
UNIT 17 LETTERS: STRUCTURE AND CONVENTIONS

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17.1 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the unit is to introduce you to

- the information usually found in a letter, and
- how these pieces of information are usually arranged in a letter.

17.2 INTRODUCTION

Most of us use the telephone so often for our work and personal communication that we wonder if we need to write letters at all. It's true that people often phone now when, in the past, they would have written a letter. But we still need to write effective letters. Job seekers write letters applying for jobs. We write letters to find out about academic courses offered/available in a college, to order books from a bookshop, to invite a guest to a function where we work or study, to lodge a complaint, to ask how to use a software package, or maybe to resign from a committee or club.

A recent TV report informed viewers that the Indian Post Office handles 100 million pieces of mail every day. That's a lot of letters! And letters are an important part of communicating with your friends, relatives, customers, and colleagues. But

how many letters actually get their messages across and achieve their purpose? Surprisingly few. Why does this happen?

Letter-writing is a skill in which customs and conventions play such an important role. Different cultures and languages have their own conventions. You probably know how to begin and end a letter in your language. In English, a letter often ends with the conventional phrase “Yours sincerely”, even if the letter writer was actually not sincere at all. Imagine you get a letter “Why haven’t you replied to my letter?” and ends with “See you soon!” Such words might be acceptable in personal letters, but would look rather odd in a business context. The conventions of formal letter writing are quite different from personal letter writing.

This unit on letters charts a way through various conventions in letter writing. But instead of taking the perspective of the *letter-writer*, let us for now put ourselves into the shoes of the *letter-reader*. Let us begin at the beginning – from the time we receive a letter to the time we finish reading it.

17.3 THE ENVELOPE

The envelope is an essential part of your letter. We want the letter to reach the person to whom it is written (*addressee*) safely and quickly. For this, the addressee, we need to write to addressee’s name and address correctly. Let us first look at the way write a person’s name and address the person.

17.3.1 The Addressee Name and Title

How do we address people? A very simple formula. Remember,

Mr	for all men who do not have another title (e.g., <i>Mr G Ravikanth</i>)
Mrs	for women only if you are sure they are married (e.g., <i>Mrs Ashwini Sahu</i>)
Miss	for girls and unmarried women (e.g., <i>Miss Farida Anjum</i>)
Ms	for women if you are not sure whether they are married or not. (e.g., <i>Ms Naina Batra</i>)
Master	for boys (e.g., <i>Master Ramesh Reddy</i>)
Prof.	for a university professor (e.g., <i>Prof. B Vasudevan</i>)
Dr	for a doctor of medicine and if it applies to a person who has PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) (<i>Dr Milind Prabhune</i>)
Fr	for priests (The Reverend) (e.g., <i>Father Saxton</i>)
Sr	for nuns. (e.g., <i>Sister Cassilda</i>)

Names can be written in different ways. For example:

Mr Albert George Brown
Mr Albert G. Brown
Mr A. G. Brown

Usually, when writing to foreigners, we put the first name first and the surname (or the family name) second. However, it is a custom in South India to put the family name first, usually as an initial. For example,

Mr L. Krishnaraya

Many times you do not know the name of the person you are writing to. This happens when you wish to write a letter of enquiry, or to ask for information or to make a booking. There are several possible titles to consider when writing such

a letter and addressing the envelope. Here are some that are safe to use until you know the person's name or correct title.

The Secretary	Government departments – head offices
The Director	institutes or local organizations
The General Manager	head offices of business organizations, commercial companies and large hotels
The Manager	small firms, travel agencies, banks, branch offices of big firms, local shops
The Principal	colleges and schools

These may be used **only** for the first correspondence. Once you receive a reply, the letter will be signed. So you will have a name and a designation. This should be used for future correspondence.

✓ **Check Your Progress 1**

1. G. Shashibushan Rao, Nirmal Kumar Das and Robert Ravi Devanna are young men with no special titles. Write their names in several different ways, as they might appear in addresses on the envelope.
2. What are the ways in which you address Surabhi Suman Mitra, a married woman?
3. You are writing to a girl Nancy Andrews. You don't know whether she is married or not. Think of two ways in which you can address the letter.
4. You have to make a complaint about a problem with your account in a bank, State Bank of Maharashtra. How would you address the letter?

