BUSINESS LETTERS

What this handout is about…

This handout will help you write business letters required in many different situations from applying for a job to requesting or delivering information. While the examples that are discussed specifically are the application letter and cover letter, this handout also highlights strategies for effective business writing in general.

Basic Points to Keep in Mind

Business Writing is Different

It is essential to understand that writing for a business context or audience can be distinctly different than writing in the humanities, social sciences, or other academic disciplines. Writing for business should be crisp and succinct. It should be to the point, specific and accurate. If you have not read many memos before, seek out some examples (refer to the Recommended Texts section at the end of this handout).

In most cases, the business letter will be the first impression that you make on someone. For this reason it is important that you are diligent in your task of writing an effective business document. Even though business writing is possibly less formal than it once was, your writing must still adhere to the conventions of standard American English by using conventional spelling and standard grammatical forms.

Business writing varies from the chatty, conversational style often found in email messages to a familiar co-worker, to the more formal, legalistic style found in contracts. In the majority of memos, email messages, and letters, a style between these two extremes is appropriate. Always remember, writing that is too formal can alienate readers, and an overly obvious attempt to be causal and informal may strike the reader as insincere or unprofessional. In business writing, as in all writing, knowing your audience is critical.

Pronouns and Active versus Passive Voice

The use of personal pronouns is important in letters and memos. Do not refer to yourself in the third person by using *one* or *the writer*. It is perfectly natural and appropriate to refer to yourself as *I* and to the reader as *you*. Be careful when you use the pronoun *we* in a business letter that is written on company stationary, since it commits your company to what you have written. When a statement is your opinion, use *I*; when it is company policy use *we*.

The best writers strive to write in a style that is so clear that their message cannot be misunderstood. Clarity should be the ultimate goal of your business writing style. One way to achieve a clear style, especially during revision, is to eliminate overuse of the passive voice, which plagues most poor business writing. Although the passive voice is sometimes necessary, often it not only makes your writing dull but also can be ambiguous, uninformative, or overly impersonal. Reliance on the active voice to keep

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the pace of the letter moving, use of personal pronouns, and a positive point of view will keep a reader interested. Two examples…

PASSIVE *It was discovered that the salary totals were incorrect.*
[Who discovered it? The Accounting Department?]

ACTIVE *The Accounting Department discovered that the salary totals were incorrect.*

Focus and Specificity
You can achieve clarity with conciseness. Proceed cautiously here, however, because business writing should not be an endless series of short, choppy sentences. Don't be so concise that you become blunt. The use of terminology and concepts related to the industry or field is encouraged in correspondence of this type. These terms and concepts should be used in a way that shows your specific knowledge and experience relating to the endeavor at hand.
A possible starting point is to reread the description of your task (e.g., advertisement of a job opening or instructions for a proposal submission). Making a short list or outline can facilitate drafting an effective piece of business correspondence. Think of your purpose and what requirements are mentioned or implied in the description of the task. List these requirements. Next, identify qualifications or attributes, maybe even answers or objectives, that match the requirements that you have just listed. Strive to be exact and specific, avoiding vagueness, ambiguity, or the use of platitudes. If there are industry- or field-specific concepts or terminology that are relevant to the task at hand, write them down. You will want to use the vernacular of your audience if it will contribute to the communication of your message or intentions.
This list of requirements and attributes will serve as an introductory outline governing your writing and directing your focus. Make sure that it is satisfactory and thorough before you start to actually write the letter or business document.

Application Letters

Many people often think of a cover letter (detailed later in this handout) as being the same thing as an application letter. By definition, this is not the case. The letter of application is essentially a sales letter in which you are marketing your skills, abilities, and knowledge. Remember that you may be competing with many other applicants. The immediate objective of the application letter and accompanying resume is to attract the attention of the person who screens and hires job applicants. Your ultimate goal is to obtain an interview.

The successful application letter accomplishes three tasks: It catches the reader's attention favorably, it convinces the reader that you are a qualified candidate for the job, and it requests an interview.

When you are writing a letter of application, do the following:

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- Identify the job by title and let the recipient know how you heard about it.
- Summarize your qualifications for the job, specifically your work experience, activities that show your leadership skills, and your education.
- Refer the reader to your enclosed resume.
- Ask for an interview, stating where you can be reached and when you will be available.
- If you are applying for a specific job, include information pertinent to the position that is not included in your general resume.

Those who make hiring decisions review many letters of application. To save them time as well as to call attention to your strengths as a candidate, you should state your objective directly at the beginning of the letter.

I am seeking a position as a manager in your Data Center. In such a management position I can use my master's degree in information systems and experience as a programmer/analyst to solve business problems.

If you have been referred to a company by one of its employees, a career counselor, a professor, or someone else, mention that before stating your job objective.

During the recent ARRGH convention in Washington, D.C. one of your sales representatives, Dusty Brown, informed me of a possible opening for a manager in your Data Center. My extensive background in programming and my master's degree in management information systems make me highly qualified for the position.

