From Cordially Yours to What's Up: Investigating Formal and Informal Letters

Brad Ure

The main goal of this article is to investigate differences and similarities between two genres of letters, formal and informal. Ure will review common conventions in each genre and discuss when each type may be use and conclude by explaining how the letter genre is changing and what it may be like in the future.

Introduction

Most people probably think they know what letters are because we use them so often; letters are written to family members, friends, business acquaintances, or more. Letters can be used to accomplish many tasks, such as persuading, informing, thanking, advertising, congratulating, and so forth, yet because they are used so often, many people may not think in depth about the genre of letters and how they might vary. This article is thus an investigation into genres of letter writing, including when they may be used.

For purposes of analyzing letters, I am considering two basic forms of letters: formal letters and informal letters. Although this categorization is very general, as there are really many genres of letters, we will look at differences between these two extremes in order to understand the generic features of letters. There are big differences between how these two types of letters are written, including the content, intent, language, and format. Informal letters are used when writing a letter to personal acquaintances of some kind, such as family or friends. Formal letters are used in situations where professionalism is required, such as for business purposes, government letters, letters to clients or companies, and so forth.

Formal Letter Writing

The conventions of formal letters often depend on the situation. Writers begin by thinking about why they want to write the letter and what they want to get out of it. Is the letter simply to share information or are is it to make a request? Most letters have a clear purpose, so writing the letter in the most rhetorically effective way to achieve that task is vital. Some types of formal letters will involve research, while informal letters will not. An example of a time that you would need to do research is if you're writing a follow up letter to an interview—doing research about the company and interviewer would be vital. The language in formal letters is usually much stricter than an informal letter; a formal letter often needs to sound professional and well thought out. Most of the time, formal letters do not use language that makes them sound personal or emotional, while informal letters do. This is because formal letters are not meant to be personal, they are meant to accomplish a task. For example, contractions are not often used in these letters. The writer usually wants the letter to sound like he or she put effort into it because of the nature of the situation; letters to bosses, representatives, companies, and so forth should sound credible so that the recipients take the letter seriously. Writers often want formal letters to be crisp, with perfect grammar and certain format conventions. For example, a characteristic of formal letters is a formal salutation. In an informal letter, the salutation would not matter much, but in a formal letter, formal conventions like Dear with a title and family name matters more.

EXAMPLES OF FORMAL LETTERS

- Business (Most Common)

- Letters dealing with an institute or education

- Complaints

- Thanking/Apologizing

- Reference

- Application

Content of the Letter

Formal letters contain many variations, but many contain at least a clear and concise reason for writing the letter and a (sometimes short) description of who the writer is. The next paragraph can expand on the purpose of the letter and back it up with information, if needed. The concluding paragraph often tells the person receiving the letter what the expectations are or what action should happen next. Many times, writers will add something at the end of a letter to catch the attention of the person receiving the letter. Once the letter is finished, writers usually proofread the letter.

Common Conventions of Formal Letters

1. **Letterhead/Return address:** Most formal letters contain the sender's address in the header. Phone number and email address are sometimes included.

2. **Date:** The date is almost always included in formal letters. It often appears under letterhead/return address.

3. **Inside address:** The address of the person receiving the letter often appears here.

4. **Salutation:** The salutation for formal letters is often "Dear," followed by the title (Mr., Mrs., Ms., Miss), first and last name. Sometimes only the name (with or without the title) appears without the Dear; other times "To whom it may concern" stands in as the entire salutation (but is considerably impersonal).

5. **Body:** The body of a formal letter usually contains the purpose of the letter and any relevant information to support the goals of the letter. Support could be statistics, lists, an invitation, an apology, and so forth.

6. **Closing:** The closing of this letter is often quite formulaic. A few of the most common options are Sincerely, Cordially Yours, Best Regards, and Yours Truly. Some closings may be more or less personal depending on the relationship between the writer and receiver.

