The old-fashioned personal business letter- written on pristine, high-quality paper, sealed in an envelope, and delivered by post or by hand- remains the single most impressive written ambassador for your company. A letter has a dignity that cannot be equaled by electronic mail or faxed correspondence. E-mail and faxes have a spontaneous, off-the-cuff quality akin to a phone call. A letter, by contrast, says that someone has planned, written, edited and revised, typed, and perhaps retyped a message. In other words, the sender has expended time- that most precious commodity- to communicate with the recipient.

It's a shame, then, that so many businesspeople regard the writing of business letters as a chore. But it doesn't have to be that way: If you keep in mind the tests of accuracy, clarity, coherence, and correctness and follow the basic rules of form and grammar, you can master the craft of writing business letters- and even come to enjoy the process.

The Parts of a Business Letter

The format of a standard business letter includes these parts:

Dateline

This consists of the month, day, and year. The month should be spelled out in full, and all numbers should be written as numerals (January 1, 2010, not Jan. 1 or January 1st). The date is typed two to six lines below the letterhead, usually on the right side of the page, although flush-left and centered datelines are also perfectly acceptable.

Reference Line

Some letters require specific reference to file, account, invoice, order, or policy numbers. These references are usually typed below the dateline, but they may also be centered on the page.

When the letter runs longer than one page, the reference line should be repeated on each subsequent sheet.

Special Notations

When necessary, letters may include notation of the means of delivery- "certified mail" or "registered mail"- or on-arrival instructions, such as "personal" (to be opened and read by the addressee only) or "confidential" (for the addressee or other authorized personnel). These lines are typed in all capital letters and placed flush left, four or five spaces below the dateline, and two lines above the inside address. On-arrival notations are also printed in capital letters on the face side of the envelope.

Inside Address of the Recipient

The inside address is usually typed three to eight lines below the dateline. When a letter is addressed to an individual, the inside address includes the following:

- **Addressee's courtesy title and full name.** When writing to a woman you don't know, you can address her as "Ms." For unisex names like Pat, Jan, Leslie, Alex, Hillary, and Lynn, however, a phone inquiry to a recipient's firm to confirm his or her gender will save potential embarrassment. Names from other cultures can also be problematic. If you cannot discover the sex of the person, you should drop the courtesy title in the address and salutation ("Jan White"; "Dear Jan White"). It's awkward, but better than risking an unintended insult. In addition, if your recipient holds a doctoral degree, you'll need to do some research to determine whether he or she uses the courtesy title "Dr." (Some Ph.D. holders revere their hard-earned title, while others dispense with it entirely.) For physicians, either "Dr. Smith" or "Jane Smith, M.D." is acceptable.

- **Addressee's business title, when required.** When an individual holds more than one position in a company, your decision to use all titles or just one will depend on the purpose of the letter and the recipient's preference. Do not substitute a business title for a courtesy title, however: Address your letter to "Mr. Richard Lambert, President, Alpha Company," not "President Richard Lambert."
- **Name of the business.** It is equally important to write the name of the company or organization exactly. Look for details: Is "Company," "Corporation," or "Incorporated" spelled out or abbreviated? Does the company name include commas, hyphens, periods, or ampersands? Are words run together? Which letters are capitalized? Find out by checking letterhead, corporate publications, the firm's Web site, or the phone book.
- **Full address.** In the address, numbers are generally written in numeral form unless they are part of the name of a building (One Town Plaza). As a rule, street numbers are written in numerals (123 East 17th Street), though First through Twelfth are often written in full. Also, spell out any number that may cause confusion. City names are written in full unless an abbreviation is the accepted spelling (St. Louis). State names can be written out or the two-letter Postal Service abbreviation can be used- followed by the ZIP code. Foreign addresses should conform

to the standards in the country of receipt. For a letter to a business or organization, the address line includes the following:

- Full name of the company, firm, or organization
- Department name, if necessary
- Full address

- **To the attention of.** If you are writing a company or company department, you may also want to include an attention line that directs your letter to a specific individual ("Attention: Mr. Benjamin Hayes" or "Attention: Director of Health Benefits"). The attention line is placed two spaces below the address and two lines above the salutation; the salutation itself is directed to the company or department.

