# Chapter 12: Business Correspondence

## Objectives

Upon completion of this chapter, readers will be able to do the following:

1. Differentiate among key forms of business correspondence—including letters, memos, and emails—by identifying their structure, tone, and appropriate use cases.
2. Compose a formal business letter using standard components and apply strategies for clarity, organization, and reader-centered communication.
3. Write and format professional memos and emails that adhere to workplace conventions and effectively deliver both informational and directive content to internal audiences.
4. Demonstrate appropriate tone, conciseness, and organization in business messages by revising poorly written examples and applying the “you-attitude”, clear topic sentences, and emphasis strategies.
5. Apply techniques for specific types of correspondence by creating or evaluating examples for professionalism, effectiveness, and reader impact.

## Introduction to Business Correspondence

In the modern professional landscape, business correspondence remains a cornerstone of effective communication. Whether exchanged via email, letter, memo, or digital messaging platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Slack, these written interactions serve as a formal record of an organization’s operations and relationships. Business correspondence conveys decisions, requests, policies, and information both within and outside of a company. It plays a critical role in shaping professional image, fostering trust, and ensuring clarity across diverse audiences. Mastery of tone, structure, and purpose is essential to create messages that are both efficient and tactful.

This chapter explores the principles and practices of business correspondence, emphasizing the importance of clarity, conciseness, and professionalism. It will guide you through the various forms of business correspondence, providing strategies for writing effective emails, formal letters, and internal memos. Real-world examples, formatting tips, and common pitfalls will be presented to help you tailor your message to your audience and context.

By the end of the chapter, you will be equipped with the tools needed to communicate with confidence and precision in any professional environment.

## Business Letters

Business letters are a formal and structured method of communication used to convey important information between organizations, clients, and stakeholders. Unlike informal or internal messages, business letters follow specific conventions in tone, format, and content to maintain professionalism and clarity.

This section will introduce the key components of a business letter—including the heading, salutation, body, and closing—and provide guidelines for writing clear, courteous, and purpose-driven messages that reflect a polished professional image.

### Common Components of Business Letters

Business letters follow a standardized format that helps ensure clarity, professionalism, and consistency. Each part of the letter serves a specific function and contributes to how the message is received. Below is a breakdown of the typical components you’ll find in a formal business letter, along with tips on how to format and use each one effectively.

#### **Heading**

The heading includes the writer’s address and the date the letter is written. If you are using letterhead stationery, you do not need to include your address. Only the date is required. The writer’s name is not included in this section, as it will appear in the signature block at the end.

#### **Inside Address**

The inside address is the recipient’s full name, title, company, and mailing address. This information helps ensure the letter reaches the correct individual and provides a reference point if the letter is redirected or archived. Use appropriate courtesy titles such as *Ms.*, *Mr.*, *Dr.*, or *Mx.*, and spell the company name exactly as it appears in their official materials. If you're unsure about the correct title or spelling, take a moment to look it up or call the company to confirm.

#### **Salutation**

The salutation is the greeting line of the letter. It typically reads “Dear [Title] [Last Name]” and is followed by a colon in business letters (e.g., *Dear Ms. Patel:*). If the letter is informal or written in a more friendly tone, a comma may be used instead. However, avoid overly casual greetings in professional settings.

In situations where you do not know the recipient’s name or gender, traditional salutations like *Dear Sir or Madam* have become outdated and may be seen as exclusionary. Instead, try to find a name by calling the company or checking its website. If that's not possible, address the letter to a department or role—for example: *Dear Hiring Manager*, *Dear Customer Support Team*, or *Dear Admissions Committee*.

#### **Subject or Reference Line**

Some business letters include a subject line, either above or in place of the salutation. This line clearly states the main topic of the letter (e.g., *Subject: Application for Marketing Internship*). It helps the recipient immediately understand the purpose of the letter and can be especially useful in letters concerning ongoing business matters.

#### **Body of the Letter**

The body is where you present your message. Begin with a clear opening statement that identifies the reason for writing. Follow with supporting details or background information in the middle paragraphs, and close with a statement of next steps, requests, or conclusions. Keep your tone professional and your language clear. Be concise—business readers appreciate brevity and clarity.

#### **Complimentary Close**

This is the sign-off that appears just before your name. Common choices include *Sincerely*, *Respectfully*, *Cordially*, or *Best regards*. Avoid overly elaborate closings. Only the first word of the complimentary close is capitalized, and it is always followed by a comma (e.g., *Sincerely,*).

[Example of Block Formatting](https://tiffktijerina.github.io/open-tc-h5p/chapter-12-block-letter-format-example.html)

#### **Signature Block**

Leave space for your handwritten signature, then type your full name four lines below the complimentary close. Beneath your name, include your job title, role, or affiliation—for example, *Customer Service Associate* or *Technical Writing Intern*. If relevant, women may include a preferred courtesy title (e.g., *Ms.* or *Mrs.*) in parentheses before their typed first name to clarify marital status, though this is optional and increasingly uncommon in modern correspondence.

