Letterhead:** Most North American businesses use 8 ½ x11 inch paper, while European businesses use 8.3 x 11.7 inch paper (known as A4). This is often printed with their own letterhead, which includes the company logo, name, address, phone number, facsimile number, and Web site (if applicable).
- 2. Dateline:** Two lines below the letterhead. Alignment depends on the style used.
- 3. Addressee and delivery notations:** Delivery notations such as FAX TRANSMISSION, OVERNIGHT DELIVERY, CONFIDENTIAL, etc. are typed in all capital letters two line spaces above the inside address.
- 4. Inside address:** Type the inside address (the address of the person receiving the letter) single-spaced, starting at the left margin, two lines below the dateline (or five lines below if there is an addressee or delivery notation). It is there to help writers accurately file a copy of the message. Be sure to include a courtesy title such as Mr. or Ms. Avoid abbreviated company names unless they appear in the printed letterhead of the document being answered.
- 5. Attention line:** If you know the person's complete name it is always better to use it as the first line of the inside address and avoid the attention line. If you do use an attention line, it may be typed in all caps or with upper and lowercase letters. Place it one line below the inside address.

6. **Subject and reference lines:** Although experts suggest placing the subject line two spaces below the salutation, many businesses actually place it above the salutation. Use whatever style your organization prefers. Reference lines often show policy or file numbers. They generally appear two lines above the salutation.
7. **Salutation:** For most letters place the salutation two lines below the last line of the inside address, or the subject line if it is used. Even if you are on a first name basis with the individual, add a colon (not a comma or a semi-colon) after the salutation. (Do not use a person's full name unless you are unsure of their gender, as in "Dear Leslie Lenahan:")

Note: Letters addressed to organizations pose certain problems. Formerly, "Gentlemen" was used generically for all organizations. That no longer works today. As of yet, no universally acceptable salutation has emerged, so you will probably be safest with "Ladies and Gentlemen."

8. **Body:** Most business letters and memos are single spaced, with double line spacing between paragraphs. Very short messages may be double spaced with indented paragraphs.
9. **Complimentary close:** The close is typed two lines below the last line of the letter. It may be formal (Very truly yours) or informal (Sincerely or Respectfully).
10. **Signature block:** Place the signature block two lines below the complimentary close. The combination of name, title, and organization information should be arranged to achieve a balanced look. Use commas to separate categories within the same line but not to conclude a line. Women may choose to use a courtesy title, but men do not. Some organizations include their names in the signature block. In such cases, the organization name appears in all caps, two lines below the complimentary close.

11. Identification section:

The writer's name and title, or their initials, may appear three lines below the signature block, left-aligned. Reference initials: If used, the name of the typist and the writer are typed two line spaces below the writer's name and title. Generally the writer's initials are capitalized and the typist's are lowercase, but this format varies. When an attachment or enclosure accompanies a document, a notation to that effect appears two lines below the reference initials. This notation reminds the typist to insert the enclosure in the envelope and reminds the recipient to look for it. The notation may be spelled out or abbreviated. Common formats include Enclosure, Attachment, Enc., and Att. It may also indicate the number of attachments or enclosures, or it may identify a specific enclosure. Copy Notation: If you make copies of correspondence for other individuals you may use cc or c to indicate a copy. A colon following the initial(s) is optional.

12. **Second page heading** (Not included in the image): When a letter extends beyond one page, use plain paper of the same quality and color as the first page. Identify the second and succeeding pages with a heading consisting of the name of the addressee, the page number, and the date. Separate this heading from the continuing text by two blank lines. If you have only one line of text or the complimentary close to put on the page, rearrange your information to avoid that second page.

Types of Letters

We can use word choice to our advantage and create letters that have impact. **Persuasion** techniques are used when you want the reader to do something, but you need to convince them.

Another type of letter is where you need to say “no.” These letters are used so that you can clearly convey your decision, and ensure that the reader does not misunderstand your answer, or find room to negotiate with you.

Let’s look at some guidelines for each type.

