

Business Etiquette in Correspondence

With such high-tech, lightning-fast communications devices as computer modems, fax machines, cell phones, and like, you may ask yourself, “Why write it (on paper) when it’s quicker to say it (by phone or via computer screen)?” Because in some ways the old axioms the *Talk is cheap* and *Actions speak louder than words* still apply.

Word wisdom

The opening sentence of your correspondence is all-important. It captures your reader’s attention (or it should) and sets the tone for the rest of the communication. That’s why it’s important to be word-wise from the beginning. The way to do this is to follow rule one for business correspondence: Use a form of thanks in the first sentence.

“Thank you for your interest in our company’s product.”

“It was a pleasure meeting with you today.”

This not only sets a congenial and gracious tone, it gives the impression that you’re putting your reader, not yourself, first. This leads us to rule two: Avoid “I”.

Many people are tempted to open their notes, letters, and correspondence with this dreaded pronoun. Don’t. Using “I” in first sentence may give the impression that you’re putting yourself first.

When is a thank-you note called for?

As a general rule of thumb, a written thank-you note should be sent any time it takes someone more than fifteen minutes to do something for you.

If you’re like most busy people, you might be asking yourself, “Who has time to write all these letters? YOU do! We all make time for things we feel are important. This little extra will help put you in the class in which you aspire—that of a true professional.

Don’t procrastinate

“How quickly should they be sent?”

Twenty-four to forty-eight hours from the time you communicated with the person. This rule applies even the busiest people. The closer to the meeting or telephone call a thank-you is sent, the more impact your correspondence will have.

To write or type?

That is the question!

Letters of thanks may be penned when you are sending a note to someone for a courtesy that was expected to you “from one person to another.” Thank-you letters may be also handwritten when sending a congratulatory letter, note of condolence, or the like. If, however, you’re sending the letter that’s likely to be saved or forwarded to someone, I recommend you type it. If you want to add a personal touch, jot a sentence or two on a “stick-um” and attach it to the correspondence. Just make sure it’s legible.

“Marketing” your correspondence

Would you like to develop a writing style that actually makes people look forward to receiving your correspondences?

Impossible, you say? Not really.

By applying a few simple techniques, investing a little extra effort, and polishing your product, you’ll crank out notes and letters that will give you that competitive edge. Here are some tips.

- **Proofread your letters.** The only way to be assured that your correspondence is error-free is to proofread carefully. If possible, in fact, have a second person proof your document before you send it. Do not be tempted to rely on spell-check software, either, useful as it is.
- **Verify the spelling of all names, first and last.**
- **Keep each sentence to ten to twelve words.**
- **Keep your letter to one page whenever possible.** Whether it’s a cover letter for a proposal or resume, or a correspondence introducing a new product or service, this guideline should be followed.

One way to accomplish this is to view your letter as having a threefold purpose. The opening paragraph should establish a rapport or reacquaintance with the reader. (“It was a pleasure talking with you yesterday concerning our company’s...”) The middle paragraph should state the purpose of your letter. (“Enclosed is a catalogue, as promised...”) The closing paragraph should state the next step. (“After reviewing the enclosed proposal, please contact me with any questions...”)

Twenty-first century greetings

Writing to someone you don’t know.

When sending a letter to someone you doesn’t know, the rule of thumb is to take the time to learn the name of the person who will be receiving it. If, for example, you’re writing to the Human Resources Director of a particular company and you don’t know his or her name, take time to phone the company and inquire. While it is perfectly acceptable to write, “Dear Human Resources Director,” or simply “Dear Director,” addressing the person by name personalizes the correspondence and certainty adds a desirable dimension.