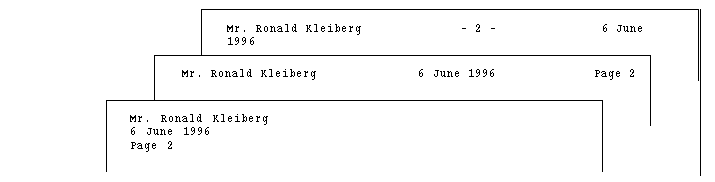
#### **End Notations**

Below the signature block, you may include additional notations:

* **Initials:** These indicate who wrote and typed the letter. The writer’s initials appear in uppercase, followed by the typist’s in lowercase (e.g., *JMP:sl*).
* **Enclosures:** If you’re including other materials in the envelope, such as a résumé or brochure, list them here (e.g., *Enclosure: Résumé* or *Encl.: Résumé and Writing Sample*).
* **Copies (cc)**: If you’re sending the letter to additional recipients, note this with a *cc:* line (e.g., *cc: Mr. Raymond Mason, Legal Counsel*).

#### **Following Pages**

If your letter is more than one page long, use plain paper (not letterhead) for all subsequent pages. Each additional page should include a header with the recipient’s name, the date, and the page number. For example:



*Figure 1: Examples of Second-Page Letter Headers*

Make sure the paper matches your letterhead in quality, color, and texture to maintain a cohesive and professional appearance.

### Business Letter Format and Style

When writing a business letter, choose a format commonly used in your organization or one that suits the context of your message. Standard formats include the block letter, semi-block letter, alternative block letter, and simplified letter. If you do not know the name of the individual or department you’re addressing, use the simplified letter format.

Business letters and memos differ from reports in both style and purpose. Keep these differences in mind as you write and revise your documents. Business correspondence should be concise, purposeful, and easy to read—especially for busy recipients.

**Problem:**

Dear Sir:

On June 1 of this year I purchased a McCallum Model 311 chainsaw from your company. I had difficulties with the saw from the very beginning. After checking with your company, I took the saw to a local repair shop, H & H Lawn and Garden, here in Santa Barbara for warranty service. The problem, a misaligned chain assembly, was corrected in one day. About three weeks later, however, I again had problems. I took the saw back to H & H. The repairman there said he would have to order the parts for the carburetor so I left the saw there, expecting it to be ready in about a week.

However, four weeks went by, and H & H was still unable to get the needed parts. At this time, I had an out-of-town project that called for a dependable chainsaw so I rented a saw for a total of $35. When I returned to Santa Barbara, I found out that the reason for the delay had been that your company had lost H & H’s parts order.

As a result of this inconvenience and expense, I am writing you to request reimbursement on the rental charges I paid for a dependable chain saw and a brand new replacement for the chainsaw that I originally bought.

*\*Writer does not establish the purpose of the letter in the first paragraph. That doesn’t get stated until the third paragraph!*

**Revision:**

Dear Sir:

I am writing this letter to describe problems that I have had over the past five months with one of your chainsaws and to request reimbursement for rental charges that I incurred during that time and a new replacement saw.

There were problems with the McCallum Model 311 chainsaw from the very beginning when I bought it on June 1. After checking with your company, I took the saw to a local repair shop, H & H Lawn and Garden, here in Santa Barbara for warranty service. The problem, a misaligned chain assembly, was corrected in one day. About three weeks later, however, I again had problems. I took the saw back to H & H. The repairman there said he would have to order the parts for the carburetor so I left the saw there, expecting it to be ready in about a week.

However, four weeks went by, and H & H was still unable to get the needed parts. At this time, I had an out-of-town project that called for a dependable chainsaw so I rented a saw for a total of $35. When I returned to Santa Barbara, I found out that the reason for the delay had been that your company had lost H & H’s parts order.

As a result of this inconvenience and expense, I am writing you to request reimbursement on the rental charges I paid for a dependable chain saw and a brand new replacement for the chainsaw that I originally bought.

*\*Writer inserts an introductory paragraph that states the purpose of the letter before going into the problem.*

#### **Get to the Point Immediately**

State your purpose right away. In the first sentence, clearly state why you are writing. Business readers want to know immediately what the letter is about and why they should spend time reading it. Avoid long or vague introductions.

For example, if you're applying for a job, open with something like:

I am writing to apply for the position currently open in your Marketing Department.

If you're responding to a complaint, you don’t need to lead with the bad news. A tactful, clear start might be:

I am writing in response to your letter of July 24, 2025, regarding the issues you've experienced with our electronic spreadsheet product.

#### Keep Paragraphs Short and Focused

In business letters, short paragraphs are the norm—often just one or two sentences. These documents are read quickly, not studied like reports or articles. Dense, long paragraphs are likely to be skimmed or skipped altogether.

Aim for paragraphs of three to eight lines. Even one-sentence paragraphs are acceptable. Shorter blocks of text help your reader absorb and retain the key points.

#### Organize Content by Topic

Break your letter into logical sections. Each topic or subject should get its own paragraph. If you're writing a complaint, for instance, structure your letter like this:

* Describe the problem(s) you've encountered
* Detail past repair attempts
* State the compensation or response you believe is fair and why

Review your paragraphs during revision. If one covers multiple topics, divide it into another. If two paragraphs accomplish the same task, consider combining them.