Persuasion Letters

- Ñ Rely heavily on the “you” attitude. It is crucial in the “please do something” letter to show the reader what’s in it for him/her.
- Ñ While you may want to use a delayed opening to strengthen your position, don’t take too long getting to the point.
- Ñ Give supporting reasons to justify your request.
- Ñ Avoid dwelling on explanations that tell the reader how his or her cooperation will solve your problem.
- Ñ Make certain you include all the details, explaining what you want the reader to do or how she should proceed.
- Ñ Since you are asking the reader to do something, make it convenient for him/her to comply.
- Ñ Be reassuring and cooperative. Avoid expressions of doubt like “If all goes well.”
- Ñ In your eagerness to persuade, be careful not to make wild promises or unsubstantiated claims.
- Ñ Never beg or grovel.
- Ñ End by giving the reader a picture of himself or herself doing as you ask and benefiting from it. Use words that assume he or she will comply (without, of course, sounding presumptuous).

“No” Letters

- Ñ Read your correspondent’s letter carefully to discover what you can do to get him or her to understand your point of view.
- Ñ Adapt your letter in tone and content to the reader’s level of understanding.
- Ñ Avoid talking down to the reader or snowing him with technical language.
- Ñ Delay your refusal. Open with an empathetic, soothing tone.
- Ñ Try to agree with the reader about something in the opening so that you can begin on common, neutral ground. Don’t, however, mislead the reader into thinking you’ll change your mind.
- Ñ “You” is a word that can be easily overused and feels intimidating to a reader.
- Ñ Give a sensible, reasonable explanation for the refusal. Don’t blame it on company policy or some other impersonal mechanism.
- Ñ Whenever possible, avoid leading into the refusal with negative terms like “unfortunately.”

- Ñ State the refusal as positively as possible. Tell the reader what you can do rather than what you can't.
 - Ñ Don't dwell on the bad news. Be clear, direct, and brief.
 - Ñ Give helpful suggestions when you can. Is there any way the reader can remedy the situation himself? Can you think of alternative courses he or she might explore?
 - Ñ Never accuse. Avoid expressions like "you state" and "your mistake."
 - Ñ Try to give the reader an alternative. Offer any assistance you are prepared to give.
 - Ñ Don't be sarcastic.
 - Ñ Don't try to score points.
 - Ñ Be well reasoned and courteous.
 - Ñ Don't rub the reader's nose in his or her own mistakes or shortcomings. If the reader mishandled a product or situation, say briefly what he or she should have done.
- End on a positive note whenever possible. Often you can express good wishes for future success in a sincere way.

