

Until recently, the two main types of business correspondence were memos and letters. Letters convey messages outside of an organization, and memos convey messages inside an organization. Lately, however, a new type of correspondence is taking the place of both: e-mail. Because it can be instantly sent and received anywhere at anytime, e-mail is rapidly growing in popularity.

## Before Beginning

Ask yourself two questions before beginning any kind of correspondence. First, who is the audience? The audience and your relation to the audience determine the tone of the correspondence. Second, what is the purpose? The purpose of the correspondence determines the content. Consider why you are writing and what information is required. Collect and organize all the information necessary and construct an outline.

## General Overview

### Form

Leave a margin of two to four centimetres between the edge of the paper and your writing. Writing should be flush against the left margin but with a ragged right margin (don't justify it). Use single spacing within paragraphs and double spacing between paragraphs. In letters, use additional spacing to create a balanced look instead of having all the information bunched up near the top. Paragraphs should be less than eight sentences long and sentences should be less than 60 words long.

### Tone

Use first and second person pronouns (I, you, we) and contractions (can't, didn't) to keep a friendly tone. Also, focus on the reader's perspective, using "you" more than "I". Remain courteous and use positive rather than negative language. In general, memos can be more conversational and less formal than letters because the receiver is more familiar to the sender.

### Graphic Highlighting

Increase readability by replacing long, confusing paragraphs with concise phrases. Include different graphic highlighting techniques; for examples, use numbers for steps, bullets for lists, and tables to organize more complex information.

## Content

### Heading *\*memos and e-mails only\**

**To:** Indicate who will receive the memo. Write the full name and position.

**From:** Indicate who wrote the message; use your full name and position. Include your *hand-written* initials in a memo.

**Date:** *\*memos only\** Put the date on which the memo is to be sent.

**Subject:** Write a brief, but clear title summarizing the main idea. The subject line should only be one line long, but not so short that the meaning is unclear. The subject line should be capitalized as well.

### Opening and Salutation *\*letters only\**

At least two spaces should go between each new section of the opening and salutation.

**Writer's address:** Write the company's name, *not* your own name, and address in the top left corner unless it is already included in the letterhead.

**Date:** Write the month in full, followed by the day and year (e.g. September 15, 2006).

**Reader's address:** Include the reader's full name, title and position.

**Salutation:** Begin the salutation with "Dear", include the reader's title and last name, and end with a colon. If the reader's name is unknown, use an attention line that includes the position instead (e.g. Attention: Human Resources Director). Avoid salutations such as "To whom it may concern" and "Dear Sir or Madam" because they are too vague and impersonal.

*\*e-mail only\** A salutation is expected in e-mails that replace letters.

**Subject Line:** A subject line is sometimes included in a letter below the salutation.

## Introductory Paragraph

In routine correspondence, be direct. The purpose of the memo, e-mail or letter should be clearly stated in the first sentence. One or two lines might be added to give context, but the first paragraph might also be only one sentence long.

If the message is negative, the main idea should go in the body paragraphs and the introductory paragraph should be a neutral buffer that provides the best news, a compliment, agreement, or understanding, depending on the situation.

## Body Paragraphs

Use the body paragraphs to provide details and explanations. Some background information can also help clarify the purpose of the correspondence.

Group similar ideas into the same paragraph, but use a separate paragraph for each different topic. A memo in particular should be clear and concise, so avoid long, dense paragraphs. Instead, use short sentences and highlighting techniques, such as bulleted lists.

## Concluding Paragraph

The message can conclude with a look to the future, a request for action, a closing thought, or a summary (especially if the message is long or complicated). If an action is requested, such as contacting you, also include how that action can be taken, a deadline for the action, and the reason for the deadline.

*\*letters only\** End a letter with a statement that shows goodwill; otherwise, the conclusion will sound too abrupt.

## Complimentary Close *\*letters only\**

The complimentary close "Sincerely" is still expected in most letters. The close is then followed, on separate lines, by your written signature, typed name and position. If you are representing a company, put the company's name between the complimentary close and your signature.

For e-mail taking the place of letters, the complimentary close "Regards" is still expected.

## Extra Notations

**Enclosures:** Note any attachments (reports, graphics, etc.) with the word “Enclosure” at the bottom of the letter or memo. Mention the number of pages included as well. For an e-mail, use “Attachment” instead of “Enclosure”.

**Copies:** If copies of the e-mail, memo or letter are being sent to more than one person, indicate this with the notation “Copy”, “c” or “Distribution” as the last line, along with the names of everyone the copies are being sent to.