17.3.2 Information in an Address

India has over a billion people and there are the number of addresses in this country runs into millions, and you want your letter to go only to **one** of them. If it is to go to the right one, the address on the envelope must be correct.

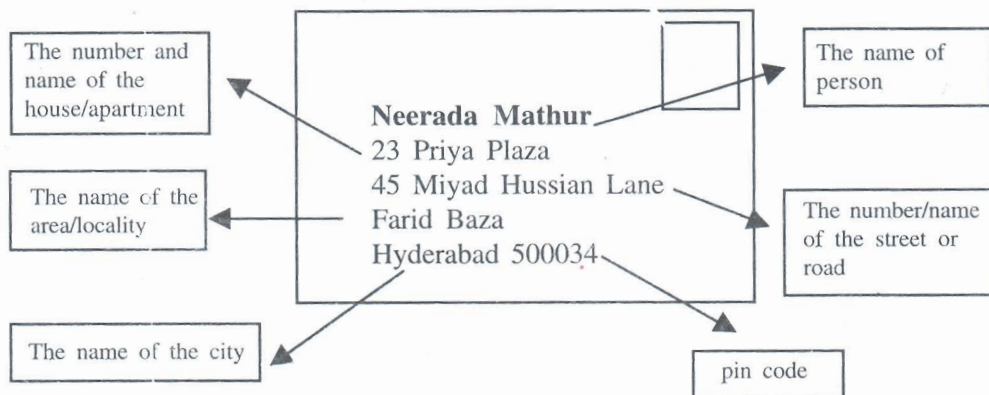
Look at these two addresses. Do you think these letters will reach the addresses safely and quickly? Why/Why not?

Gupta R.
 435 South Vasant Vihar
 Road No. 7 Lanka
 Varanasi 221005

Mr R. Gupta
 Road No. 7 Lanka
 Varansai

Letter 1 will reach its destination fast but not Letter 2. The address is incomplete and there is no pin code. Let us find out how a address should be written on an envelope.

Here is the form of a typical address:



The **pin code** is the Postal Index Code. In Britain a pin code is called a *postcode* and in the United States a *zip code* (*zip* = **z**one **i**mprovement **p**lan). When you look up a number in a telephone directory, it becomes easier to locate the person if you know the address and the pin code.

The Postal Department, India Post, has recently released a series of advertisements with the slogan, “Impossible for others, but India Post delivers it to every Indian.” Here is a sample address from this advertisement.

Shambhunath (Shambhu)
House No. 6, Behing Shiv Mandir
Tital Village, Distt. Nasik
Maharashtra

India Post in the largest postal network in the world.

If you are writing to someone for the first time and do not know the pin code, just write the address without it! It will reach the correct address though it may take a long time to get there. But it is better to write it if you know it.

✓ Check Your Progress 2

1. Use the following names and other information to invent addresses and write them out as they would look on envelopes.

Name	town/city	House/apartment/ building name and number	street name and number	pin code
Ms Kiran Mehta	Agra	Ananya Enclave	23 Bhavani Colony	
The Principal	Chennai	St. Martins College	30 Anna Salai	
The Manager	Hyderabad	Food world	Habsiguda	500072

2. Each of these advertisements below contains a name and an address. Find these and then address an envelope to each one.

Outlook, India's most exciting newsweekly, and Picador India are delighted to bring you the Third Annual Non-Fiction Competition

The Prizes

Outlook will publish the winning piece. All short listed entries will be published on www.outlookindia.com. For the winner, a prize of 25 Picador paperbacks (currently in print) of the winner's choice PLUS a cash prize of ₹500. The two runners-up will each receive 8 Picador India titles. Please send your entry with your name and address clearly marked on the script to: NON-FICTION COMPETITION, Picador India, 54/12 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110002.

Make the perfect lifestyle statement with Style Spa. And discover a fresh perspective in furniture, with styles and designs from across the world. Here contemporary design and impeccable styling meet precise craftsmanship. Bringing international quality, elegance and comfort right into your home.

