

Formal Letter



What is a formal letter?

The formal letter is a standard genre in professional and academic settings. While the function and purpose of the document may change based on the circumstances in which you are writing, many of the formatting and organizational conventions will be consistent. Be sure to read your assignment prompt carefully to determine the larger goal of the letter. In some cases, your purpose will be to inform or persuade, to apply for a job/position, or to introduce another document (or set of documents).

How should the letter be organized or formatted?

Typically, formal letters follow a consistent set of genre expectations. Again, be sure to note any specific request made by your teacher in the letter assignment. Common formal letter conventions include (see an example below):

- Date
- Inside Address
- Salutation
- Body
- Closing
- Signature
- Enclosure (if applicable)

Your tone should be formal and appropriate for the audience to which you are writing. Page layout will vary between writing contexts, but typically you want 1" margins on all sides with line-spaces between each component of the letter. Further, letters are typically written in "block" format, meaning you do not indent new paragraphs. Rather, you add a single line space between paragraphs.

Examples of assignments that might use the formal letter format include:

- Job application cover letter (w/ Resume)
- Graduate school cover letter (w/ CV)
- Letter to the Editor
- Reflective letter
- Project proposal

Tips for Writing the Cover Letter:

The cover letter is one of the more common letter formats we use in academic and professional settings. Applications for jobs and admissions packets for graduate school are almost always framed with some form of a cover letter. Here are a few tips for writing a successful cover letter for a job or school application.

Be goal oriented; we rarely write formal cover letters without a specific purpose in mind. Ensure that the objective is crystal clear for your reader. If they have to search to determine your purpose, they will stop reading.

Think rhetorically; focus on the expectations of the job, position, or institution. Try to imagine what the reader will want to see and then write with that goal in mind. Use job ads, websites, and program recruitment materials to determine what a potential employer or academic program desires in an applicant.

Break the letter into manageable sections; typically the formal cover letter works in three distinct parts:

- Section 1 (usually a single paragraph) identifies the position for which you are applying as well as where you heard about it; outlines your interest in the job and sets up your qualifications (why do you want the job and why should they want you for the job).
- Section 2 outlines specific qualifications. These may be special skills/training, relevant experience, or goals and ambitions. Be specific and offer concrete examples. One way to think about the body of a cover letter is that it gives you the opportunity to elaborate on interesting elements of your resume (or curriculum vita). If you have problems with your resume—for example, gaps in work history—the body of your letter is a good place to address them; try to turn these potential problems into strengths.
- Section 3 closes the letter (again, typically this is one paragraph). You want to be clear and direct, but also gracious. Thank your reader for their time, state your interest in talking with them about the position, restate your contact information.

Sample Formal Letter:

Inside Address → Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road
London
N1 9RR

Date → February 8th, 2013

Salutation → Re: Editorial Assistant Career Opportunity

Dear Sir or Madam,

Body w/ Block Format → I am a senior at Ohio Northern University in Ada, Ohio, searching for opportunities to gain professional experience in an editing or publishing field. I have recently learned by way of indeed.co.uk that your company, Macmillan Publishing Ltd, is accepting applications for the position of editorial assistant in the nonfiction division of Pan Macmillan. As a passionate reader and published writer, I feel I have much to offer Pan Macmillan's internationally recognized nonfiction publishing branch.

1'' Margin → This position requires a keen dedication to collaboration and strong organizational skills. Through my commitments to various on-campus publications, I've grown to enjoy working in a group setting. I have learned how vital it is to work *with* other contributors – be they advisers, writers, photographers, other editors, etc. – to see our project objectives met effectively and in adherence to strict deadlines. As Poetry Editor of ONU's *Polaris Literary Magazine*, I am required to regularly review the publication's email account and update corresponding Excel spreadsheets which house submission information. I also lead a small group of staff members in selecting poetry submissions and liaise with my fellow genre editors, co-editors and academic advisor to ensure we are staying on budget and staying on track.

Closing → In addition to my strengths in teamwork and communication, I also feel that my experience as an employee at the Taggart Law Library has given me the needed organizational expertise for which this position calls. Since May of 2012, I have worked as a Technical Services staff member, cataloguing and archiving thousands of case files for the execution of an interactive archive. In order to avoid accruing detrimental errors to the archive, this position demands that I remain, at all times, thoroughly organized and detail-oriented.

Signature → I feel that I would make an excellent addition to the Pan Macmillan editorial team and look forward to speaking with you in detail regarding the opportunity. I can be contacted for an interview at (555) 555-5555 or a-student@onu.edu at your earliest convenience.

Enclosure → Sincerely,

A Student

Enclosure: Curriculum Vitae