

COMM 310 Reading: Canadian Business Letter Formats

Characteristics

A common CMAPP *product*, a business letter tends to have the following characteristics.

- a) It is written communication that is directed from outside an organization to an audience within that organization, or from within an organization to an audience outside it.
- b) It may be sent and received on paper (in “hard copy”), but is often transmitted as an attachment to an email.
- c) It normally contains only text but can include visuals
- d) Normally, it does not exceed a few pages.
- e) It adheres to standard conventions.
- f) It adheres to one of several standardized formats.

History

Imagine it is 1850, seventeen years before Confederation. You are Lee Pearson, the owner of a small company in Bytown, a small lumber town at the confluence of the Ottawa and Rideau rivers, and the terminus of the recently built Rideau Canal. (That still frontier town would, five years later, be renamed Ottawa, and 12 years after that, become the capital of the newly created Dominion of Canada.) You need to communicate with Marcus Dougherty, the president of a Toronto firm, Upper Canada Textiles, with whom you have long done business.

Sitting in your candle-lit office overlooking the Rideau Canal, you would have taken your best quill pen, and, perhaps on your best linen paper, would have carefully hand-written... a letter! Having closed with a phrase such as, “I remain, Sir, your humble and obedient servant, Lee Pearson,” you would have entrusted the document to the already existing postal service, and hoped that Dougherty would receive it within the next week or so.

Both society and technology have changed dramatically since then—although it may seem that the length of time Canada Post sometimes requires to deliver a letter from Ottawa to Toronto has not decreased significantly... Then again, these days, most correspondence would be sent electronically...

People seem inclined to standardize things that begin almost chaotically. For example, in the early part of the twentieth century, not every car manufacturer (of which there were many more in North America than there are today) placed the clutch pedal on the far left and the gas pedal to the right of the brake pedal, or a turn-signal wand on the left of a steering column. Over time, however, uniformity of design became the rule.

This same tendency has given business letters—even when composed in a word processor and sent as “bits and bytes”—standard formats and conventions. But, it is important to recognize that these conventions are not intrinsically valuable. Rather, they simply reflect customs that have grown up and that differ from one part of the English-speaking world to another: what is standard in one place may be thought peculiar elsewhere.

Regardless of other considerations, you want your business letter to be effective. In most cases, part of your success comes from *not having your audience notice* your use of conventions. Consider: you receive a letter from a company with whom you do business. If they have misspelled your name, that error will seem to leap off the page at you; it is the first thing you'll notice, and it will somehow remain in your mind and colour your reaction to the entire message.

Or, the letter's addressing you as *Mr.* if you are female or *Ms.* if you are male, would likewise attract your immediate attention and—however subtly—influence your reaction to the entire communication, regardless of its content.

Similarly, if you found that sender's letterhead and your name and address were not on the page, but were on a separate laminated sheet, you would pause and wonder what they were implying—regardless of the letter's actual content.

Finally, if their letter closed with “Yours entirely amicably,” you would be taken aback, and would likely reread the letter, this time with a slightly suspicious eye. In effect, you *noticed* the conventions, and reacted negatively.

Over the last 20 to 30 years, business letter writers have exhibited a trend toward less formal language (a lower level of discourse) and shorter paragraphs (often of only one sentence). They have also demonstrated an increasing acceptance of variation in conventions. And, remember, those who write business letters *do* over time mould the conventions. By way of example, Lee Pearson's flowery complimentary close cited above was then the standard; today, it would be considered suspect, perhaps “kinky”, laughable, or, at best, antiquated.

Block and Modified Block

Two of the common formats now predominating in Canadian usage are the ***Block*** and ***Modified Block***, illustrated, with explanations as body text, in Figures 1 and 2 on pages 5 and 6, respectively. Their standard conventions include the following.

Letterhead

This “return address” for a business (or for a private individual) is printed as part of the stationery used for a letter's *first* page. (Note that this page does not normally bear a printed number; succeeding pages are numbered but bear no full letterhead.) Typically, it contains the name of the business (perhaps illustrated with a logo), its postal address, an email address, a phone number, possibly a fax number, and probably a web address. More and more commonly, it will also include Facebook and Twitter identifiers. The letterhead's style and presentation are up to its creator. When designing a letterhead, though, you should remember the *CMAPP Complementary Attribute of Accessibility*.

Date

The date the letter was signed must appear; forgetting it can later prove embarrassing or problematic.

Use of the “short-date format” *1/3/2011* would, in Canada, probably be understood as March 1, 2011, but as January 3 in the United States. More common in Canada is the “short-date format” *2011/03/01*, which is less likely to be misinterpreted anywhere. It is, however, better to write the date in full, sometimes known as the “long-date format”.

Inside Address

This segment specifies the letter's primary audience (in CMAPP terms). While variants are becoming more acceptable, the following "formula" (without the + signs, of course) remains the one least likely to be "noticed". (Note that "honorific" signifies an abbreviated title—today often spelled with or without a final period—such as *Mr*, *Ms*, or *Dr*.)

Honorific + First Name or Initial + Last Name
Title
Company
Street Address
City + Province + Postal Code

Today, many inside addresses derive from various kinds of contact lists—the renting or selling of which is a multi-million dollar business. Such lists often lack honorifics; thus, we now often see the first line of the inside address bearing only a first name (or initial) and a last name. However, many recipients assume such an inside address introduces advertising, thereby lessening their interest in the message.

Salutation

A kind of "polite opening", the salutation should take the following form:

Dear + Honorific + Last Name:

Note that the convention requires a *colon* at the end of the salutation line.