Dissecting Letters

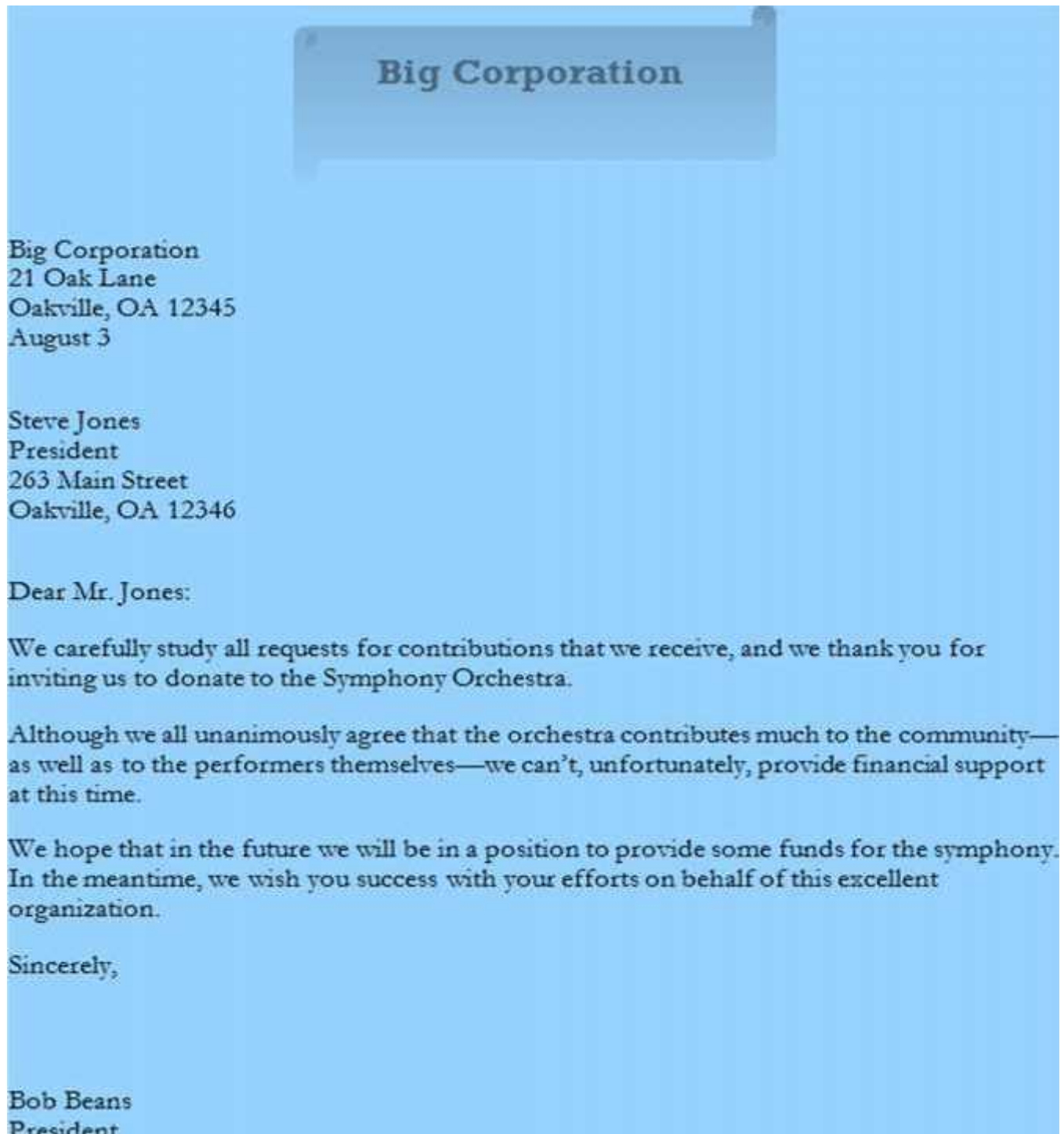
Look at the samples on the next few pages. Identify the different parts of the letter and what type of letter it is (to inform, persuade, say no, or recommend).