Patrick or Patricia? Here’s one for you. What if you’re writing to a “Pat Smith” and the address is a P.O. Box. You have no idea of the company name. What should be the appropriate salutation? In a rare case like this, about the only thing you can do is use the greeting, “Dear Pat Smith:”

If you’re an administrative assistant for someone with one of those names that can be either masculine or feminine (Jean/Gene, Joe/Jo, etc.), learn how to let someone know tactfully whether your supervisor is a man or woman. For example,

Caller: “*This is Paul Jenkins from West Side Savings. May I speak with Jean/Gene Cummings?*”

Assistant: “*Certainty, I’ll tell Mr. Cummings who’s calling.*”

If you’re trying to determine the sex of the person with whom you wish to speak or correspond, phrase the question. For example,

Caller: *“This is Paul Jenkins from West Side Savings. I’d like to send our new brochure to Jean/Gene Cummings and am calling to verify the correct spelling of that name. Can you help me with that?”*

Assistant: *“Certainty. Miss Cummings spells her name J-e-a-n, middle initial A., C-u-m-m-i-n-g-s. Is there any other information you need?”*

“Mrs.”

Here’s a common correspondence mistake. When sending a correspondence to a married woman who has made known she prefers to be addressed as “Mrs.,” many people nowadays have begun using the woman’s first name: “Mrs. Mary Smith.” Actually, despite all the changes in business etiquette and social protocol, this is not considered correct. The husband’s name should still be used: “Mrs. John Smith.” When a spouse’s name is unknown, I recommend that both heading of the letter and the envelope simply read “Mary Smith.”

To whom???

When every effort to learn the name of the person with whom you will correspond has met with defeat, address the correspondence, “To whom It May Concern:” While the intention of the frequently used salutation, “Dear Sir/Madam:” is clear, it should *not* be used. After all, when was the last time you heard a business woman called “Madam”?

First or last?

Even when the casualness that has entered many areas of the workplace, the more formal use of a person’s first and last names is still warranted in many instances. Last names, for example, should be used when

- You are writing to a person you have not met face to face.
- You are writing to a person who has not invited you to use his or her first name.
- The person with whom you are correspondence is matter-of-fact or formal in his or her approach with you.
- You are unsure whether to use the person’s last name or first name in the greeting.

If still in doubt, remember ...rarely can you get in trouble being too formal; but sometimes you can rub a person the wrong way by being too formal.

Signing off

What’s an appropriate signature? First name? Last name? Both?

- Take your cue from your salutation. If you’ve addressed the person by name only, then sign only your first name. If you’ve used a “Mr.,” “Ms.,” or other title followed by the last name, then sign both first and last names (“Sandra Henderson”). In any event, both your first name and last name should be typed under your signature.

Big correspondence mistakes: A review

Why do I continually emphasize punctuality?

For many reasons. Your ability (or inability) to be punctual is a reflection of the kind of person you are. No one wants to conduct business with someone who makes a habit of being late or of not following up within an established time frame.

The others, again, are:

- Using first name when not appropriate
- Using “Dear Sir/Madam:” in a salutation instead of “To Whom It May Concern:”
- Using the word “I” in the first sentence of the letter.
- Presenting written correspondence in a sloppy manner—with misspellings, “white out” corrections, grammar errors, typos, etc.
- Failing to make the envelope as professional in appearance as the letter itself
- Failing to hold the cover letter to one page

Learn to avoid these blunders and you’ll already be ahead in your professional correspondence.

Fax finesse

- Send your faxes when promised.
- Give your faxes the same professional treatment you do regular mail. The speed of the technology doesn’t give you a license to be sloppy.
- For the convenience of the receiving party, always include a cover sheet stating your name, telephone number, fax number, and any other pertinent information.
- If you’ve correction fluid on your document, be sure to fax a photocopy rather than the original. Correction fluid appears as a blotch when faxed.
- Make a photocopy of any document on colored paper. Colors slow down the fax transmission, making the procedure costlier and more time-consuming.
- Keep the receipt of each fax transmission.
- Notify the recipient by phone that the fax has been sent.
- Be sensitive about sending more than three or four pages via fax unless you’ve been requested to do so.

Memo Manners

To help speed up the process and to create efficient, professional looking memos, consider the following suggestions.

- Give memos the same attention you give the correspondence you send your clients and customers. That means proofread. And then proofread again!
- Make your memos efficiency tools. When, for instance, you’re requesting a short response to your memos, designate a space on the document. By doing so, you’ll save the recipient the added time of creating another document. There’s also a good chance you’ll hear from the person more promptly.
- When sending a memo to people on the same professional level, list their names in alphabetical order.
- When sending a memo to people on various professional levels, list them by rank.