#### Use Clear Topic Sentences

Open each paragraph with a sentence that signals its topic. Open each paragraph with a sentence that signals your reader quickly grasp the letter’s structure and the function of each section.

**Before:** I have worked as an electrician in the Decatur, Illinois, area for about six years...

**After:** As for my work experience, I have worked as an electrician in the Decatur, Illinois, area for about six years...

#### Use Lists to Highlight Key Points

When appropriate, present information in list format. Lists improve readability and help the reader quickly identify important points. For examples of lists in action, see the formats for block letters, inquiry letters, and order letters discussed earlier.

#### Emphasize Strategically

Information at the beginnings and ends of paragraphs tends to stand out. Place your strongest points in those positions. Less favorable or potentially negative details can be placed in the middle, where they’re less prominent—but don’t omit them.

**Before:** In July I will graduate... I have worked as a lab assistant... I have also been serving as a dietitian...

**After:** In my education at the University of Kansas, I have had substantial experience writing technical reports and scientific papers...

#### Deliver Bad News Positively

Even when the message is negative, you can frame it in a respectful, constructive way. Avoid harsh words like “cannot,” “refuse,” or “deny.” Instead, focus on what you *can* do or explain the reasoning behind a decision.

**Before:** I simply cannot help you without seriously disrupting my work schedule.

**After:** I’d like to help you locate the information you requested. Due to current work commitments, however, I will only be able to answer a few of your questions...

#### Focus on the Reader

Use the *you-attitude*—write what focuses on the reader’s interests and perspective, not just your own. Even when talking about your own qualifications or background, frame that information in a way that shows how it benefits the reader.

**Before:** I am writing you about a change in our pricing policy that will save our company time and money.

**After:** I am writing to inform you of a new policy that will help us serve your large party needs more efficiently and without delays...

#### Avoid Inflated or Legalistic Language

Resist the temptation to use overly formal, bureaucratic phrasing. Use clear, straightforward language. Write as a practical, plainspoken professional—not a contract lawyer.

**Before:** The purpose and aim of the aforesaid program is to provide and permit basic pedestrian amenities...

**After:** The program is designed to provide sidewalks and basic amenities for an arts and crafts marketplace.

#### End with a Clear Call to Action

Whenever possible, close your letter by stating what you want the recipient to do and by when. Weak closings like “Hope to hear from you soon” are too vague.

**Stronger:** As soon as you approve this plan, I’ll begin contacting sales representatives to arrange for purchase and delivery. May I expect to hear from you within the week?

## Memos and Emails

In today’s fast-paced professional environments, memos and emails serve as essential tools for internal communication. While both formats share similarities with business letters, they are typically less formal and more concise, designed to convey information quickly and clearly within an organization. Memos are often used for official announcements, internal policies, and brief reports, whereas emails can range from casual reminders to detailed project updates. Despite their brevity, both require clarity, professionalism, and consideration of the reader’s time and purpose. In this section, you’ll learn how to structure effective memos and emails, adjust tone for different audiences, and ensure your messages are both efficient and impactful.

### Anachronistic Differences Between Memos and Emails

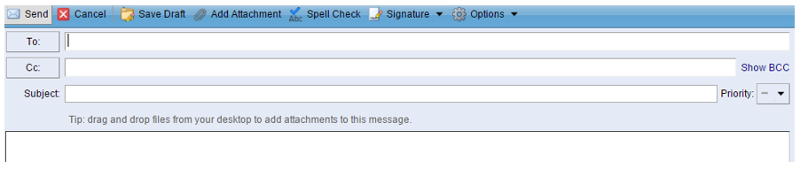
If you like movies, especially ones set in historical periods, you might enjoy finding anachronisms, or things in the wrong time period. You might see something from the present, such as a mobile phone, that is not supposed to be in a movie set in the past, such as 1850.

**Anachronism: "a person or a thing that is chronologically out of place; especially: one from a former age that is incongruous in the present" (**[Merriam-Webster](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anachronism)**)**

For example, in the first Indiana Jones movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, viewers see a plane flying over a map to demonstrate Indy's route in Nepal. However, the map is from the 1980s, while the movie is set in the 1930s before air travel was commonplace. Moreover, viewers see the plane fly over Thailand, but the country was called Siam until 1939.



Surely, no one has ever confused the writing of an email or memo with an action movie, but if you enjoy finding anachronisms, note that some exist in everyday email form. Anachronisms are embedded in it from the days before computers. Can you think of any right now? As we cover the basics of email and memos, we’ll point to a few.



*Figure 1: An email form*

#### To, From, Subject, and Date

If you have ever written an email, you may have noticed that you must provide the name of the recipient and the subject. The email often automatically provides the sender’s name and the date.

Email formats are based on memo formats—that is, they are set up to provide the four key pieces of introductory information that a memo states in its heading: to, from, subject, and date.

For this reason, emails are often considered to be synonymous with memos. Much of the information exchanged via email can be categorized into types of memos: meeting minutes, lab reports, progress reports, directives, and other types of business and professional correspondence.