When the inside address contains no honorific, the salutation is likely to be:

Dear + First Name or Initial + Last Name:

Again, though, some audiences react adversely to this lack of an honorific.

As business correspondence continues to lean towards greater informality, we now not uncommonly see the salutation form above replaced by:

Dear + First Name,

But, some audiences do not feel that strangers should presume the friendship implied by the use of first names. And, interestingly, it may not always be "older" audiences who feel this way. Thus, you should carefully consider your audience before making this choice.

Complimentary Close

Showing the end of the "body" of the letter, complimentary closes now take diverse forms; however, the three most common—all of which end in a comma— remain:

Yours truly,
Yours sincerely,
Sincerely,

Note that only the first word is capitalized.

Signature Block

The signature block contains two elements:

- the *signature* itself, which, of course, is often quite illegible; and, immediately below it,
- the *signature line*, in which the full name is typed, sometimes followed on the same or on the subsequent line by a title. Note that a company name does not appear here: it is in the letterhead

The Simplified Format

Quite some years ago, the burgeoning North American direct mail industry needed to deal with the “gender-specific honorific” problem. The companies that compiled and maintained the mailing lists often did not know their audiences’ preferred honorifics, but it was to their commercial advantage to offend as few people as possible. Consequently, the industry helped popularize a very practical solution: a different letter format that avoided the “difficult bits”. This style of business letter is usually called the *Simple* or *Simplified* format. Figure 3 on page 7 is an illustration of this format, again explained by the text.

Very little in life carries only advantages; technical communications is no exception. Along with its conveniences, the *Simplified* format—now quite popular with many organizations in Canada—carries its own potential “downside.” Perhaps because the format’s origins lie largely in the advertising industry, some audiences still view it somewhat askance, presuming the letter to be from someone wanting to sell them something. Again, note the impact of CMAPP: what you know about your audience should condition your product.

Figure 1: The Block Format



9999 - 2011st Street.
Langley, B.C. V1V 0M0
(604) 444-4444

April 1, 2011

Ms. Françoise Désormais
Executive Assistant
Radisson Automobiles Inc.
6134 Bank Street
Ottawa ON K2A 2B3

Dear Ms. Désormais:

This letter illustrates the **block format**.

You will notice that there is no punctuation at the end of any of the lines of the inside address—all of which are left flush—and that the two-letter abbreviation for the province (Canada Post's current standard) does not contain periods. As well, the salutation is followed by a colon.

You should note the following common conventions.

Body text paragraph spacing (¶) is normally 1¼–1½ times line spacing. At least three line spaces separate the date from the inside address, and that from the salutation. A single line space—not a ¶ space—lies between the lines of the inside address. A single ¶ space separates the salutation from the first paragraph of the body.

The complimentary close is one ¶ space below the last text line, and (to allow for the signature itself) three to six ¶ spaces above the signature line. Any enclosure notation will be one ¶ space below the signature line, and any copy indicator will fall one ¶ space below that.

Within body text, separate paragraphs by one ¶ space only, and use only a single space (space bar) after commas, semi-colons, colons, and periods.

Unless your “house style” requires otherwise, use left (not full) justification.

I hope you find this information useful and look forward to receiving your letters.

Yours truly,

P. R. Hayakawa

(Ms.) Pat Hayakawa, Instructor, MIS

Encl.

c. Boris Milkovsky

Figure 2: The Modified Block Format



5827 Dixie Road
Mississauga ON L2J 2J2
(905) 998-9989

April 1, 2011

Mr. Flavio Santini
Senior Consultant
Accelerated Enterprises Ltd.
352 St. Mary Avenue
Winnipeg MA R2R 1M8

Dear Mr. Santini:

You will notice that this letter uses the modified block style.

In this form, the date begins at the horizontal centre of the page. The inside address and the letter body use the same format as does the block style.

The complimentary close and signature block—like the date—begin at centre page.

Attachment and copy indicators will be set flush left, as in the block style. Use left justification unless your house style requires you to do otherwise.

It has been a pleasure answering your questions, and I hope to hear from you again in the near future.

Yours sincerely,

Roger Concorde

Roger Concorde
Registrar

Attachment
c.c. Nancy McDiarmid

Figure 3: The Simple or Simplified Format

Newfoundland Office
101 Signal Hill Road
St. John's NF A1B 9A7
709 843-1147 Fax 709 833-7788



April 1, 2011

T. Trann
General Manager, Radisson Automobiles Inc.
1970 Brunswick Street
Halifax NS B3J 3K6

SPECIFICS OF *SIMPLE OR SIMPLIFIED* FORMAT

This letter illustrates the simple or simplified format. While it responds to the possible problem of insufficient “personal information”, it may also elicit a negative response—one that is, admittedly, becoming rarer.

The inside address does not have any required entries (honorific, initial, etc.). You merely include whatever relevant information you have. There is no salutation. Rather, there is a subject heading, always in FULL CAPS, and normally set off by three line spaces (not ¶ spaces) both above and below. No punctuation appears at the end of the lines of those segments.

This format tends to be set in full rather than left justification.

There is no complimentary close. The signature block begins 1–2 ¶ spaces below the last line of body text. Note that the signature line is normally in FULL CAPS, too. Should there be reference initials, or indication of attachment or enclosure, they would begin one ¶ space below the signature line, which is normally set in ALL CAPS.

I trust this material responds to your needs. Please let me know if our office can be of further service.

Leila Berakett

LEILA BERAKETT
ASSOCIATE