



Present a seminar on

Letter Writing

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Letter Writing

Training Course Workbook

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1 Introduction

You may have an excellent idea or proposal, but unless you can effectively communicate it in a letter, you will not get the desired outcome.

It is essential to understand your reader's needs and then clearly write what you need to say. Every letter should be clear, human, helpful and as friendly as the topic allows. The best letters have a conversational tone and read as if you were talking to your reader.

Through a combination of theory and exercises, you will develop writing skills to enable appropriate structure and present letters that are easy to read and understand.

1.1 Course objective:

To produce clear, concise and effective letters by adopting a systematic approach.

2 Advantages and disadvantages of writing

What is the purpose of letter writing? Why must we do it?

A written document can provide more than a visit or phone call. It not only gets your message across clearly but it provides a permanent record. With well-written letters there should be no misunderstanding, unlike the possibility on the telephone or in conversation.

Letters also serve as a record. They are long-lasting, tangible evidence of information you communicate to others.

Writing has its advantages and disadvantages.

2.1 Advantages

- You can choose your words carefully
- You can send the same message to several people
- The risk of misunderstanding is less than speech
- It is a permanent record, which you can copy and refer to later.

2.2 Disadvantages

- It takes time
- It does not have the advantages of body language, which can emphasise points and motivate
- You cannot be certain people have read the document
- You get no immediate feedback, hence you cannot modify the message if readers misunderstand it.

2.3 As a general rule

- If all you want to do is communicate factual information – writing is best
- If you want to persuade, motivate and involve – verbal communication is better.

When considering whether to write or speak to someone, ask yourself these questions:

1. 'Would it be best to put this in writing?'
2. 'Should I use writing to back up my words?'
3. 'Will I save a lot more time and trouble later, if I take the time and trouble to put it into writing now?'

Exercise 1 - Attributes of effective letter writing

Instructions

Working in pairs make a note of what you consider the most important attributes of effective writing.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

As a group, we will then complete the chart below.



Exercise 2 - Setting objectives for writing assignments

Instructions

Before writing (or typing) a business letter we need to ask some important questions. Because these questions begin with the letters W and H they are known as W H questions.

Working in pairs, finish writing the list of the questions that you will need answering before starting the assignment:

Who

Why

What

When

How

With the answers to these questions you will be able to establish the objectives of the letter.

3 What is the purpose of the letter?

When you write a business letter, you must try not to waste your reader's time. The first step in any writing task is to set down your aim. Ask yourself, Why am I writing? and What do I want to achieve? The clearer you are in your own mind about what you want to achieve, the better your letter.

You need to make a clear decision about the purpose of the document before you start to write. Are you writing to:

- provide information?
- get some action?
- give instructions?
- change opinions, persuade or sell an idea?
- confirm an agreement made face-to-face or over the telephone?

What do you want the writing to achieve? How you organise your ideas will depend on this.

These questions help you focus on the information that supports your central aim, and to cut information that is irrelevant. By doing this, you'll find you keep to the subject and perhaps write a document that is a third shorter than you would otherwise draft.

- To avoid long sentences:
 - Delete words that do not affect the meaning
 - Re-write the sentence as two or more sentences.
- If you have two different things to say that are short, use two sentences
- However, do not take short sentences to the extreme, e.g. "Thank you for your letter. Sorry about your problem. Please read your agreement."
- Note that bullets points may be considered too abrupt for letters.

Exercise 3 - The research team

Instructions

Working on your own read the paragraph below and from it identify

1. How many people make up the team; and
2. Decide if the member(s) of the team can be identified by name.

"A 'research team' proceeded towards the apex of a natural geological protuberance. The purpose of their expedition the procurement of a sample of fluid hydride of oxygen in a large vessel, the exact size of which was unspecified.

One member of the team precipitately descended sustaining severe fractural damage to the upper cranial portion of his anatomical structure. Subsequently, the second member of the team performed a self-rotational translation orientated in the direction taken by the first member."

Exercise 4 - What makes writing hard to read?

Your business writing should be easy to read and understand. So what makes writing hard to read?