The main difference between emails and memos, is that memos exist on paper. The key format difference, then, is the signature.

#### Signatures

In emails, it is common for the sender to "sign" the email like a letter. In an informal email, the sender may simply sign their first name. In a more formal email, the sender might have a closing like in a letter—"Sincerely," for example, followed by their full name and title. In this way, emails can be more like letters.

Paper memos **never** have a closing and signature. Instead, the writer would indicate that they really wrote the memo by initialing by their name in the paper heading using blue or black ink. Historically, memos were typed up by stenographers and taken back to a superior for approval. Thus, the stenos would put their lower-case initials after a backslash at page bottom:

To: Martha Garner  
From: Greg Brown  
Subject: Server Outage  
Date: December 1, 2024

This Friday, December 4th at 7 pm EST, our team will be performing software updates and required maintenance to keep our servers secure.

Please note, our LMS, email, and support forum may be momentarily unavailable around that time. Please expect a brief interruption of services.

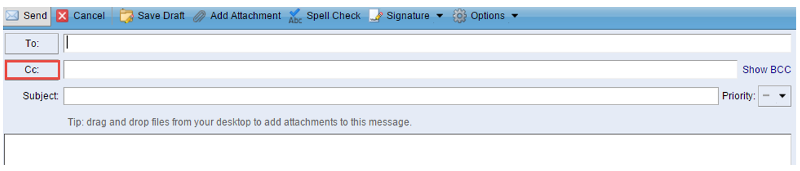
/gb

However, since people write messages on their own computers, the /gb now indicates authorship if they match the From line.

Of course, in email, the reader feels confident that the email originated from the sender because the sender likely logged in to a secure email account.

#### Carbon Copy (cc) and Blind Carbon Copy (bcc)

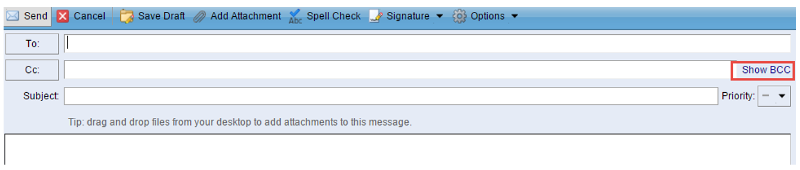
If you examine your email before you send one, you may notice some options that represent the days when memo writing and letter writing were commonplace. You have the option to cc a recipient. CC stands for carbon copy. Before copy machines home printers that could quickly generate multiple copies of a document, people used carbon paper to make copies. When a person would write or type, the writer would slip a piece of carbon paper underneath the document, and the striking of the pen or typewriter key would make a duplicate mark on a second piece of paper underneath the carbon paper, hence the term carbon copy. So, the "cc" in the email heading stands for carbon copy, even though we don't use carbon anymore. In fact, sometimes, the cc is just changed to c for copy.



*Figure 2: The cc/carbon copy line*

When is it appropriate to use the cc option? Primarily when you want someone to have a copy of the email for reference purposes or to keep someone informed. For example, you manage a team, and you recently had a meeting. You send the meeting minutes to the team members who attended the meeting. You also want your supervisor to know that 1) you had a meeting and 2) you covered important topics and some decisions were made. Your supervisor isn't necessarily going to respond to the email and isn't directly involved in the meeting or projects. This is a good time to use a cc. When you cc someone on the email, everyone who gets the email can see who is cc-ed.

Your email also has a bcc or bc option. Bcc stands for blind carbon copy, and bc is blind copy, but they are the same thing. When you use the bc option, only the person bc-ed can see who received the email. The person in the "to" box or anyone cc-ed cannot see that a bc copy was sent or who received it. Some people consider the bc option to be unethical. Others agree that it is appropriate to use the bc option when emailing a subordinate about a difficult matter—a disagreement regarding policy, for example—and you want to make sure your supervisor knows what you wrote.



*Figure 3: The bcc/blind carbon copy line*

People generally agree that using the bc option is appropriate for privacy reasons. For example, perhaps you are an attorney, and you email an insurance company a copy of a client's claim. You might bc the client to ensure the client knows you sent the document and to keep his or her email address private from the insurance company. The insurance company likely assumes that the client will get a copy of the claim or already has one. In another example, professors might send out an email to their entire class using bc to keep students’ emails private from each other. With the bc, every student will receive the email, but each student can only see the professor’s name as the sender. Or you might use bc out of courtesy. For example, if you have received an email with the hundreds of email addresses that were cc-ed on the original email, you understand the frustration of scrolling through them all to get to the message. If it's not necessary for the recipients to know who received the email, then you can simply bc all the recipients. That way, when someone replies, there's no chance they will accidentally hit "reply all."

#### Through and Via

Something you may not know about is the "through" or "via" line on paper memos. In the military or in especially hierarchical companies, it may be frowned upon for a person to send an email to someone at a level above the direct supervisor. At such organizations, any correspondence to a person above the writer's direct supervisor must go through the supervisor, indicated with a "through" or "via" line. The direct supervisor initials by the name signaling that the supervisor has read and approved the memo. It is then sent to the next level until it arrives to its intended recipient. That recipient is assured the memo has been read and approved through the proper chain of command.