Style Spa is India's largest furniture retail network, with SS showrooms across 35 cities

STYLE SPA

Living room. Dining room. Bedroom Furniture

Style Spa Furniture Limited, 41 Montieth Road, Egmore, Chennai 600 08. Style Spa Furniture Limited was formerly known as Gautier India Limited.

17.4 THE LETTER-OPENING

A common belief is that a letter is effective if it has said what it wanted to say. That is if the reader has been able to retrieve the information we've put in the letter, it is presumed to have achieved its purpose. But there is much more to letter writing than mere transfer of information.

Every letter that goes out should look attractive and should impress the one who receives it. Many times, you write to a person you have never met. That means, your letter reaches the person before he/she meets you. Also, it is quite possible that the person you write to will never get to meet you, and his/her only acquaintance with you will be through your letters. Any impression that this person has of you is through your letters. Therefore, it is important that our letters are smart and impressive.

Let us find out how we can make our letters look smart and attractive. Look at the opening of this letter:

From: Farida Begum 18. 14 th main Koramangala Bangalore 5600014	Date: 2.1.2004
To: Mr. Rakesh Mittal #3 (Old 116) 28 th Cross 7 Block, Anna Nagar Chennai 600016	
Ref. LG/261/Dn/2004	
Dear Sir,	


This letter has all the necessary information. It clearly says

- (1) who the letter is from
- (2) who it is addressed to
- (3) when it was written and
- (4) what (in short) the letter is about.

Any letter **should necessarily** have these pieces of information.

A common way of writing a letter is to *put your own address on the top left hand corner*. This helps the person who gets the letter to write to you in reply. In a business letter, it is helpful to give as complete a contact address as possible. We should always write our address on a letter, even if the person we are writing to knows it already. The form of an address is the same as that shown in the earlier section (17.3.2). In case we are writing on a letterhead, we need not give the name and address once again.

This is how a letterhead looks:

<p>राष्ट्रीय शैक्षिक अनुसंधान और प्रशिक्षण परिषद् श्री आरविन्द मार्ग, नई दिल्ली 110 016 फोन : कार्यालय 26510105 फॅक्स : +91-11-26510105 ई-मेल : jdnCERT@yahoo.com</p>		<p>NATIONAL COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING SRI AUROBINDO MARG, NEW DELHI 110 016 PHONE : OFF. 26510105 FAX : +91-11-26510105 E-mail: jdnCERT@yahoo.com</p>
<p>Prof. G. Ravindra Joint Director</p>	<p>No.F.4-7/JD(C)/PD/2007 /1163 May 23, 2007</p>	

In a personal letter, the address need not be fully given. We might put just the name of a city, of a locality, or an institution or a house.

17.4.1 Date

Next comes the date. You may write:

January 1, 2005	or	Jan 1, 2005
1 January 2005	or	1/2/05

You can see that we can put either the date first, or the month ; both ways are acceptable. In India, we usually give the date in the order – day/month/year. However, Americans usually prefer the order – month/day/year. This difference could give rise to a problem. For example, you write a letter to an American on 2.1.2005. He might think the letter to be written on the first of February rather than the second of January. To avoid such confusion, you can use words instead of only numbers. It is better to spell the name of the month.

British	American
1 January 2004	January 1, 2004
1 st January 2004	Jan 1, 2004
1 st Jan 2004	
1 Jan 2004	

17.4.2 Addressor's Name and Address

In an official or business letter the name and address of the person you are writing to comes next.

17.4.3 Reference

A businessperson who writes a lot of letters naturally keeps a record of them. S/He gives each letter a reference number of some sort, though it may be only his/her initials. When you answer such a letter, it helps if you mention the reference number; your reply would then be linked with an earlier letter sent to you. A reference line looks like the following:

Ref. LG/261/Dn/2004

and is usually placed at the centre between the receiver's address and the greeting. Many people do not have a reference line but give the reference in the first line of the letter. For example:

With reference to your advertisement in the *Times*, dated 23rd March,
With reference to your phone call today,
Thank you for your letter of March 5, 2004.