Sample One



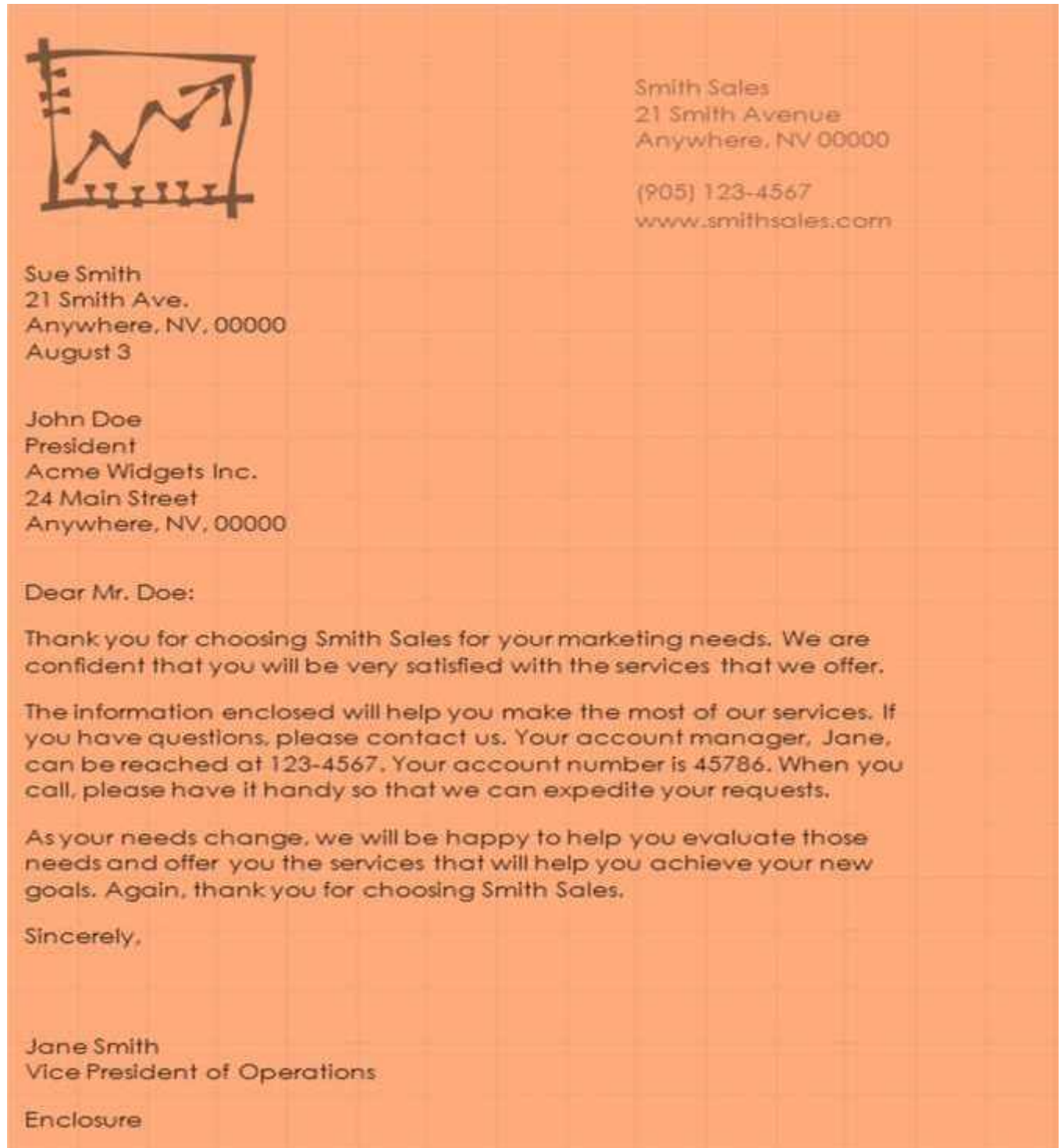
Type of Letter: _____

Sample Two



Type of Letter: _____

Sample Three



Type of Letter: _____

Sample Four

Jane Doe
24 Maple Ave.
Somewhere, ND, 12345
August 3

Sam Spade
PI
Spade Investigations
76 West Side Road
Anywhere, USA, 99999

Dear Mr. Spade:

It is with great pleasure that I recommend Annik Stahl. I have known her for twenty years.

Annik has always displayed a high degree of integrity, responsibility, and ambition. She is definitely a leader rather than a follower. In addition to her excellent scholastic accomplishments, she has proven her leadership ability by organizing a hockey league in North Dakota to provide young people an opportunity to compete and learn good sportsmanship.

She is also a most dependable team player. Her good judgment and mature outlook ensure a logical and practical approach to her endeavors.

Annik would be an asset to any organization, and I am happy to give her my wholehearted endorsement.

Sincerely,

Jane Doe
jd/hb

Type of Letter: _____

Test Your Knowledge

Sometimes you are writing letters to thank people, or to express gratitude for something special. Such letters often end up with a restatement of the initial thanking. What are some expressions you might use as openers?

When you are writing a letter requesting information, what are some of the expressions you would commonly use to make the request?

When you are writing a letter to pass along good news, how can you begin the letter?

How could you start a congratulatory letter?

When you are trying to persuade someone to your way of thinking, what are some strategies that it may be helpful to keep in mind?

If someone is making recommendations or writing letters of reference, do you have any suggestions for them?

Further Reading:

- ✓ Holberg, Andrea, Sonia Garza, Kathleen D. Kelly, and Kathleen A. Moses. *Forms of Address: A Guide for Business and Social Use*. Rice University Press, 2006.
- ✓ Kessler, Lauren. *When Words Collide: A Media Writer's Guide to Grammar and Style (8th Edition)*. Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2011.