Salutation

Your salutation is your greeting. In most cases, it is a simple "Dear Mr. / Mrs. / Ms. / Dr. _____," followed by a colon. It is a rule of thumb that you salute a person in a business letter with the same name form you use in person; so a business salutation uses a first name only when you know the addressee well or have agreed to correspond on a first-name basis.

What to write when you are addressing a company rather than an identifiable person? The old-fashioned "Gentlemen" is obviously unacceptable unless the organization includes no females. "Sir and Madam" and "Ladies and Gentlemen" sound stilted. "To whom it may concern" is acceptable but rather formal and cliched. The best solution is probably to address the company ("Dear Blue Sky Investments") or department ("Dear Investor Relations") or to direct your salutation to a specific position ("Dear Human Resources Director"). A salutation such as "Dear Sales Representative" is also acceptable.

Body

Whether your letter consists of a single paragraph or several, the chief rule here is brevity. Business letters should never go beyond one page unless absolutely necessary. The trick is to be concise and to the point, but never discourteous.

Ending

When ending your message, stay friendly and brief. If you know the recipient, it's fine to end on a personal note: Please give my best to your wife" or "I enjoyed seeing you at the trade show and hope your trip home was pleasant as you expected." Even if you don't know the person, your closing can be friendly and helpful ("I look forward to talking with you soon." Or "Please call me directly at 555-1212 if you need additional copies of the brochure.") It is always polite to say

thank you for for a service or attention. Do not, however, thank someone for something they have not you done: "Thank you in advance" is presumptuous.

Complimentary close and signature. A complimentary close is used on most letters, typed two lines before the last line of your message and usually positioned flush left on the page. In most business letters, you want to end on a friendly but not too familiar note. Use variations of "truly" ("Yours truly," "Yours very truly," "Very truly yours") or "sincerely" ("Most sincerely" "Very sincerely," "Sincerely yours," "Sincerely"). "Cordially" and it's variations are proper closings for general business letters, especially when the writer and recipient know each other. If you are on a first-name basis with your addressee, informal closings are appropriate ("As ever," "Best wishes," "Regards," Kindest regards," "Kindest personal regards"). Closing such as "Respectfully and "Respectfully yours" indicate not only respect but also subservience; although seen in diplomatic and ecclesiastical writing, they are too obsequious for most business letters.

Your handwritten signature will appear below the complimentary close, followed by the typed signature. Your business title and company name may be needed, but don't repeat information that already appears in the corporate letterhead. Your name is typed just as in the handwritten signature. The courtesy title "Mrs.," "Miss" or "Ms." may be added to indicate the writer's preference. Academic degrees (Ph.D., LL.D.) and professional ratings (CPA) may also be included in the typed signature. If more than one writer is signing a letter, the written and typed signature blocks can be placed either side by side or vertically.

Final Notations

If your letter is typed by someone else, the typist's initials may be included two lines below the signature block. Once standard in business letters, the use of initials is now a matter of corporate style.

When you are enclosing materials with your letter, the notation "Enclosure," "enc.," or "encl." sometimes with an indication of the number of enclosed pieces- "Enclosures (2)"- is typed below the signature block. The notation "Separate mailing" or "Under separate cover" followed by the name of the piece or pieces ("Separate mailing: 2004 Annual Report") appears when materials are being sent separately.

Courtesy copies- notated as "cc:" or "Copies to"- indicate that your letter is to be distributed to other people. The names of these recipients are listed alphabetically, and you may also include their addresses if this will be helpful to your recipient.

A postscript, or P.S., can be added below the last notation and should be initialed by the letter writer. Postscripts are a common tactic in contemporary direct-mail advertising, as if the writer had one last brilliant reason for you to buy the product. With word processing, however, P.S.'s are rarely necessary and may signal to the reader that you did a poor job of organizing your thoughts if you left important information out of the body of your letter.

For more information on Emily Post Business Etiquette Programs contact Director of Sales and Relationships, Dawn Stanyon at Dawn@emilypost.com.