We normally don't require a reference in informal letters that we write to friends and relatives or the full address.

Look at this opening of letter.

Latha Krishnan
78, Kailash Colony
Pune 412 019

The General Manager
Flee Bag Hotel
Garden Path
Ooty

Subject: Application for the post of the PurchaseManger

Dear Sir,

Application for the post of the purchase manager – is a **subject line** that helps the reader find out what the letter is about. It is not necessary to state that it is a subject, just like we don't need to mention "Date", "To" and "From". The subject line should be short – not more than five or six words, so that it fits in a line. We can highlight the subject line by underlining it or putting it in bold.

17.4.4 Salutation: Dear Sir

In all, nearly all, the letters we write in English, the first few words usually are: Dear Sir! In most cases, writing 'Dear Sir' is not a problem. But what happens when you are writing to a woman? If you know this, you should address her as a woman. We are not too sure whether women would like to be called "Sir" no less than men would like to be called "Madam"! Therefore, when we do not know the gender of the person, we write "Dear Sir or Madam"!

Should all letters begin with a Dear Sir or Madam? No, not really. Let's take an example from a telephonic conversation, to show when and why not to use Dear Sir and Madam.

Imagine that you wish to speak to the Principal of a college. You put through a call and

Request A: ask to be connected to the Principal

Request B: ask to be connected to Dr. Jagdish Pande (who is the Principal).

Would the response to the two requests be the same? Never! It is quite possible that in Request A, you will end up speaking to an assistant rather than the Principal. But if you show that you know the Principal, it is likely that you will get to speak to him directly and fast. In a letter too, if the letter is a formal one, and you know the name of the person you are writing to, use it in the greeting, with the proper title. For example:

Dear Dr Pande

Dear Prof. Rekha Singh

Dear Ms Anita Pereira

Note that in a greeting we never write the person's initials, therefore do not write "Dear Dr J. Pande". In south India, most people do not have a surname, and choose to use their family name as an initial. In a greeting, we should write the name, they treat as their last name. For example,

R Madhukar is greeted as Mr Madhukar and

P Vasudha as Ms Vasudha

In informal letters, the greeting is more personal. We greet a friend by his or her first name, or by its short form if that is commonly used. For example, to your friend, Mrs Meena Sharma, you can write

Dear Meena or Dear Meenu

Apart from "Dear", which is a generally used greeting in both formal and informal contexts, there are a few others we can use only in informal contexts, when we write to close and loving friends, and relations – My dear, My dearest, and Dearest.

Now that we have looked at the different necessary items in a letter-opening, let us focus attention to some words which are unnecessary and should be omitted. They are the words – **date**, **to** and **from**.

We find many letters which say: Date: 2.1. 2004. We do not need to specify that 2.1.2004 is a date. In case we think the date 2.1.2004 can be mistaken for something else, it would be better to put it in words – 2 January 2004. There is another advantage in giving the date in this way.

Again, like writing 'Date', it is redundant to write 'To' and 'From'. This is because the convention is that the address on the top is that of the person who send/writes the letter and the one below it is that of the person who receives the letter. To give 'To' and 'From' is not only unnecessary but also insults the reader's intelligence.

✓ Check Your Progress 3

Set out all the following as it would appear at the top of the letter, and include the greeting.

1. *Writer's name and address:* Kulwinder Kaur, 261 Harnam Surjeet Apartments, Babaji Khalsa Road, New Delhi 1100012. *Subject:* Application for the post of Design Applications Manager. *Date:* 14 February 2004. *Receiver's Address:* Mr Vineet Kumar Saxena, The Vice President (HR), Alpha-Eastern Engineering Ltd., C-123, Chandra Bose Sarani, Kolkata 700 003.

2. *Writer's Address:* Claire Patrick, 261 Hallam Tower Road, Sheffield, S14 2AR. *Date:* 10th January 2004. *Reference:* ADP/6/OST/04. *Receiver's Address:* The Secretary, Bureau for Educational Visits, Seymour Mews House, Seymour Mews, London W 1H PE.