## A Note on E-Mail

Initially, e-mail messages were very casual; however, e-mail is now becoming more formal as it takes the place of business letters and memos. The exact level of formality required depends on the content of the e-mail and the relationship between the sender and the audience.

Regardless of whom the e-mail is being sent to, it should always be written with correct spelling and grammar. Also, avoid the use of ALL CAPS for emphasis because it is seen as shouting. Try using *italics* instead. Full capitalization should only be used for the subject line. Another mistake to avoid is the use of emoticons ;- ) since they make the message look unprofessional. Finally, never send an e-mail that you wouldn’t like to see reproduced. Once sent, an e-mail is beyond your control.

Because of the ease with which e-mails can be sent, it’s easy to overdo distributing trivial messages. Remember to send e-mails only when it is needed and to send them only to those who need it. E-mails should never be used to avoid an uncomfortable face-to-face situation, such as when delivering bad news.

## Examples of a Routine Memo and Business Letter

Heading with full names and positions, plus writer's initials

Purpose of the memo stated in first paragraph

Instructions for action and deadline (with the reasons for it) in the conclusion

**To:** Ashley Jones, Inter-Office Communications Coordinator  
**From:** Alex Smith, Department Administrator A.S.

**Date:** February 23, 2006  
**Subject:** DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEMOS, LETTERS, AND E-MAILS

Here is the information that you requested for your presentation on the three major types of correspondence used by our company.

Although the three types of correspondence are similar, there are several major differences between memos, letters, and e-mails:

	<b>Memo</b>	<b>Letter</b>	<b>E-Mail</b>
<b>Receiver</b>	Internal	External	Both
<b>Tone</b>	Less formal	More formal	Varies
<b>Salutation and Close</b>	None	Both	Varies
<b>Number of Topics</b>	One topic only	One or more topics	One or more topics
<b>Enclosure Notation</b>	"Enclosure"	"Enclosure"	"Attachment"
<b>Heading</b>	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Medium</b>	Paper	Paper	Computer

The presentation on the different kinds of correspondence is scheduled for February 29, so if you have any further questions, please e-mail me at alexsmith@email.com before February 26.

Subject line in capital letters

Table to organize information

Reader's address includes the full name with title and position.

Topic of letter stated in the introductory paragraph

Bullets used as a graphic highlighting technique to organize body paragraphs

Complimentary close with company name and writer's signature, full name, and position

Career Writers, Inc.  
702 Riverside Road  
Toronto, ON M9W 5L7

June 6, 2006

Ms. Christine S. Wormwood, Junior Undersecretary  
New Technology World  
704 Ocean Shore Street  
Oakville, ON L6H 1M3

Dear Ms. Wormwood:

**SUBJECT: YOUR MAY 29 LETTER ABOUT THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF CORRESPONDENCE**

The four main categories of business correspondence are those that inform, those that request, those that persuade, and those that deliver bad news. However, before reviewing these different types of correspondence, first consider the different approaches needed when you are writing a letter with a positive or negative message.

If the message of the letter is positive or neutral, the letter should be direct, which means opening with the main idea and following it with details and explanations. If the message is negative, you can use an indirect strategy instead. An indirect letter presents the main idea, the negative message, in the body paragraphs and softens the blow of the negative message with a polite, neutral introductory paragraph known as a buffer.

The following brief overview of the four different categories of correspondence indicates whether to use a direct or indirect strategy and also gives a very general idea of how to write the different kinds of letters.

1. Inform (Direct)
  - Give the most important information first.
  - Provide explanations and details.
2. Request (Direct)
  - Ask the most important question first.
  - Give a detailed description or ask further questions, and explain the reasons for the request.
  - Request action, give a deadline, and show appreciation.
3. Persuade (Direct/Indirect)
  - Capture attention with a compliment, question, or statement of reader's benefit.
  - Reduce resistance with explanations.
  - Motivate action.
4. Deliver Bad News (Indirect)
  - Soften bad news with an indirect opening (the buffer).
  - Give reasons for bad news, use subordinate clauses and passive voice.
  - Close with a polite, positive statement that doesn't refer to the bad news.

For an example of each of the four different categories of letters, please see the enclosed documents.

If you have any further questions regarding the different categories of letters, I encourage you to call me at (416) 657-6622 ext. 6258. I will be happy to provide you with additional information on the subject.

Sincerely,  
Career Writers, Inc.  
Franc Jamieson  
Franc Jamieson  
Chief Writing Engineer

Enclosures 4

Address with the name of the writer's company, but not the writer's name

Subject line in all capital letters

Body paragraphs develop the topic

Courteous, forward-looking close that shows goodwill

The inclusion and number of enclosures is indicated