

Elements of a Business Letter

There are four optional elements that can be integrated into a business letter, however they seldom appear on cover or thank you letters. Let's look at each element in more detail.

First, there is the **heading**. There are two general types of headings. The first is a letterhead. A letterhead contains the name and address of a company or individual. It is inappropriate to use company letterhead when trying to find alternate employment. Prospective employers could infer that you waste company time and materials on personal issues. This is not the type of attitude you want to display to a new employer. If you have a personalized stationary on a high quality, white or cream paper this could be used. It is expensive to have personalized stationary printed and with the quality of today's ink jet printers it is unnecessary. An individual can design his or her own stationary at home or at the local library. The second type of heading is the standard plain letter form. This form provides the writer's address and may also include a telephone number. This type of heading can be on the right or left side of the paper depending on the style of formatting chosen.

The second element is the **date line**. The date line appears under the heading with one space between the heading and the date line. The date should be written out completely. Do not abbreviate the date in any manner. In the United States, the usual date line is written month-day- year. An example would be April 4, 2002.

The next element is the **Inside Address**. This consists of the title of the person receiving your letter, his/her name, position, company name, and company address. Look at the example below and identify each part of the Inside Address element.

Mr. Steven Smith
Personnel Director
Apex Chemical Company
456 Jackson Drive
Parkersburg, WV 26101

- **Title:** Always address the recipient by his or her proper gender or professional title. Mr. for any male, Mrs. for a married female, Miss for an unmarried female, Ms. for a female if unsure of marital status and Dr. for an M.D. or a Ph. D. To determine the correct title you may have to do a little research. You might want to call the company and ask for the correct title.
- **Name:** Use the individuals full name. Do not use nicknames, abbreviates, or shortened forms of the person's name unless it is preferred by the individual. Again, you may have to do some research to find out the correct name.

■ **Position:** This is simply the person's job title. Chief Operating Officer, Human Resources Director, and Personnel Director are but three examples.

■ **Company:** Use a company's complete name. Again do not abbreviate.

■ **Address:** Street, post office, box, city, state, and zip code

The fourth element is the **Salutation**. Commonly, one to two blank lines are left between the inside address and the salutation. The salutation or "greeting" usually begins with 'Dear' and is followed by the title and complete name of the individual to whom the letter is being sent. However, if you are responding to a "blind" ad which does not state the person's name, and there is no way to obtain that person's name you have two options. The first is to leave out the salutation altogether. This avoids the problem of addressing a gender-sensitive person with the wrong title. The second is to use "Dear Sir or Madam". This option neutralized the gender title all together. After the salutation, skip one line and continue to the body of the letter.

The fifth element is the actually **Body** of the letter itself. The body of the letter should be between two and four paragraphs. The paragraphs should contain no more than three to four sentences of 25 words or less. There should be one blank line between each paragraph to allow for easy reading. This allows your letter to be easily followed and concise. The letter should be one page if at all possible. The first paragraph of the letter will inform the employer what position you are applying for and how you heard of the position. The second and third paragraphs will describe you skills and qualifications for the position. The last paragraph will contain contact information and inform the employer that you will contact him/her about meeting to discuss the position. Don't say "I will wait to hear from you about the position." Take a proactive approach and tell the employer "I will contact you this week to set up a time to discuss the position." It shows the employer that you are truly interested in the position and that you are a go-getter.

The sixth element is the **Closing**. The closing ends your cover letter and can take various forms. Generally there are two blank lines between the body of your letter and the closing. Some of the most common closings include; Sincerely, Yours truly, Cordially, and Respectfully Yours. It is not recommended ending your cover letter with Love or Your friend as these closing are too personal.

The last element of a business letter is the **Signature Line**. The signature line should be on two lines. You should leave four lines between the closing and your printed name. Your actual signature will be placed in these four lines. You should sign the letter with a black or blue pen and use your complete name. If you did not put your telephone number in the heading or in the last paragraph of the body, it is appropriate to place it underneath your typed name.