Instructions

Working in pairs, note five points which you feel cause difficulties for the reader:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Exercise 7 - Grammar

Instructions

Correct the grammar in these sentences.

- 'Wheres them letters what I wrote?'
- 'Would it be possible for you and I to go to the meeting?'
.....

11.3 Active and passive verbs

Most people know that a verb is a 'doing' word (such as 'make', 'work', 'write', 'cancel', 'ask' and so on); but they don't know about active and passive verbs.

Passive verbs have nothing to do with verbs in the past tense. They are just a way of turning sentences around and saying something a little differently - in the future, present or past.

Spotting passive verbs is easy. They always have two things:

- one of the following - been, being, be, were, was, am, are, is; and
- a 'past participle'.

The following table shows the past participles of various verbs and how we get to them.

Verb	'I have...'	Past participle
work	I have worked	worked
ask	I have asked	asked
cancel	I have cancelled	cancelled
make	I have made	made
write	I have written	written

Changing passive verbs into active verbs is probably the best-kept secret of professional writers and editors. Using active verbs will change your writing style from dull, impersonal and long-winded to vigorous, interesting and readable.

There are two main methods to turn passive verbs into active verbs:

1. Place the agent before the verb (the agent is the person, machine etc., that does the doing)
2. Cut out as much of the passive verb as possible

1. Place the agent before the verb

Ask yourself: Who did it? Then place the answer before the verb.

Example 1

Passive: The new press officer was hired by the Publicity Director.

Who hired the new press officer? The Publicity Director.

Place this information before the verb and we avoid the passive verb

Active: The Publicity Director hired the new press officer.

Example 2

Passive: The committee decided that management should be kept up to date on developments in the computer industry.

Who should keep them up to date? We have to add this information if we want to avoid the passive verb.

Active: The committee decided the Technology Unit should keep management up to date on developments in the computer industry.

Note: Passive verbs are often ambiguous. The passive verb 'be' hides information from the reader. Turning passive verbs into active verbs has the advantage of making your writing clearer and more informative.

Example 3

Passive: After the application has been considered you may be contacted and you may be invited for an interview.

Who considers the application?	We do.
Who will contact the applicant?	We will.
Who will invite the applicant?	We will.

Active: After we have considered your application, we may invite you for an interview.

Note: Turning passive verbs into active verbs makes you use more pronouns and names of people. This improves your tone as the reader deals with human beings rather than impersonal bureaucracies.

Example 4

Passive: If no money is withdrawn from the policy, the insurance-linked savings fund will continue to grow until a claim is made.

Who withdraws the money? The policyholder.
Who will make the claim? The policyholder.

Active: If you do not withdraw money from the policy, the insurance-linked savings fund will continue to grow until you make a claim.

Note: We could redraft the sentence starting with the phrase: *"If the policyholder does not withdraw..."* however, if the reader is the policyholder, it is much better to personalise the message and use the pronoun "you": *"If you do not withdraw..."*

Exercise 8 - Passive sentences

Instructions

Working in your pairs make these passive sentences into active sentences.

1. "Your complaint has been investigated"

.....

2. "Job application advice can be obtained"

.....

3. "Enquiries have been made by us"

.....

4. "It will be signed by the manager"

.....

5. "This will be sent to your home address..."

.....

6. "Action will be taken to..."

.....

7. "The service contract is drawn up to allow..."

.....

8. Details of this matter have been recorded..."

.....

9. I have requested for your order/booking to be cancelled"

.....

10. Once you ... your claim will be dealt with accordingly"

.....

By themselves, passive verbs do not look too bad. Nevertheless, when you have many of them together, they make writing dull, bureaucratic, impersonal and occasionally ambiguous. Sometimes you will want to use a passive. However, to keep your writing lively, aim to make 80-90% of your verbs active. A word processing program is useful devise to measure this for you.

11.4 Tautology

You almost certainly know what tautology is. However, the word itself might be new to you.

Exercise 9 - Tautology

Instructions

The following phrases all say the same thing twice or add unnecessary information. Underline the repeated or unnecessary information.