17.5 THE LETTER-ENDING

Let us look at the ending of this letter.

Thanking You,

Yours obediently

Applications Manger
Zodiac Global Solutions Ltd.

17.5.1 Thanking You

We find many letters ending with the phrase "Thanking you". Do we really need it? Many would feel that it is a convention and has to be used. Today, it is treated as a meaningless phrase and should not be used unless there is a strong reason for it.

Actually when we make a request to someone, we feel that we should thank him/her in anticipation that our request will be granted. This doesn't really sound nice. It is as if we are almost telling the person that we know our request will be granted, or that we do not have the time to write once again and thank him/her if our request is granted.

Well, if it is a thank you-letter, and we want to assert that we are grateful, we can use the following expressions at the end:

- Thank you
- Thank you for your support
- Thank you for your help
- Thank you very much.

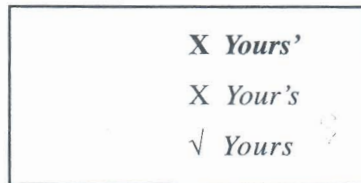
If there is no reason to thank the person to whom we write, it is good to drop the phrase – Thank you and or the meaningless phrase – Thanking you.

17.5.2 Yours Obediently

This is a phrase we no longer use, though many government officials still end their letters to ordinary people with the phrase “Your obedient servant”. We no longer use phrases like — Yours humbly, Yours faithfully I remain yours /your (servant) forever.

What we use today are

- Yours sincerely,
- Sincerely yours,
- Sincerely,
- Yours faithfully,
- Faithfully,
- Yours cordially
- Yours truly



Letter-endings depend on the form of greeting used.

Yours faithfully is more formal and matches the greeting “Dear Sir or Madam”. “Yours sincerely” is less formal and matches the greeting “Mrs. Krishnan”, “Prof. Gurudas”. The letter closing and the greeting indicate the tone and the relationship between the writer and the reader. If we are on the first name basis and the business letter is very informal, we may use, “Yours cordially” or “Yours sincerely”. These phrases are known as **the complimentary close**.

Formal letters

<i>Addressee</i>	<i>Greeting</i>	<i>Ending</i>
The Principal	Dear Sir or Madam	Yours faithfully,
The Secretary	Dear Sir or Madam	Yours faithfully,
Miss Carol Green	Dear Miss Green	Yours sincerely,
Mr Anand Kumar Jain	Dear Anand	Yours cordially,

In **informal letters**, we use phrases like,

With love,

Yours,

Yours ever,

With all my love,

With warm regards,

✓ **Check Your Progress 4**

Give a matching complimentary close for the following:

Formal

<i>Addressee</i>	<i>Greeting</i>	<i>Ending</i>
The Director	Dear Sir or Madam	
The Secretary	Dear Sir or Madam	
Mrs Monica Dalal	Dear Mrs. Dalal	
Mr Suresh Mathur	Dear Suresh	

Informal

Miss Kavitha Seth	Dear Kavi
Mr G. Pranesh	Dear Pranesh

17.5.3 Signature

Look at these signatures.

In 1, can you say who wrote the letter? The writing is almost illegible. The reader would not know who to write back to. In case your signature does not give your name clearly, it is advisable to write your name in block letters after it.

(Chandra Kala Shukla)

Even if our signature is legible, it is a convention that we write our name in block below it. We should write the name clearly so that it is clear that the writer is a man or a woman. For example, C. K. Shukla could stand for Chetan Kumar Shukla. Remember, that in no case should your letter go unsigned.

What is the problem with the signature (2)? We usually use Mr / Miss / Mrs /Dr /Prof. with our names when we sign.

17.6 FORMATS – BLOCK AND INDENT

Look at the layout of these two letters:

1.

Preeti Nigam
 Krishna House
 48 G N Chetty Road
 Chennai

21 April 2004

Mr George Palkiwala
 The Secretary
 YMCA Football Association
 Hyderabad

Dear Mr. Palkiwala,

In reply to your enquiry of 16 November 2004, I have pleasure in sending you the lists you requested, with address and telephone numbers.