To: Martha Garner  
Through: Allison Hall  
From: Greg Brown  
Subject: Server Outage  
Date: December 1, 2024

This Friday, December 4th at 7 pm EST, our team will be performing software updates and required maintenance to keep our servers secure.

Please note, our LMS, email, and support forum may be momentarily unavailable around that time. Please expect a brief interruption of services.

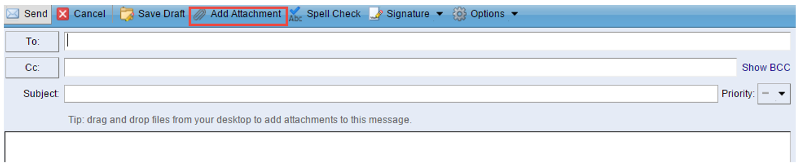
/ah

In an email-only culture, this same process would be achieved by sending the email to your direct supervisor and allowing the supervisor to forward the email up the chain of command.

Regardless of how hierarchical you believe your organization to be, it is generally not a good practice to send correspondence—paper or electronic—to persons at levels above your supervisor without discussing the matter with them first, thereby giving them a chance to review and approve your memo or email.

#### Attachments

Paper memos also indicated if attachments were included. "Attachment" meant that there was supposed to be something paper clipped to the memo with additional information. It was a clear message to the recipient that if no paper was clipped, something must be missing. This is reason that you often see a paper clip icon for the attachment button or notification in an email. Because enclosures/attachments are often indicated by paper clip symbols in an email feed, the "Attachment" note is not used in emails.



*Figure 4: The add attachment button*

It is clear that memos and emails are not the same document. Essentially, memos evolved into emails, although paper memos are still in use, and are often scanned and distributed electronically. In this chapter, we use the terms emails and memos interchangeably; we will clarify if we are referring to one or the other specifically.

## Common Types of Business Correspondence

The majority of business correspondence is standard, everyday communication between coworkers and colleagues. However, some common purposes and genres of business correspondence warrant individual consideration.

### Inquiries

Inquiry letters and emails are a formal request for information, advice, referrals, or guidance from individuals or organizationsin both academic and professional settings. Oftentimes, theier purpose is to obtain data, clarify procedures, or gather expert insights. It is important that your inquiry is well executed, thoughtful, and focused. Try to search the internet for readily available information prior to submitting a request to avoid overloading the recipient, thereby increasing your chances of receiving a helpful response. Demonstrate respect for the recipient’s time and expertise by crafting a concise, well-structured, and purposeful message.

When writing an inquiry, begin by clearly stating your purpose within the first few sentences. If your inquiry is solicited—that is, made in response to an advertisement or call for communication—refer directly to the product, service, or opportunity that prompted your message. In an unsolicited inquiry, it is especially important to provide context to your message.

* Briefly introduce yourself
* Explain your current project or area of interest
* Specify what information you are seeking
* Mention how you found the recipient and reference any source that led to your inquiry, such as a journal article, website, or referral

Present your requests in a clearly organized, easy-to-read format. Numbered or bulleted lists work well to break down complex queries and make it easier for the recipient to respond efficiently. If your inquiry involved multiple detailed questions, consider attaching a short questionnaire or survey. In traditionally mailed correspondence, include a stamped, self-addressed envelope to encourage a reply.

For unsolicited inquiries, it is courteous to offer compensation or recognition for the recipient’s time, such as covering the cost of photocopying and mailing documents, offering credit in your final report or publication, or sharing the completed project. In contrast, solicited inquiries may be more suited to requesting materials like brochures, price lists, or program.

Always thank the recipient for their time assistance. Avoid phrases like “thank you in advance,” which can seem presumptive. Instead, express appreciation for any assistance the reader may provide, acknowledging the effort your request may require. If appropriate, you may also demonstrate how the recipient or their organization might benefit from fulfilling your request, such as potential collaboration, visibility, or future business ventures. A respectful, well-crafted inquiry increases your chances of receiving a response and reflects positively on your professionalism and communication skills.

### Response to an Inquiry

Response memos and emails are vital to professional communication, offering timely and essential information in respectful manner. Response to inquiries typically address questions related to a product, service, policy, or internal process. The sender may be a customer seeking technical support, a supervisor inquiring for a status update about a delayed project, or a colleague requesting clarification on company procedures. As the respondent, your job is to deliver accurate and courteous answers that reflect positively on you as a professional and your organization’s attentiveness.

Begin your response with an acknowledgment of the inquiry and, if appropriate, a note of appreciation. If you are replying to a client or customer, you might thank them for reaching out or for their continued support of your product or service. If the inquiry comes from a colleague, a brief and friendly greeting such as “It’s nice to hear from you” helps set a collegial tone. Recognize that the sender may be experiencing frustration, especially if the issue involves a delay or malfunction. Maintaining an empathetic yet professional tone is important from the start.