1. Safety is absolutely essential on the production line.
2. Advanced planning always reduces errors.
3. A definite decision is needed on which supplier to choose.
4. Staff may possibly be required to work overtime.
5. Let us revert back to an earlier page.
6. The training helped us to focus on key objectives for the future.
7. At that moment in time the company was still solvent.
8. This year's results were an unexpected surprise.
9. I'd like to think that we could co-operate together in the North.
10. The initial launch of the brand was successful

I myself personally never use tautology. Let us make sure that we do not repeat in the future the mistakes of the past!

Exercise 10 – Unnecessary words

Instructions

Here are a few examples that might contain unnecessary words. Underline those you believe are unnecessary.

1. "During the course of investigations"
2. "Also, it should be mentioned that many people ..."
3. "Allow a few days to elapse before speaking with ..."
4. "You should contact..."
5. "...which is done for each and every incident..."
6. "...anything over and above this"
7. "... for a period of 14 days"
8. "... up to a maximum of four people"

12 Punctuation

Punctuation suggests breaks in reading the letter. If you read the letter out loud, pausing for punctuation, does the letter flow? (use a shorter pause for a comma than a full stop)

The most common uses of commas are:

- to replace brackets, e.g. The Store Manager, Bob Smith, informed me...
- to mark off clauses in a sentence, e.g. As a frequent user of our products, you will no doubt like to know...
- to show you have put something extra in a sentence, e.g. You must, if possible, give the booklet to...

It is important to use punctuation accurately because it helps the reader to make sense of the writing. In speech, we can help a listener with pauses, the rise and fall of the voice and changes in emphasis. In writing, punctuation performs some of those functions.

Punctuation shows readers how writers have grouped their words. The punctuation suggests breaks in the reading, to mark off the thoughts. I have ranked the different punctuation marks in order of the size of break intended.

Major breaks:

.	?	!	:	:-	;
full stop	question mark	exclamation mark	colon	colon & dash	semicolon

Minor breaks:

()	-	,	“	’
brackets	dash	comma	quotation marks or inverted commas	single inverted commas or single quotation marks

Exercise 16 – Punctuation

Instructions

Read the sentence below and change the way it reads by altering the punctuation.

A woman, without her man, is nothing.

.....

12.1 The major punctuation marks

The **full stop** is the major break. These are, of course, used to split sentences. But make sure your sentence is a sentence. It should have at least one verb, it should make sense and it should be making, one or more statements.

Use full stops to show abbreviations. However, this convention is beginning to disappear; for example when the last letter of the abbreviation is also the end of the word. For example, Mr. for Mister and Ltd. for Limited is written as Mr for Mister and Ltd for Limited.

Also you will not find many full stops for familiar abbreviations like TV, RSVP, USA, BBC and ITV.

The same is true for acronyms, such as VAT, which are initials but pronounced as words.

Question and **exclamation marks** carry their own full stop. Only use the question mark for questions; similarly, only use the exclamation mark to express strong emotions.

The **colon** signals a pause longer than a semicolon but shorter than a full stop. You may follow a colon with a capital or small letter. Use a capital letter if the words following make a complete sentence.

Use a colon:

- Before a bullet list (see this example)
- Before a list (these may be written as dot points), for example:
 - I have three duties: dictation, typing and filing.
- Before a statement that explains, enlarges or summarises, for example:
 - We need to find a solution: one that will solve all our problems.
- Before a long quotation
- To show ratios or references for example:
 - 2:1 30:70 Matthew 2:13

Do not use a colon:

- Before a list of items that immediately follows a verb or a preposition:
 - Wrong: The job requirements are: research, writing and public speaking
 - Right: The job requirements are research, writing and public speaking.

You will also see the colon and dash used in this way. The dash adds nothing!

The **semicolon** is also a major pause, but not as long as the colon. Use it to separate independent clauses. For example, Sarah joined the company as a manual worker in 1990; thirteen years later, she was the Chief Executive. The independent clauses are, 'Sarah joined the company as a manual worker in 1990' and 'thirteen years later, she was the Chief Executive.'

When items in a series or list contain commas, use the semicolon as a separator. For example, the following attended the meeting: Peter Smith, Finance; Janice Brown, Human Resources; David Green, Sales; and Chris Jones, Training.