In the succeeding paragraphs, expand on the qualifications you mentioned in your opening. Add any appropriate details, highlighting experience listed on your resume that is especially pertinent to the job you are seeking. Close your letter with a request for an interview. Prepare your letter with utmost care, proofreading it carefully.

Two sample letters of application are presented here. The first letter (Sample #1) is by a recent college graduate and is in response to a local newspaper article about the company's plan to build a new computer center. The writer is not applying for a specific job opening, but describes the position being sought. The second letter (Sample #2) is from a college senior who does not specify where she learned of the opening because she does not know with certainty whether a position is available.

Sample #1

6123 Farrington Road
Apt. B11

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Chapel Hill, NC 27514
January 11, 2005

Taylor, Inc.
694 Rockstar Lane
Durham, NC 27708

Dear Human Resources Director:

I just read an article in the *News and Observer* about Taylor's new computer center just north of Durham. I would like to apply for a position as an entry-level programmer at the center.

I understand that Taylor produces both in-house and customer documentation. My technical-writing skills, as described in the enclosed resume, are well suited to your company. I am a recent graduate of DeVry Institute of Technology in Atlanta with an Associate's Degree in Computer Science. In addition to having taken a broad range of courses, I served as a computer consultant at the college's computer center where I helped train computer users on new systems.

I will be happy to meet with you at your convenience and discuss how my education and experience matche your needs. You can reach me at my home address, at (919) 233-1552, or at krock@devry.alumni.edu.

Sincerely,

Raymond Krock

Enclosure: Resume

Sample #2

6123 Farrington Road
Apt. G12
Chapel Hill, NC 27514

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January 11, 2005

Taylor, Inc.
694 Rockstar Lane
Durham, NC 27708

Dear Ms. Jones:

I am seeking a position in your engineering department where I may use my training in computer sciences to solve engineering problems. Although I do not know if you have a current opening, I would like to be a part of the department that developed the Internet Selection System.

I expect to receive a Bachelor of Science degree in Engineering from North Carolina State University in June, when I will have completed the Computer Systems Engineering Program. Since September 2000, I have been participating, through the University, in the Professional Training Program at Computer Systems International in Raleigh. In the program I was assigned to several staff sections as an apprentice. Most recently, I have been a programmer trainee in the Engineering Department and have gained a great deal of experience in computer applications. Details of the academic courses I have taken are contained in the enclosed resume.

I look forward to hearing from you soon. I can be contacted at my office (919-866-4000 ext. 232) or via email (brock@aol.com).

Sincerely,

Rebecca Brock

Enclosure: Resume

Cover Letters

As mentioned previously, application letters and cover letters are not the same thing. By definition, a cover letter identifies the item being sent, the person to whom it is being

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sent, and the reason for its being sent. A cover letter provides a permanent record of the transmittal for both the writer and the reader.
Keep your remarks brief in a cover letter. Your opening should explain what is being sent and why. In an optional second paragraph, you might include a summary of the information you are sending. A letter accompanying a proposal, for example, might point out any sections in the proposal of particular interest to the reader. The letter could then go on to present a key point or two explaining why the writer's firm is the best one to do the job. This paragraph could also mention the conditions under which the material was prepared, such as limitations of time or budget. The closing paragraph should contain acknowledgements, offer additional assistance, or express the hope that the material will fulfill its purpose.

The following are examples of cover letters. The first letter (Sample #1) is brief and to the point. The second letter (Sample #2) is slightly more detailed because it touches on the manner in which the information was gathered.

Sample #1

Your Company Logo and Contact Information

January 11, 2005

Brian Eno, Chief Engineer
Carolina Chemical Products
3434 Pond View Lane
Durham, NC 27708

Dear Mr. Eno:

Enclosed is the final report on our installation of pollution control equipment at Eastern Chemical Company, which we send with Eastern's Permission. Please call me collect (ext. 1206) or email message at the address below if I can answer any questions.

Sincerely,

Nora Cassidy
Technical Services Manager
ncassidy@company.com

Enclosure: Report

Sample #2

Your Company Logo and Contact Information

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January 11, 2005

Brian Eno, Chief Engineer
Ecology Systems, Inc.
8458 Obstructed View Lane
Durham, NC 27708

Dear Mr. Eno:

Enclosed is the report estimating our power consumption for the year as requested by John Brenan, Vice President, on September 4.

The report is the result of several meetings with Jamie Anson, the Manager of Plant Operations, and her staff and an extensive survey of all our employees. The survey was delayed by the transfer of key staff in Building "A." We believe, however, that the report will provide the information you need to furnish us with a cost estimate for the installation of your Mark II Energy Saving System.

We would like to thank Billy Budd of ESI for his assistance in preparing the survey. If you need any more information, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Nora Cassidy
New Projects Office
ncassidy@company.com

Enclosure

Recommended Texts:

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Freeman, Lawrence H. *Franklin Covey Style Guide for Business and Technical Writing*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Franklin Covey, 1997.

Locker, Kitty O. *Business and Administrative Communication*. Boston: Irwin/McGraw-Hill, 1997.

For samples of various types of resumes and business letters:

http://careers.unc.edu/

http://www.provenresumes.com

http://www.4hb.com/letters/index.html

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