Answer questions clearly and be as direct as possible. If the inquiry includes multiple questions, organize your responses accordingly—mirror the numbering or structure of the original message to make your reply easy to follow. For example, if the third question in the inquiry reads, “The instructions say to insert tab A into slot B, but I only see slot C,” you might respond, “3. Please turn the product over—slot B is located on the reverse side from slot C.” If there are helpful online resources, include links and verify that they are current and functional before sharing them.

If you are unable to answer a question—due to lack of knowledge or because the information is confidential—be honest, but never dismissive. Instead of saying, “I don’t know,” explain the situation and offer a next step. If the question falls within your responsibilities but you don’t yet know the answer, commit to resolving the issue. Consult a knowledgeable colleague, reference official documentation, or speak with a supervisor. If the question belongs to someone else’s area of responsibility, first ask for permission to forward the inquiry, then ask the original sender for their consent to share their message. Never forward correspondence without permission—doing so may breach trust or privacy.

Throughout your message, maintain a polite and service-oriented tone. Practice the “you” attitude by focusing on the needs and perspective of the inquirer. Even if the questions seem repetitive or simple, show patience and understanding. Your response is not only a reflection of your knowledge—it’s a reflection of your courtesy, reliability, and willingness to help. End your message with a genuine offer to assist with any additional questions or needs. By responding to inquiries thoughtfully and professionally, you demonstrate both competence and respect—key factors in building strong working relationships.

### Complaints

Complaint letters are formal communications aimed at addressing problems including but not limited to defective products, substandard services, billing errors, or unfulfilled agreements. While many complaints can be handled informally through face-to-face conversations or phone calls, certain situations require the clarity, permanence, and authority of a written letter. A written complaint is especially useful when the issue is complex or ongoing or when previous attempts to resolve the problem have failed. Written complaints provide a document trail that can be referred to later if needed. Regardless of how valid or frustrating the situation may be, the key to a successful complaint letter lies in maintaining a calm, professional tone. Avoid accusatory or emotional language that may alienate the recipient. Instead, frame your complaint as a request for resolution and cooperation, not as a personal attack.

Begin the letter by clearly stating your purpose—to file a complaint and request a resolution—without immediately launching into detailed grievances. This opening should set a constructive tone, signaling to the recipient that you are seeking a fair and reasonable outcome. In the body of the letter, describe the problem thoroughly and factually. Include all relevant details such as product names, model or order numbers, service dates, names of employees involved, and copies of receipts or supporting documents if available. This information forms the "evidence" for your claim. After presenting the issue, specify the exact compensation or corrective action you are requesting. Depending on the tone and nature of the complaint, it may be more diplomatic to delay this request until after you have explained the problem, especially if the situation is sensitive.

Simply describing the problem is inefficient—you should also explain why your requested resolution is appropriate and justified. You might include references to company policies, warranties, industry standards, or past experiences as a loyal customer. Demonstrating that your request is fair, reasonable, and supported by facts strengthens your case. Additionally, it is often helpful to frame your request in terms that align with the recipient’s interests. Suggest that resolving the issue will help maintain a positive customer relationship or protect the company’s reputation. Always assume good intent—present the problem as the result of an oversight or honest mistake rather than negligence or malice.

Toward the end of the letter, reinforce your confidence that the company will respond appropriately. Express appreciation for the recipient’s attention to your concerns and willingness to help. A respectful and solution-focused tone not only increases the likelihood of a positive outcome but also encourages a cooperative response from the recipient. Ultimately, a well-written complaint letter reflects both professionalism and a desire to resolve the issue constructively.

### Adjustments

Adjustment letters—written in response to complaint letters—are critical in maintaining goodwill and trust between a business and its customers. Despite the company’s decision to grant or deny the requested compensation, these replies must be handled with respect, diplomacy, and professionalism. A poorly worded response can escalate the issue, damage the company’s reputation, and may result in the loss of future business. On the other hand, a well-crafted adjustment letter serves to resolve the complaint thereby strengthening the relationship, even in cases where the customer’s request must be declined. The tone of the message should be courteous, respectful, and empathetic throughout, with a focus on restoring confidence in the company’s commitment to quality service and customer satisfaction.

Begin your letter by acknowledging the original complaint, including the date of the correspondence and a summary of the issue. The acknowledgement demonstrates attentiveness, confirming that you have carefully reviewed the customer's concern. If you must refuse the requested compensation, avoid stating the denial immediately unless you can do so in a gentle and tactful manner. Delaying the refusal slightly gives you the opportunity to first express empathy and appreciation for the customer's feedback. Let the writer know that their dissatisfaction is taken seriously and that the company values the opportunity to address the issue.

If granting the compensation, do so graciously—never imply reluctance or that the customer is being granted a favor. Frame the resolution in a way that reinforces the company’s integrity and commitment to service. If, however, the request cannot be honored, provide a clear, honest explanation of the reasons behind the decision. Whether the issue stems from company policy, customer error, or a misunderstanding, present your explanation in a non-defensive, non-confrontational tone. Avoid placing blame or implying that the customer is at fault. Instead, use neutral, constructive language to communicate your position and reassure the customer that their concern has been evaluated fairly.