To help the reader, we can separate ideas inside a sentence. We are again asking the reader to pause, but only briefly. Brackets do this more strongly than dashes, which are stronger separators than commas.

12.2 Commas

It is not easy to lay down rules about commas, because their position is often just a matter of personal taste. However, do not use the comma in front of the 'and' in a series unless 'and' is used within the series itself. For example, note the difference between:

"I wish to order black, and grey socks." and "I wish to order black and grey socks."

The exception is when a pair go together by association. For example, birds and bees, gin and tonic, rag-and-bone.

A good principle is to use as few as you need and only use them when they make the meaning clearer. For example, use them:

- to show where you would have a short, natural pause if you were speaking. 'You may not think this is a good idea, but it has worked well in every other area.'
- to show you have put something extra in, when you would use a pair of commas. 'You must, if possible, give the booklet to the occupier.'

The most common uses of the comma are:

1. To replace brackets. For example, 'Your accountant, Andrew Robins, tells me that...'
2. To mark off clauses in a sentence. For example, 'As a frequent user of our products, you will no doubt like to know...'
3. To separate clauses introduced by a relative pronoun. For example, 'The men, who were carrying guns, were arrested...' means something entirely different from 'The men who were carrying guns were arrested...'

In the latter case only those men carrying guns were arrested, whereas in the former case, the phrase 'who were carrying guns' merely describes the men by telling us that they were carrying guns.

12.3 Quotation marks

These are used to show the exact words of the speaker or the exact words quoted. You may use double quotation marks ("...") or single quotation marks ('...'). However, you can use double speech marks to show the words used. For example 'The man in the blue suit said "*I am not the one you want*" and then drove off at speed.'

If you decide to use single speech marks you should stick to that decision throughout a piece of writing.

12.4 Apostrophe

Apostrophes are the most misused punctuation mark in the language. Let us look at the basic rules and the exceptions.

1. To show possession of something. Usually you add 's to the person possessing. For example:
 - the electrician's tools
 - the board's decision
 - the army officer's uniform
 - the people's candidate
 - Tony Blair's car.

13.5 Internet

Capitalise the word 'Internet'; do not capitalise the word 'intranet' (unless it starts a sentence). Write 'web site' as two words, not capitalised unless it starts a sentence.

13.6 Symbols

Spell out words instead of using symbols. Use symbols such as % in graphs and charts only, otherwise, spell it out as 'per cent'. However, you can use the '&' in companies names and products. For example Marks & Spencer, HR & Training.

13.7 Telephone and facsimile numbers

Write these numbers without parentheses or hyphens. For example, use 020 7012 3456 not (020) 7012 3456

14 Stylewriter computer program

The main goal in writing is to convey your ideas with the greatest possible clarity and to design and write in a way that best serves your readers. Plain English is clear English. It is simple and direct but not simplistic or simple-minded.

Using plain English does not mean everyone's writing must sound the same. There is no one 'right' way to express an idea. It is possible to express our thoughts in many different ways and the variety comes from the individual way we approach an idea or writing task. There is plenty of room for individual style, rhetoric and imaginative writing.

I have used some examples in this workbook from a computer program called Stylewriter by Editor Software (UK) Ltd. This program works with Microsoft Word to check the grammar and plain English in a document.

StyleWriter helps you write in plain English by identifying words and phrases in your writing that detract from clarity. It questions your use of long sentences and passive verbs and aims to make you think about every word you write.

StyleWriter does not encourage a standard style that everyone should follow. Rather, by helping you break out of the typical business writing style, StyleWriter encourages you to express yourself in your own words.

15 Stages of letter writing

Here are the seven stages:

1. The Heading

The heading of a letter should include the name of your company, the address, telephone number, facsimile number and e-mail address.

It is not necessary to type the return address if you are using stationery with the return address already imprinted.

2. The Inside Address

This is the address you are sending your letter to (also called the addressee). Make it as complete as possible. Include titles and names if you know them.

This is always on the left margin. If an A4 paper is folded in thirds to fit in a standard business envelope, the inside address can appear through the window in the envelope.