The papers also contain general information for those intending to stay it the hostels.

Yours sincerely,
 (Preeti Nigam)

2.

Preeti Nigam
 Krishna House
 48 G N Chetty Road
 Chennai

21 April 2004

Mr George Palkiwala
 The Secretary
 YMCA Football Association
 Hyderabad

Dear Mr. Palkiwala,

In reply to your enquiry of 16 November 2004, I have pleasure in sending you the lists you requested, with address and telephone numbers.

The papers also contain general information for those intending to stay it the hostels.

Yours sincerely,
 (Preeti Nigam)

Letter 1 has a **block** format, where all the lines – the addresses, the date, the greeting the paragraphs of the letter, the complimentary close and the signature—are all aligned to the left margin. No lines are indented. Letter 2 has an **indent** format. The sender’s address, the date, the complimentary close and the signature are aligned to the right margin.

✓ Check Your Progress 5

Given below are words and phrases that indicate positions for specific elements in a letter. Look at the sample of letters above and put these words and phrases in the right boxes.

top right hand corner bottom right hand left aligned bottom left hand	left had side of page right hand side of the page indented top left hand corner
--	--

<i>Elements of a letter</i>	<i>Block format</i>	<i>Indent format</i>
Your address		
Date		
Greeting		
Paragraphs		
Complimentary Close		

17.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have looked at the structure of letter. There are many things we need to remember while writing a letter. Remember

- Not to use 'To' and 'From' in the inside address.
- Not to say 'Date: 2.1.2004'
- To use 'Dear Sir or Madam' when we do not know who we are writing to
- To use subject line, but do not label it 'Sub' or 'Subject'
- Not to end all letters with 'Thanking you'
- Never to send a letter without your signature
- To use either a block or an indent format, and not a mix of the two.

17.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Mr G Shashibushan Rao Mr Nirmal Kumar Das Mr Robert Ravi Devanna
 Mr G S Rao Mr N. K. Das Mr R. R. Devanna
 Mr Nirmal K Das Mr Robert R Devanna
2. Mrs Surabhi Suman Mitra, Mrs. S. S. Mitra
3. Miss Nancy Andrews, Ms Nancy Andrews
4. The Manager,
 State Bank of Maharashtra

Check Your Progress 2

Ms Kiran Mehta
 201 Ananya Enclave
 23 Bhavani Colony
 Agra

The Principal
 St. Martins College
 30 Anna Salai
 Chennai

The Manager
 Food world
 48 Habsiguda
 Hyderabad 500072

Check Your Progress 3

Kulwinder Kaur
 261 Harnam Surjeet Apartments
 Babaji Khalsa Road
 New Delhi 1100012

14 February 2004

Mr Vineet Kumar Saxena
 The Vice President (HR)
 Alpha-Eastern Engineering Ltd.
 C-123, Chandra Bose Sarani
 Kolkata 700 003

Application for the post of Design Application Manager

Dear Mr Saxena,

Clarie Patrick
261 Hallam Tower Road
Sheffield, S 14 2AR

10 January 2004

The Secretary
Bureau for Educational Visits
Seymour Mews House
Seymour Mews
London W 1H PE

Ref: ADP/6/0ST/04

Dear Sir or Madam,

Check Your Progress 4

Formal		Ending
Addressee		
The Director		Yours faithfully/ Faithfully yours/Faithfully
The Secretary		Yours faithfully/ Faithfully yours/Faithfully
Mrs Monica Dalal		Yours sincerely/ Sincerely yours/ Sincerely
Mr Suresh Mathur		Yours sincerely/ Sincerely yours/ Sincerely
Informal		
Miss Kavitha Seth		With love, With regards
Mr G. Pranesh		With love, With regards

Check Your Progress 5

<i>Elements of a letter</i>	<i>Block format</i>	<i>Indent format</i>
Your address	top left hand corner	top right hand corner
Date	left hand side of page	right hand side of page
Greeting	left aligned	left aligned
Paragraphs	left hand side of page	indented
Complimentary Close	bottom left hand	bottom right hand