

ENGLISH BUSINESS LETTERS

NEW EDITION

F.W. KING
D. ANN CREE

Revised by David O'Gorman



English Business letters is a new edition of the established **Modern English Business letters**, and provides pre-intermediate and intermediate students with a complete guide to the writing and layout of business letters.

This new edition contains some 150 specimen letters and over 700 phrases and extracts from letters. Examples of both British and American style are given. All the kinds of business letters required by various firms are discussed, ranging from enquiries, offers, sales letters, reminders, complaints and adjustments, collection and delivery letters, to those arranging appointments, travel-and accommodation. With each chapter there are exercises giving students practice in writing similar letters. All the letters are presented in an attractive and realistic style, and the revisions have taken into account decimalisation and metrication.

Special attention has been paid to the needs of students whose interest lies mainly in import-export matters, and information is given on terms used in all aspects of foreign trade, including accounting, agencies, banking, insurance and transport.

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Introduction

The English language has often been described as a 'living' language. This means that it grows and renews itself by a never-ending process of taking up new words and expressions and pushing worn-out ones into the background to languish or die. The process is slow: each age adds something to the national heritage, something that is typical of the spirit of that age. The result is clearly seen in the writing and speech of that age.

In compiling this work on Business English we had in mind chiefly the need of the foreign student of English who has mastered basic grammar and acquired a fair vocabulary and some idiom, and who now wishes to apply his knowledge to the study of business letter writing. We have therefore given examples of letters written in a clear, direct, friendly and positive style. (We have also kept in mind the need of the student who requires English for correspondence with English-speaking countries, and whose interest therefore lies mainly in import-export matters.)

In this new edition we have given 150 specimen letters as well as some 740 phrases and extracts from letters. No book of commercial correspondence could reproduce specimen letters in every style of expression used in commercial writing, but the carefully classified groups of phrases given will enable the student to build his own letters on the pattern of the specimens.

In this edition many of the letters are presented in a more attractive and realistic style and the revisions have also taken into account decimalisation and metrication.

We think these revisions will make our book even more useful as a guide to business letter writing.

F. W. KING

D. ANN CREE

1 | Business letter writing

Letter-writing is an essential part of business. In spite of telephone, telex and telegraphic communication the writing of letters continues; in fact most telephoned and telegraphed communications have to be confirmed in writing.

The letter is often evidence of an arrangement or a contract, and must therefore be written with care; even the shortest and most usual of letters may have this importance. The need for thought in writing is clear when you realise that in speaking—either face-to-face or by telephone—the reaction to the spoken word can be seen or heard immediately, but reaction to a letter is not known until the answer is received.

When you have written a letter, read it through carefully; see that you have put in everything you intended, and have expressed it well; read it again, trying to put yourself in the place of the receiver, to find out what impression your letter will make.

It is obvious that what has been said in the previous paragraph becomes even more important when you write a letter in a foreign language. Unless you know that particular language very well you are certain to translate some phrases from your own language literally; these phrases may then convey quite a different meaning from that intended. It is in any case impossible to translate all business phrases literally as each language has its own characteristic idiom. With this in mind we have given as large a selection as possible of English phrases in general use.

A question frequently asked is: 'How long should a good letter be?' The answer is: 'As long as is necessary to say what has to be said.' The manner of interpreting this varies, of course, with the writer, and also very greatly with the nationality of the writer.

Because the aim of the letter is to secure the interest of the reader, and his co-operation, the letter should begin with sentences that will introduce the matter without undue delay, and polite forms to help the introduction must not be too long. The letter should continue with the subject itself and all the necessary information or arguments connected with it, but the wording must carry the reader along smoothly; jerky, over-short or disjointed sentences spoil the impression. The letter should have a suitable ending—one that is not long but makes the reader feel that his point of view is being considered. This is especially necessary when sellers are writing to buyers.

Waste of time in subsequent letters should be avoided by giving all the information likely to be required, unless the writer purposely refrains from going into too much detail until he knows the reaction of his correspondent.

A good vocabulary is necessary, both in your own and foreign languages; repetition should be avoided as much as possible, except where the exact meaning does not allow any change of word.

Everyone has a characteristic way of writing, but it must be remembered that the subject of the routine business letter lacks variety and certain accepted phrases are in general use. This is of great help to the foreigner, who can rely on them to compose a letter that will be understood. Let us say, perhaps, that a routine business letter is like a train, running on a railway track, whereas other letters are like cars that must, of course, keep to the road but are otherwise given greater freedom of movement than a train.