16.1 Order of paragraphs - SCRAP

The mnemonic SCRAP is a useful way of remembering the order to lay out a business letter.

The letters stand for:

Situation

Complication

Resolution

Action

Politeness

Situation - is a statement of fact(s) that the letter is concerned with. It goes at the beginning of the letter.

Complication - develops the facts stated in the situation and suggests a problem or asks a question.

Resolution - suggests a solution to the problem.

Action - is where you say you know the problem and how it should be solved, then confirming you are going to do this, or suggest the reader should do that.

Politeness - Whatever the tone of your letter you are more likely to get a good response if you conclude with some expression of goodwill, even if it's only the basic 'Yours sincerely'.

Let us look at a few examples of SCRAP in action. Imagine you have ordered some computers from a company and they have not arrived. You want to know what is going on and get some response from the company.

Dear Sir

Situation	I ordered ten new computers from you on 22 July.
Complication	Although you promised delivery in August, it is now September and we need them urgently.
Resolution	Our increasing workload means we cannot cope without more computers. This leaves me with me no alternative.
Action	We have no choice but to insist on delivery by the end of the month or to cancel the order and find another supplier.
Politeness	Please let me know by 18 September if you can guarantee delivery within this period, or if we should go elsewhere.

Yours faithfully

As the example shows, the process from the initial statement of the problem to the final comment leaves the recipient in no doubt what is going to happen. However, the letter is neither angry nor rude, although the situation is frustrating. The clear statement of wishes and intentions in the letter should bring a speedy response!

Now that you are going to become a regular customer I can offer you the opportunity to take advantage of our offer to

I look forward to receiving your completed booking form and payment for the course.

Yours sincerely

Liz Garrard
Training Co-ordinator

Encl.: Course Booking Form

Make sure that the recipient knows that items accompany the letter in the same envelope, use indications such as 'Enclosure,' 'Encl.,'

17 Dealing with Customer Complaints

In the ideal organization there will be no one to deal with complaints because everything works perfectly and there are no complaints from customers.

Surveys conducted by consumers associations like the Which magazine reveal that certain makes of car are more likely to develop faults than others. Therefore the manufacturers of the less reliable cars are going to have a larger number of complaints to deal with.

Clearly the answer is not to have a bigger complaints department, but prevent the complaints occurring in the first place. It is important to treat a complaint as valuable feedback to prevent this occurring again.

Research into complaints shows that for every formal complaint you receive, there may be 10 other customers who were dissatisfied and who felt like complaining, but who never did. A happy customer may tell three people about their experience, but an unhappy one could share their problems with about ten other people. That is not the word-of-mouth advertising you want.

Dealing with complaints effectively can build a good relationship with your customers, save money by avoiding their escalation, and earn repeat business.

Most companies receive and reply to complaints by telephone, e-mail and letter, and if it's your job to respond to them, you can be your organization's most valuable ambassador. You need to stay motivated and be confident that you are dealing with customers as effectively and positively as possible.

17.1 Complaints that are handled well will lead to:

- building of customer supports for the business
- preventing the same happening again
- increase in loyalty
- maintenance of customer base
- increase in profitability.

All good reasons to handle complaints effectively.

17.6 When dealing with a complaint it is worth noting that:

- people tend not to complain; they take their business elsewhere
- if a customer takes the time to complain, you can probably retain his or her business
- people have expectations about how they should be treated when they complain.

How the organization reacts to the complaint will have a significant effect on any future relationship with that customer. The ability to develop a complaint handling system that delivers a consistent level of service to complaining customers is important.

The cost of satisfying a complaining customer is likely to be less than the cost of losing the customer. With this in mind please consider the following points:

- The first thing a company should do upon receiving a complaint is to seek to correct the problem. Write the letter as soon as you have received and investigated the complaint. Delaying your reply is likely to aggravate the situation
- When you do not have enough information to respond to the complaint immediately, send a letter to either ask the customer for more information or to inform the customer that you are collecting more information from another source before responding. It lets the customer know that you take the complaint seriously.
- When asked for advice, only give the advice on the subject you have been asked about
- If you have been asked for advice and do not feel you can give it, express your regret and suggest that someone else would be in a better position to be of assistance
- When responding to previous correspondence, repeat the important information. Your response letter is also a wonderful opportunity to ask any questions or clear up any misunderstanding you have
- Don't send out a standard letter
- Make your reply relevant to their complaint – Ask yourself “What does the complainant want?” When you know their desired outcome you can address those issues.
- Don't make promises that you cannot keep
- Keep it personal by using I, we, you
- Use the words they use (visual, auditory, feelings etc.) For example:
 - If you **see** what I mean – I can **see** what you mean – **looking** back I can **see**
 - This doesn't **sound** right to me – I would like to **discuss** this with you
 - I don't **feel** this is right – How would you **feel** if
- Be professional and courteous with a polite, understanding tone. Don't argue. Even if you do not agree with the complaint and can do nothing about it
- Even if your response letter contains negative information (such as you are unable to offer a refund), keep the tone positive and polite
- Avoid comments or expressions of personal opinion, unless they are complimentary.

Exercise 18 – Phrases to Use or Avoid

Instructions

Inappropriate phrases can create the wrong impression. Read these phrases and decide whether they are useful or should be avoided. If they should be avoided write a suggested phrase.

Phrase	Use or avoid? Suggestion if 'avoid'
"I would like you to accept my apologies for the delay in my response. I assure you that no discourtesy was intended"	
"I assure you that this is an isolated incident and does not reflect the high level of service we offer to all our customers."	
"I understand my decision on this matter may not be to your satisfaction"	
"Having duly read and noted the contents of your correspondence..."	
"I appreciate the inconvenience and frustration this has caused you"	
"It is not possible to put a monetary value on the inconvenience caused".	
"I was sorry to hear of the problems that you have experienced with"	
"I regret to inform you [information]"	
"Whilst it is always disappointing to hear from a dissatisfied customer, it is only by receiving correspondence such as yours that we can effectively address ourselves to customer care issues and improve our level of service"	

19 The steps in replying to letters of complaint

The following stages are arranged systematically to help you write letters replying to complaints.

If you receive a complaint letter, there are two main possibilities:

Accept the complaint

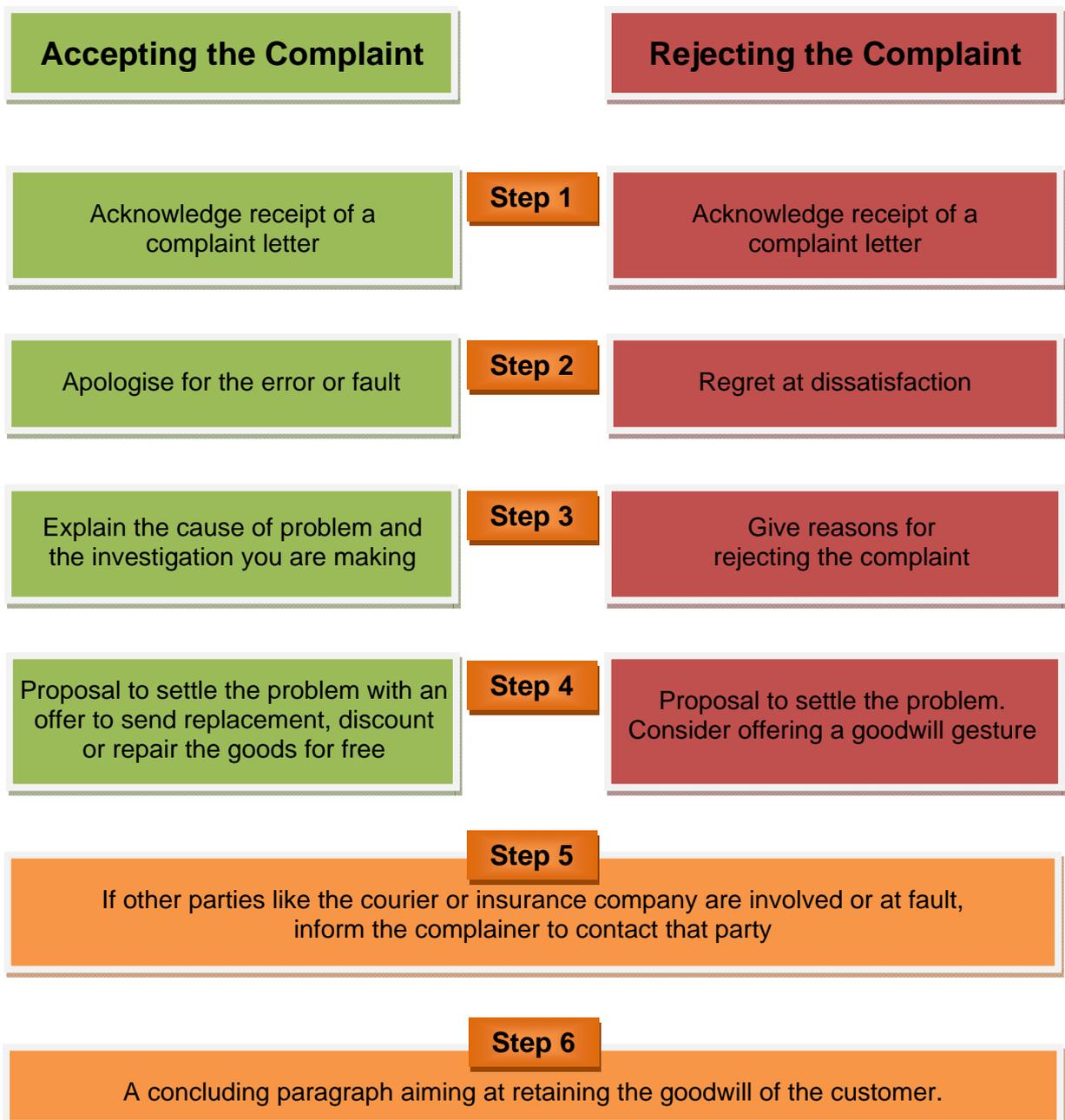
If we are sure that we are at fault. If it is related to goods or products, we are sure the defects are due to poor quality control or other manufacturing process.