When denying compensation, it is also helpful to offer a gesture of goodwill to soften the disappointment. By offering a discount on future purchases, a partial refund, replacement with a lesser-value item, or helpful advice may help prevent a similar problem in the future. Gestures of goodwill signal the company’s desire to maintain a positive relationship, even if the full request cannot be fulfilled. Conclude the letter in a warm, respectful note, expressing hope that the customer will remain satisfied with your products or services. Reaffirm your commitment to quality and invite further communication if needed. A carefully written adjustment letter reflects your organization’s values and can turn a complaint into an opportunity for customer loyalty and long-term engagement.

### Progress Reports

A progress report is a formal document used to update supervisors or stakeholders on the status of an ongoing project, providing a snapshot of project accomplishments, outstanding work, and any challenges that may affect the timeline or outcome. Whether the project is high stakes or relatively low pressure, consistent communication through progress reports builds trust, ensures accountability, and allows decision-makers to respond proactively to emerging issues. For example, if you're leading a team tasked with producing your company’s annual holiday newsletter, your supervisor will expect regular quarterly updates. Progress reports might summarize team meetings, outline completed and planned tasks and flag any problems that could hinder progress. Your updates help maintain momentum and allow for early adjustments, especially if there’s a risk of delay or increased costs, even if the project isn’t mission-critical.

The tone and content of a progress report should reflect the scope and importance of the project. If you’re managing something more complex—such as coordinating renovations for a company parking deck—the stakes are higher. Timely, detailed progress reports are essential. A delay in construction, for instance, might require your supervisor to renegotiate parking lot leases, reschedule cleaning crews, or communicate revised timelines to upper management. Alerting decision-makers to potential issues as early as possible allows for thoughtful contingency planning, minimizing negative impacts across the organization. Avoid presenting overly optimistic tone that ignores potential obstacles. Instead, strike a balance: highlight progress and successes, but also candidly describe issues or risks and explain how they’re being addressed. Transparency builds credibility, positioning you as a reliable communicator.

Closely related to the progress report is the **status report**. While a progress report focuses on a specific project, a status report provides a broader overview of an entire department or unit. It may include updates on multiple projects, staffing developments, budget matters, and upcoming objectives. Typically submitted on a regular schedule—monthly or quarterly—status reports give leadership a comprehensive view of departmental operations and help guide strategic planning. Whether you are reporting on a single initiative or summarizing a team’s full workload, approach each report with clarity, organization, and a proactive mindset.

See Chapter 4 for more information about progress reports.

### Directives

Business correspondence serves many purposes, but most often it is used to share information within an organization. For casual announcements—such as reminding colleagues that tomorrow is “Donut Day”—a brief, informal email may be entirely appropriate. For instance, a message like

Hello everyone! Just a quick reminder that tomorrow is Donut Day!

works well when the event is familiar, non-urgent, and does not require formal action. However, not all informational messages are so simple. Consider a more significant event, such as the company’s annual blood drive. In this case, the message may need to provide additional context, especially for new employees who may be unfamiliar with the company’s ongoing partnership with the local blood bank. It can also be an opportunity to highlight the community impact of the event—perhaps by noting that one employee’s family member has directly benefited from past donations, if sharing that personal detail is appropriate and approved.

An effective informational memo or email about the blood drive would begin with a clear announcement of the event, including the date, time, location, and any preparation instructions (e.g., encouraging participants to stay hydrated and eat beforehand). It might then provide brief background on the company’s history of involvement, including participation statistics or outcomes from previous years. The message could conclude with an encouraging statement such as

I hope everyone who is able to consider donation and helping us support our community.

This type of message is considered **informational correspondence**—its primary function is to share news or updates without requiring formal action from the reader. In contrast, **directives** serve a more action-oriented purpose. Where informational messages communicate updates or promote engagement, directives communicate specific instructions, policies, or procedures that recipients are expected to follow. A directive begins with a brief explanation or rationale, then clearly outlines what action must be taken and when. Both types of communication play an essential role in professional settings, but each follows its own conventions and goals.

A well-written directive typically begins with the rationale. Providing context helps readers understand why the change is necessary and reinforces that the request is reasonable. This explanation can also help recipients recall the new procedure and comply more effectively. The directive then concludes with a clear, detailed description of the new policy or process to be followed.

Consider this example: Imagine your company is updating office access policies due to a recent security concern. As employees arrive in the morning, they discover their computers were accessed overnight. A preliminary investigation reveals signs of tampering, though no confirmed breach has occurred. As a precaution, management decides to restrict after-hours access to employee offices. The janitorial staff, who typically clean individual offices during the evening shift, will no longer be permitted to enter those spaces.

To communicate this change, you would issue a directive. Begin by briefly explaining the situation:

Over the past two weeks, several employees have reported that their computers appeared to have been accessed after hours. A security review is ongoing, and while no data breach has been confirmed, we are taking steps to strengthen office security.

Avoid naming individuals or offering extraneous details—this ensures discretion while still offering enough background to justify the change. Take the opportunity to remind employees of computer-related best practices, such as updating passwords but not leaving written password reminders near workstations.