This greater 'freedom of movement' applies also to business correspondence dealing with matters of policy, special offers, negotiations, reports and customers' complaints, all of which are matters that demand individual treatment. Here the correspondent must not only make his meaning clear but also try to create in the reader's imagination a true impression of his attitude. This is by no means so difficult as it may seem if the writer will remember that simplicity of word and phrase usually gives the impression of sincerity. Also a style of writing which is natural to the writer carries his personality to the reader.

In foreign trade, with its numerous problems and complications, the use of forms is a necessity: it facilitates the handling of goods at the various stages, indicates that regulations have been complied with, and saves unnecessary correspondence. It is the repetitive nature of many business transactions that makes it possible for the form to do the work of the letter. A study of the wording on forms is therefore advisable, and one or two specimens relating to certain transactions will be found in later chapters.

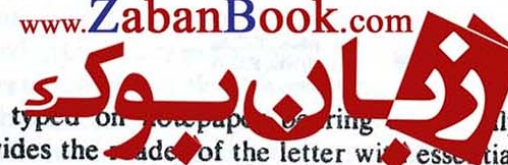
The growing use of the telephone and telegraph is also reducing correspondence in this age when, as never before, 'time is money'. Another factor is the increasing personal contact in international trade. With any one part of the world only a few hours' flying time from any other it is not surprising that many businessmen prefer to make personal visits in order to discuss important matters on the spot.

Other modern conditions and tendencies that have their effect on the nature of correspondence are the establishment of foreign companies by large international organisations, business tie-ups between pairs of firms in different countries, export and import controls and restrictions, currency controls and the financial policies of governments.

The really competent correspondent therefore needs to understand something of the principles and practice of modern commerce. There is no room in this book for even an outline of these principles, but some brief explanations of certain procedures are given in order to help the less experienced student to understand the letters that follow.


2 | The letter heading and the layout

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Business letters are usually typed on notepaper bearing a specially designed heading which provides the reader of the letter with essential information about the organisation sending it. Normally the heading will include the company's name and address, its telephone numbers and telegraphic addresses, the type of business it is engaged in, its telex code and V.A.T.¹ number, and in many cases the names of the directors. It is becoming increasingly common for firms to print an emblem or trademark on their stationery.

Here is an example of a heading that might be used by a British company:

Telegrams: BRONK LONDON Registered Number 725716	 H. BROWN & W. PINK LIMITED <i>Home & Overseas Merchants</i>	Telephone: 01 486 0517 (2 lines)
DIRECTORS: H. BROWN W. PINK		18 HILL ST. LONDON W1M 5RN

The firm in this example is a *limited company*,² and this fact is indicated by the word 'Limited' (very often abbreviated to 'Ltd.'), which is printed after the name. Since the name of the company does not show what its line of business is, this is stated separately.

Here are two more examples of letter headings, both of which would be used by *partnerships*.²

GREY, BLACK & WHITE	
SOLICITORS <hr/> T.M. White G.R. Jones	Telephone: 01 388 5599 265 HIGH HOLBORN LONDON WC1H 8BA

¹ Value Added Tax, an indirect tax which replaced Purchase Tax in connection with Britain's entry into the European Economic Community (the E.E.C.). ² See page 8.

of the firm written to need to be made. Firstly, they are typed on the left, normally against the margin. The diagonal grading of the name and address is rare nowadays, and the style shown in the example is neater, as well as being quicker for the typist.

Secondly, the use of *Messrs.* (an abbreviated form of *Messieurs*, the French word for *Gentlemen*) should not be used in front of the name of a limited company, nor should it appear with the names of firms which indicate their line of business and do not consist of family names. It follows, therefore, that *Messrs.* will be used mostly when a partnership is being addressed, as in this example:

Messrs. Hamilton and Jacobs
265 High Holborn
London WC1 7GS

Note also that the number of the street in the address always precedes the name of the street, and that in the case of large towns and cities in the United Kingdom the name of the county is not required. It is not necessary, for example, to add 'Lancashire' to the address in the example on page 4. However, when the firm addressed is situated in a smaller town, the county name is necessary, and it should be remembered that in Britain there are two Richmonds, one in Surrey and another in Yorkshire, and several Newports, for example.

- (e) *The salutation.* Below the address a double space at least is left, and the words 'Dear Sirs' are typed. This is the usual *salutation* in British business letters addressed to a company rather than to an individual within the company. Very often a comma is typed after the salutation, but an increasing number of firms are eliminating this, considering the spacing to fulfil the function of traditional punctuation. Once again, there are no hard-and-fast 'rules', but every firm will have its own policy. In the U.S.A. the most common salutation is 'Gentlemen:'. Note that the salutation is typed against the left-hand margin.

