

How to Write Letters: A Complete Guide to Correct Business and Personal Correspondence

Mary Owens Crowther

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"Do not abbreviate anything—initials may be used in informal invitations and acceptances, but, in the formal, "H. E. Jones" invariably has to become "Horatio Etherington Jones."

"No one can go far wrong in writing any sort of letter if first the trouble be taken to set out the exact object of the letter. A letter always has an object—otherwise why write it? But somehow, and particularly in the dictated letter, the object frequently gets lost in the words. A handwritten letter is not so apt to be wordy—it is too much trouble to write. But a man dictating may, especially if he be interrupted by telephone calls, ramble all around what he wants to say and in the end have used two pages for what ought to have been said in three lines. On the other hand, letters may be so brief as to produce an impression of abrupt discourtesy. It is a rare writer who can say all that need be said in one line and not seem rude. But it can be done.

"The single purpose of a letter is to convey thought. That thought may have to do with facts, and the further purpose may be to have the thought produce action. But plainly the action depends solely upon how well the thought is transferred. Words as used in a letter are vehicles for thought, but every word is not a vehicle for thought, because it may not be the kind of word that goes to the place where you want your thought to go; or, to put it another way, there is a wide variation in the understanding of words. The average American vocabulary is quite limited, and where an exactly phrased letter might completely convey an exact thought to a person of education, that same letter might be meaningless to a person who understands but few words. Therefore, it is fatal in general letter writing to venture into unusual words or to go much beyond the vocabulary of, say, a grammar school graduate. Statistics show that the ordinary adult in the United States—that is, the great American public—has either no high school education or less than a year of it. You can assume in writing to a man whom you do not know and about whom you have no information that he has only a grammar school education and that in using other than commonplace words you run a double danger—first, that he will not know what you are talking about or will misinterpret it; and second, that he will think you are trying to be highfalutin and will resent your possibly quite innocent parade of language."

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