After the rationale, you present the actual directive in a clear and direct manner:

Effective immediately, employees are asked to place their trash bins outside their office doors on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays by 5:00 p.m. for janitorial staff to collect and empty. Please return your bins to your offices the following morning. For security reasons, janitorial staff will no longer have access to individual offices.

This kind of communication helps eliminate confusion and ensures compliance. Employees understand not only what they are being asked to do, but also why it matters.

To summarize: a directive is a formal communication outlining a specific policy or procedural change. Unlike an informational memo, it begins with context and ends with clear instructions, while maintaining a professional and respectful tone. The document’s focus should be on clarity, rationale, and actionable guidance.

### Incident Reports

An incident report is a formal account of unexpected events like accidents, injuries, security breaches, or equipment failures. Typically, individuals directly involved or those who witnessed the incident, complete these reports: police officers, security staff, or employees. In many workplaces, incident reports are standard forms; they must be completed carefully and accurately. Before writing your report, ensure that you have the most up-to-date form and understand what information is being requested. Most forms include a section for a detailed narrative of the event—this is your opportunity to describe exactly what happened in detail. Review your facts before writing: confirm names of involved parties, job titles, date(s) of the incident(s), locations, and equipment details. Avoid vague or speculative language. Only include what you directly observed or experienced, describing any actions you took in response to the incident.

Precision and clarity are essential in incident reporting, as these documents may be reviewed for legal, insurance, or medical purposes. Avoid using casual or generational slang in your report. For instance, instead of saying the bandages were “straight up MIA” (a slang term sometimes used to mean thrown away, removed, or gone), write that the first aid kit did not contain any bandages. Be honest and objective. Including false or misleading information—intentionally or accidentally—can have serious consequences, including disciplinary action or loss of benefits. Do not assign blame, speculate about causes, or admit fault, even if you think you made a mistake. Determining responsibility is the role of investigators or supervisors who have access to a broader context. Your job is to report the facts clearly and professionally.

If no official form is provided, write your report in a well-organized narrative format. Present the information chronologically:

* Begin with the moment you became aware of the incident
* Break up long sections into paragraphs to improve readability.
* Pay careful attention to spelling, grammar, and sentence structure—especially since your report may be used as part of an official investigation or legal process.

A clearly written, fact-based incident report helps protect everyone involved and ensures that appropriate actions can be taken in response to the event.

### Meeting Minutes

For most formal meetings, someone is responsible for recording key points of discussion and any decisions made. These records—called *meeting minutes*—serve as an official record of what took place and are often filed for future reference. If a question later arises a topic that was discussed, the minutes are the first place people check for clarity.

In many organizations, a designated person—often a secretary—records the minutes. In other settings, the responsibility may rotate among attendees. After the meeting, the minutes are “written up,” a common term that refers to formatting and preparing the notes for distribution to the group.

Meeting minutes typically follow a standard format. They are then shared via email, uploaded to a shared folder, or distributed as a memo. A complete set of minutes includes the following in the header:

* Name of the organization or group
* Date and location of the meeting
* Names of attendees
* Name of the meeting leader or chairperson
* Name of the person recording the minutes
* Start and end time of the meeting

Meetings usually follow a pre-set *agenda*, which is often shared ahead of time. Many people find it helpful to open the agenda in a word processing program and take notes directly under each agenda item. This step ensures that the original wording of each topic is preserved, and the structure of the meeting is reflected within the minutes.

The body of the minutes summarizes what occurred. This includes:

* Who presented each agenda item
* Motions made, by whom, and who seconded them
* The outcomes of any votes
* Decisions reached
* Whether an item was tabled (postponed) for a future meeting

It's important to keep minutes concise and focused. Minutes should not be a word-for-word transcript or a detailed account of back-and-forth conversation. Instead, capture only the essential points. If there was a lively or even tense discussion, avoid including personal remarks or conflicts. Simply note that the topic was discussed and record the outcome or next steps. The goal is to create a clear and professional record that reflects the work of the group while maintaining a positive, neutral tone.

In short, meeting minutes are a vital tool for organizational memory. They provide a snapshot of decisions and discussions, and they should be written in a way that is objective, well-organized, and easy to reference.

## Attribution

This chapter is revised from the first edition of *Open Technical Communication*, Chapter 2.1: “[Business Correspondence and Resumes](https://alg.manifoldapp.org/read/open-technical-communication/section/67472d69-a8f9-4aa9-9342-501970a730e7)” by David McMurrey and Chapter 2.13: “[Memos and Emails](https://alg.manifoldapp.org/read/open-technical-communication/section/ae63b0b2-c5f8-4747-bd36-365f68a55c77)” by Tamara Powell and Tiffani Tijerina, which are both openly available under a Creative Commons Attribution license.

The content in Chapter 2.1 of the first edition of *Open TC* was originally sourced and revised from David McMurrey’s *Online Technical Writing*, section titled “[Business Correspondence and Resumes](https://mcmassociates.io/textbook/lettov.html),” which is openly available under a Creative Commons Attribution license.

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## AI Assistance Notice

Some parts of this chapter were brainstormed, drafted, and/or revised in conversation with ChatGPT 4o and Google Gemini 2.5 Flash. All AI-generated content was reviewed and revised as needed by a human author.