When writing to an individual within the firm addressed, the salutation is 'Dear Sir' ('Dear Madam' if the recipient is known to be a woman), or 'Dear Mr_____', 'Dear Mrs._____', 'Dear Miss_____', or 'Dear Ms._____' if the addressee is addressed by name rather than by position.

In recent years the use of the form *Ms* has become quite common, originated in the U.S.A. and, like its 'male' equivalent *Mr*, it indicates whether the person addressed is male or female.

- (f) *The complimentary close.* This is typed above the name of the firm sending the letter, then a space is left for the signature. If the salutation is 'Dear Sirs' or 'Dear Sir', the complimentary close will read 'Yours faithfully' or, less commonly, 'Yours truly'. If the correspon-

dent is addressed by his or her name—'Dear Mr Brown', 'Dear Miss James', etc.—the complimentary close will take the form 'Yours sincerely'.

Here are some examples:

Name and address	Salutation	Complimentary close
Southern Airways Ltd. 250 Oxford Street London W1 7TM	Dear Sirs	Yours faithfully (Yours truly)
The Marketing Manager Software Ltd. Richmond Surrey SFY 3DF	Dear Sir	Yours faithfully (Yours truly)
Ms J. Faulkner British Films Ltd. 3 Wardour St. London W1 5JN	Dear Ms Faulkner	Yours sincerely

- (g) *The signature.* It often happens that the person who has dictated a letter is unable to sign it as soon as it has been typed. Since it is often essential to send a letter as soon as possible, the typist or some other employee connected with the letter in question will sign it instead: in such cases he or she will write the word 'for' or the initials 'p.p.' immediately before the typed name of the employee responsible for the letter.

The name of the person signing the letter is typed below the space left for the signature, and is followed on the next line by his position in the company or by the name of the department he represents.

Traditionally the complimentary close and signature have been typed in the middle of the page, but it is becoming more and more common for firms to place them against the left-hand margin.

The example on page 4 does not mention an *enclosure*, nor does it have a *subject line*.

If an enclosure accompanies the letter, this fact is indicated both in the text itself and by the word *Enclosure* (often reduced to *Enc.* or *Encl.*) typed against the left-hand margin some distance below the signature. There are other ways of referring to enclosures—the use of adhesive labels, for instance, or the typing of lines in the left-hand margin beside the reference in the text to the document or documents enclosed—but typing the word *Enclosure* at the bottom of the letter is by far the most common.

The subject matter of a letter is often indicated in a *subject line* which appears below the salutation:

Dear Sirs

Your order no. 6544 of 15 March 1977

The term 'Re-' is seldom used these days to introduce the subject: like other Latin words which have been employed in British correspondence for decades, it is now considered old-fashioned and artificial. (See Chapter 1) Subject lines are not always required, and the date of a letter referred to in the first line of the answer is often sufficient to indicate what the subject is.

STYLE OF AMERICAN FIRMS

Foreign learners of English commercial correspondence should beware of drawing a sharp distinction between British and American styles. The fact of the matter is that the similarities are more striking than the differences, and the differences between British and American English in general are fewer and less important now than they were, say, fifteen or twenty years ago. For correspondence purposes it is quite enough to be familiar with one particular layout and one particular set of conventions, since Americans have no difficulty in understanding British business letters, and *vice versa*. Another point to bear in mind is the fact that the majority of business letters today are written, not by Americans or British people, but by individuals and firms using English as a foreign language. This is another factor which has caused the two styles to merge to a very considerable extent, and provided you follow the advice given in this chapter and elsewhere, your letters will conform to modern business practice.

TYPES OF BRITISH FIRMS

The *limited liability company*, or *joint stock company*, is the commonest type of firm in the United Kingdom. The company is owned by shareholders, and the term 'limited liability' means that when the full price of a share has been paid the holder has no further liability to contribute money to the company.

The shareholders in a limited company elect a Board of Directors, and these men and women are responsible for looking after the financial interests of those who elect them. The directors appoint one of their number to the position of Managing Director, and he or she is the link between the Board, who make policy decisions, and management, whose function it is to execute the policy determined on. Thus the Managing Director is in charge of the day-to-day running of the company, and in large organisations he is often assisted by a General Manager. The various departmental managers—the Sales Manager, the Personnel

Manager, the Chief Buyer, and others—are responsible to the Managing Director for the efficient running of their departments. British company law requires a limited company to have a Company Secretary. (See Chapter 14)

Another type of firm is the *partnership*. In this case limited liability does not extend to the whole firm and all partners (even in a *limited partnership* there must be at least one partner with unlimited liability), so partnerships are very seldom manufacturing or trading firms. They tend rather to be professional organisations such as firms of solicitors, auditors, architects, or management consultants. The names of all partners must, in accordance with the law in Britain, be printed on the stationery of a partnership.