7. **Signature:** Formal letters often include a signature followed by a typed name underneath. Titles may be included.
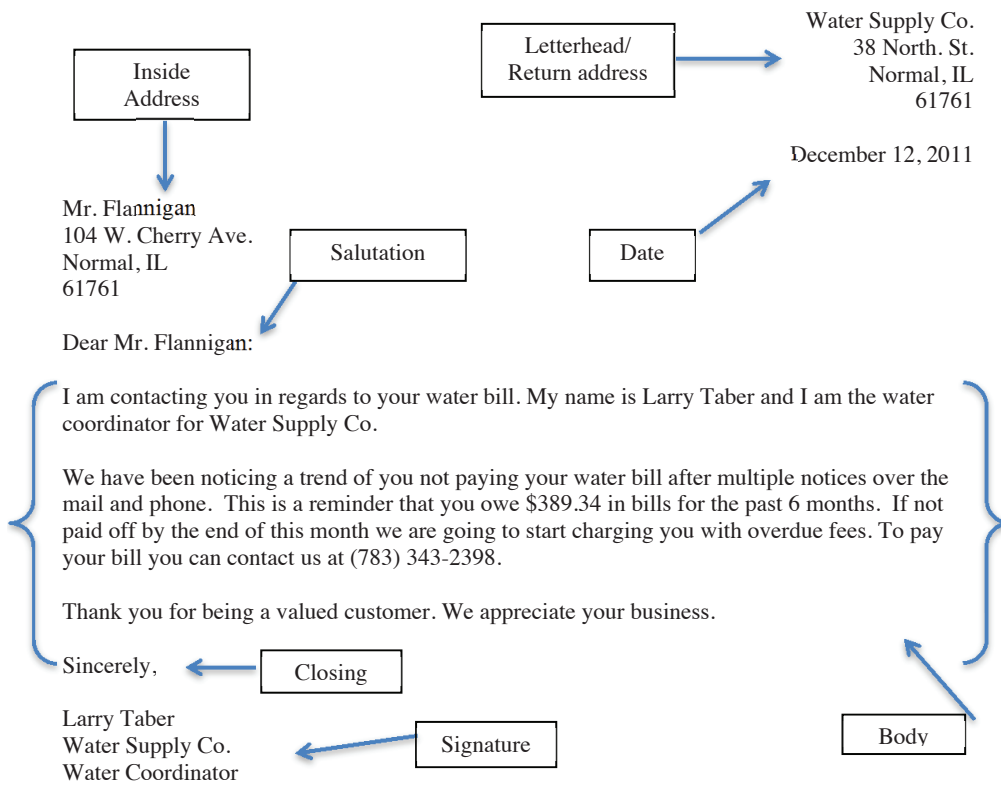
Figure 1: Example of a Formal Letter

Informal Letter Writing

Informal letters are usually used between two good acquaintances, although they can be written by many people in many different situations. The most typical informal letters are sent back and forth between relatives, friends, or anyone that you want to contact in a friendly way for any reason. Informal letters are also commonly called friendly letters. Most of the time, these letters are written back and forth on a personal level. Sometimes they are used just to see how people are doing and make sure all is well. A great example of informal letter usage is with college students. When at school, many students receive and send letters between family or friends to keep in touch.

Another reason people write informal letters is to convey a message to the reader, such as an invitation, thank you, birthday, or congratulation. After this purpose is stated, writers often add more to the letter, asking questions about the recipient's life or informing them about the writer's life. People usually respond to the letters by another letter or another type of communication. The next thing that differs greatly from a formal letter is the language used. Slang terms can be used, pretty much any language you want can be used, and this type of letter does not have very many limits when it comes to language. One example is in the salutation and closing of these letters. There are endless options for what writers can put here and can involve exclamation points or anything else. Contractions are also allowed in these letters. Also, unlike formal letters, many times emotions are involved in the letters. When someone writes a friendly letter and involves something such as congratulation, emotions of pride and happiness are involved. Something sometimes added at the end of an informal letter is a postscript, better known as the P.S. Writers add small personal comments here about anything. A lot of the time it will be something like see you soon, love you, or a reference that only the recipient would know about.

> ### EXAMPLES OF INFORMAL LETTERS
>
> • Thank you letter
>
> • Birthday letter
>
> • Congratulating letter
>
> • Personal letter
>
> • Invitations
>
> • Pen pals

Content of the Letter

The writing of informal letters is a lot less complex than formal letters and takes a lot less time and formatting. Writers can write informal letters in many different ways, but here are some common conventions. The first paragraph can show why the writer is writing the letter or at least allude to it, and the purpose can be responding to a letter, wanting to catch up, seeing how things are going, and so forth. If a writer has never written this person before, an introduction is often included in this first paragraph. The next part of the letter can consist of the details of the message. If the letter's main focus

is an invitation, for example, the details might include the where and when of the event. Another paragraph can be added before the closing of the letter, and this paragraph may sum up what the writer wrote, state a closing remark, or may not be present at all.