Reject the complaint

We could reject the complaint or claim, if the cause of the problem was beyond our responsibility. For example, the defects were caused by careless handling during installation.

In handling complaints, both parties should have goodwill to settle the problem objectively.

The following stages have been arranged systematically to help you write letters replying to complaints.



12. We hope this action will settle the matter and that our friendly connection will continue
13. We look forward to receiving your future orders and assure you that they will be filled correctly.

20 The Indian Wood Carver Analogy

There was once an old Indian craftsman who carved beautiful elephants from a piece of wood. When asked how he did it, he replied, "It's easy. I just cut away all the wood that doesn't look like an elephant."

Effective writing is similar. To create a masterpiece, all you have to do is bear in mind who the reader is, and cut away everything that won't help you achieve the result you want.

21 Dishonest customers

Unfortunately, there are dishonest customers who will make false claims to get some bonus. Some people will use a product or piece of clothing and then return it, saying they weren't satisfied.

High-end women's clothing stores often will have expensive gowns returned after some important event. The clothes have obviously been worn, but the customer says she is not satisfied or has changed her mind. Usually, the store will refund the money.

Since it is often difficult to tell if the complaint is valid or not, the company will follow the adage, "The customer is always right." But since some dishonest people repeat their crimes, a better adage is, "The customer is always right... once."

22 Dealing with difficult customers

When you are dealing with difficult customers you need to decide initially whether there is a case for their annoyance. If there is, then the fault lies with your organization and you need to speak with senior management about improving your quality and systems. If it is the customer who is difficult, consider first how much their business is worth to you, and whether, rather than pushing them away, you should be involving them more.

There is never a need to tolerate abuse. Most companies will have policies regarding this but, if after warning the customer that you will not tolerate that type of behaviour, they continue you should terminate any correspondence or phone call. Abuse is not an effective form of communication and therefore will never lead to a satisfactory resolution.

Clients and customers hold the key to business but they are not free to treat you disrespectfully. Ensure your organization has clear guidelines for handling clients and customers, and put them into practice.

It is important that your company or organization has a policy for dealing with these issues and all staff dealing with complaints following that policy.