EXERCISES

1. Design a letter heading for a company manufacturing washing machines, refrigerators and other household equipment. Include all the information about your company which is normally shown in a modern letter heading.
2. Write out the following date in three or four different ways in which it might appear at the top of a business letter: *the fourteenth of April nineteen-seventy-eight*.
3. Imagine you are writing to the company whose letter heading appears on page 4. How would you set out the inside address, and what would the salutation and complimentary close be?
4. Below are names and addresses which might appear—suitably set out, of course—in the top left-hand corner of a business letter. Give the correct salutation and complimentary close in each case:
 - (a) Burke and Sons Ltd., 55 Inkerman Road, London SE5 8BZ.
 - (b) The Sales Manager, BGW Electrics Ltd., Liverpool 4.
 - (c) Mr A. L. Moon, British Rail (Southern Region), London W1M 2BT.
 - (d) Ms Angela Box, Gorton and Sons, 344 Oxford St., London W1A 3BA.
5. Which of the organisations mentioned in Exercise 4 should be addressed as *Messrs.*? Give your reasons for including or omitting *Messrs.* in all four cases.

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3 | The enquiry

Most letters of enquiry are short and simple, so much so that many firms have adopted the practice of sending printed enquiry forms, thereby eliminating the need for a letter. As a prospective buyer, the writer of an enquiry states briefly and clearly what he is interested in, and this is all the receiver of the letter needs to know.

It is rather different when the object of your enquiry is to obtain a special price for regular orders, or selling rights in your area. In cases like these you are asking for concessions, and you have to 'sell' your proposal to the supplier. This requires much more skill than does the writing of a routine enquiry, and we will be returning to letters of this type shortly.

A first enquiry—a letter sent to a supplier with whom you have not previously done business—should include:

- (a) A brief mention of how you obtained your potential supplier's name.
Your source may be an embassy, consulate, or chamber of commerce; you may have seen the goods in question at an exhibition or trade fair; you may be writing as the result of a recommendation from a business associate, or on the basis of an advertisement in the daily, weekly or trade press.
- (b) Some indication of the demand in your area for the goods which the supplier deals in.
- (c) Details of what you would like your prospective supplier to send you. Normally you will be interested in a catalogue, a price list, discounts, methods of payment, delivery times, and, where appropriate, samples.
- (d) A closing sentence to round off the enquiry.

Here are some suggestions for sentences which you might include in a routine enquiry:

Opening lines

1. Your name has been given us by the British Chamber of Commerce in Hamburg, . . .
2. The British Embassy in Copenhagen has advised us to get in touch with you concerning . . .
3. We saw your products demonstrated at the Hanover Fair earlier this year, and would like to know whether . . .
4. Messrs. Rawlingson and Townsend of Bletchley, who we understand have been doing business with you for some years, inform us that you may be able to supply us with . . .
5. We have seen your advertisement in last Sunday's *Observer*, and would be grateful if you would let us have details of . . .
6. Your advertisement in this month's issue of *The Shoemaker* states that you can offer . . .

Indicating the state of the market

7. There is a brisk demand here for high-quality sports shirts of the type you manufacture.
8. Demand for this type of machine is not high, but sales this year will probably exceed £25,000.
9. These fancy goods are in demand during the tourist season (late May to early September), but for the rest of the year sales are moderate, and often rather low.
10. There is no market here for articles of this type in the higher price ranges, but less expensive models sell very well throughout the year.
11. You can count on a brisk turnover if prices are competitive and deliveries prompt.

Asking for information

12. Will you please send us your catalogue and price list for . . .
13. Will you please quote prices c.i.f. Amsterdam for the following items in the quantities stated: . . .
14. We would be glad to receive specifications of your new SE11 typewriter, together with your current export price list and details of trade discounts.
15. We are also interested in your terms of payment and in discounts offered for regular purchases and large orders.
16. If we place orders with you we will have to insist on prompt delivery. Can you guarantee delivery within three weeks of receiving orders?
17. We would appreciate a sample of each of the items listed above.

Closing sentences

18. We are looking forward to hearing from you.
19. We would appreciate a prompt answer.
20. As our own customers are pressing us for a quotation, we hope you will be able to make us an offer within a fortnight from today's date.
21. We hope to hear from you shortly.
22. Since the season will soon be under way, we must ask you to reply by the end of this month.

The first three model letters in this chapter are examples of routine first enquiries. Letters 1 and 2 are addressed direct to suppliers, while no. 3 is written to an agent.