Genre Conventions of Informal Letters

1. **Heading:** The heading usually includes the date.

2. **Salutation:** Salutations can be a number of things such as Dear, Hi, Greetings, What's up, and so forth. It may or may not be followed by a name and a comma.

3. **Introduction:** The first paragraph that starts the letter may give an idea of what the letter will cover, or it may just be an opening line like a greeting. This part of the letter is optional.

4. **Body:** The main part of the letter may contain the message, the reason for the letter, and any related or even unrelated information.

5. **Conclusion:** Some letters may have conclusions that sum up the letter and contain any final remarks.

6. **Close/Signature:** The letter closing has many options, including Love, Talk to you later, Sincerely, and so forth. Informal letter closings are often more personal than informal letters. A signature follows and may include a full name, a first name, initials, or something else entirely.

7. **Postscript:** A postscript can be included after the signature. This is the P.S. at the end that usually contains a last small message.
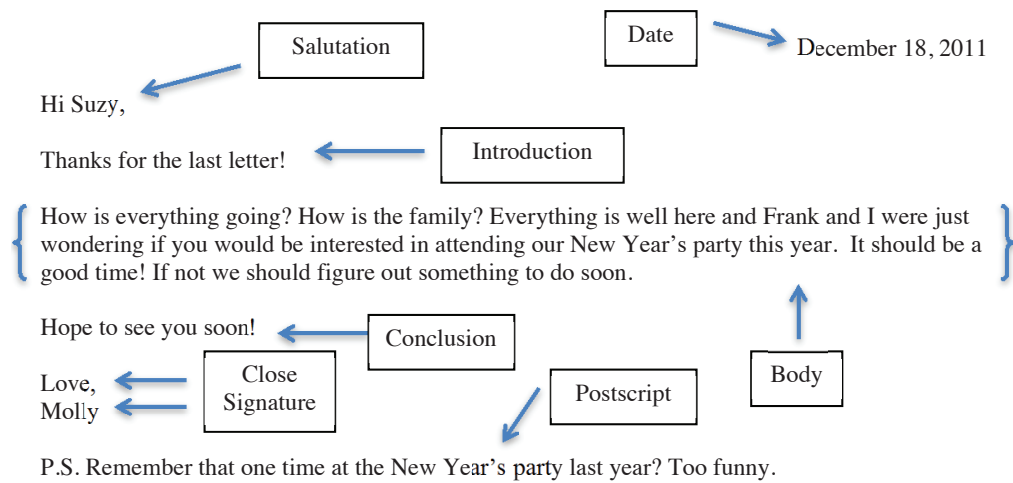
Figure 2: Example of an Informal Letter

Conclusion

After reading about the two general genres of letters and common ways of writing them, how can you use them? Try writing a personal letter to a friend or family member you have not talked to in a while, or, if you have had poor customer service lately, try writing a formal complaint letter. You might also consider how the genre of letters is changing. Currently, the number of informal and formal letters are diminishing with the use of technology. Email, Facebook, and other various social networking websites are being used to communicate. People may be writing letters by hand less and less as it is easier, faster, and cheaper to log onto the computer and type a message. Technology is especially affecting informal letters, as friends can check on status updates and send wall posts or private messages through Facebook. Even formal letters are being replaced by email, as business and professional inquiries can be done more conveniently that way. Eventually, I wonder if hard copy letters might eventually disappear. But in the meantime, letters are still used in many situations so this genre analysis of their conventions will hopefully prove useful to other writers.
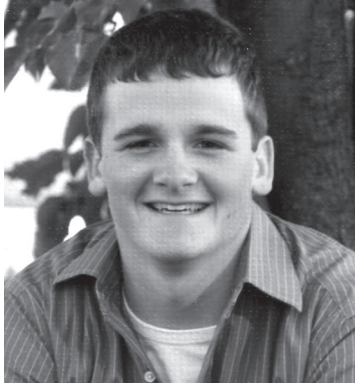
Brad Ure is a 19-year old sophomore at Illinois State University studying Business Administration. He grew up in the northern suburbs and graduated from Lakes Community High School in 2011. In his free time, he is either socializing with friends or doing something outdoors.