



Being taken seriously by the outside world when you are incarcerated can be challenging. Perhaps the most preferred method you have to convey your message to an outside party is a letter. Writing a professional letter, however, is much different than writing a personal letter. Most people do not know how to write a professional letter. Taking the time to perfect this skill will only make the act of settling your affairs from prison (and we hope one day out of prison) much easier.

WRITING A PROFESSIONAL LETTER

STEP 1 Define the purpose of your letter. Before you begin writing, it's important to have an objective in mind. Ask yourself **why** am I writing this letter, and **what** do I hope to achieve? Is your letter intended to bring about action or are you writing a letter to show appreciation? Do you need a reply, or are you writing a letter to have record of an event? Knowing where your letter is going will help get you on the right track.

STEP 2 Brainstorm. Keeping the objective of your letter in mind, begin writing down all of the ideas you want to include. Make a list of all of the events, ideas, and thoughts you want in your letter. It doesn't matter the order; that's what revisions are for. Having all of your ideas written in one place will not only help make sure you don't leave anything out but will also help you better communicate your objective.

STEP 3 Write a rough draft. Using your brainstorming ideas, write your first draft. The body of your letter should begin with a friendly greeting. From here, state all necessary facts. Events should be in chronological order, and your writing should be concise and to the point. Try to keep the body between two to three paragraphs. If possible, your letter should fit on one page. If you find it's longer, you may want to consider shortening your message. After stating all necessary points, summarize your purpose for writing and offer a suggestion on how to proceed.

STEP 4 Revise and proofread your rough draft. This is one of the most important steps to letter writing. Your first draft should never be your final copy. Look for ways to improve upon your writing. Ask yourself the following:

“There is no end to education. It is not that you read a book, pass an examination, and finish with education. The whole of life, from the moment you are born to the moment you die, is a process of learning.”

- Jiddu Krishnamurti

- Does my letter achieve its objective?
- Can I word sentences more clearly?
- Did I include a greeting, all points, & closing?
- Are my events listed in chronological order?
- Do I repeat myself unnecessarily?

Once your letter reads the way you would like it to, proofread your letter carefully for spelling and grammatical errors. Use spell check, if available, or a dictionary to check any words you are unsure of. If possible, allow some time to pass before proofreading your letter. This will help you catch errors more easily.

FORMATTING YOUR LETTER

While it's important that your letter has purpose and direction, communicates your thoughts in concise language, and is free of spelling and grammatical errors, it's equally as important to format your letter correctly. Block style formatting is the most commonly used style for formal letter writing. As the name suggests, no indentations are used, and all text is aligned to the left. Follow these steps to write a properly formatted block style letter:

- Your address should appear on the top left hand side of the page. Do not abbreviate 'street', 'building', etc. Type the words out in their entirety. If your inmate number and/or cell number is required when writing, you should include these in your address.
- Type the date directly below your address. It should be one line beneath the sender's address or two returns on a keyboard. The most common format for a professional letter would be as follows: March 15, 2016
- The recipient's name should appear next, one line beneath the date or two returns on a keyboard. Include his or her title (Mr., Ms., Mrs., Dr., etc.). If you are writing a woman and do not know her preference, always use Ms. After the recipient's name, type his/her job title. Below the name, write the name of the company. One line below that, write the recipient's street address. On the next line, write the recipient's city, state, and zip code. If you do not know the recipient's title, contact the company to find out. Alternatively, ask a pen-pal or family member to research it for you.
- Type the body of your letter next. Place a single space in between paragraphs, and do not indent paragraphs.
- Next is your closing (one or two words followed by a comma) and printed name. "Sincerely," "Yours sincerely," "Best," "Respectfully," and "Kind regards" are all appropriate. Leave space between your closing and printed name so you are able to sign your name in this area. You should use your full name when writing your name and signing your letter.
- If you are including anything besides your letter in the envelope, add the word 'Enclosure' or 'Enclosures' (if you are enclosing more than one item) below your printed name. List your additional enclosed item(s) here.

Example: Enclosures – Copy of vocational certificate

Additional Tips

- 1)** If a typewriter or computer is available to you, we recommend typing your letter instead of handwriting it. Typed letters will appear more professional, and of course they're always more legible. If typing your letter is not an option, a handwritten letter is fine. Your letter should be written in blue or black ink, and the paper you use should be clean and free of wrinkles.
- 2)** When typing your letter, you should use a simple font such as Arial or Times New Roman at no larger than 12 point size. Side, top and bottom margins should be 1 to 1 1/4 inches. One-page letters and memos should be vertically centered.
- 3)** Save a copy of your letter for your personal records. If you do not receive a reply within an appropriate time (2-6 weeks), send your original letter again along with a cover letter politely indicating that you have not received a reply to your original letter.
- 4)** Know when to send mail Certified. Is this a time sensitive matter? Is it a legal one? If so, you may wish to send the letter Certified, which will generate a return receipt from the post office for your records and help expedite the letter. However, it is much cheaper to send a second letter than it is to send a Certified one. Please keep this in mind when sending mail Certified.

Sample Letter in Block Format:

Your First and Last Name #12345-678
Prison Name
5 Hill Street, Cell Number
Madison, WI 53700

March 15, 2016

Ms. Helen Jones
President
Jones, Jones & Jones
123 International Lane
Boston, MA 01234

Dear Ms. Jones:

I hope you are doing well, and I hope business is good.

This letter serves as my request for your consideration for the position of foreman at your company. While I do understand it may seem unusual having a person currently incarcerated apply for this position, I will be home on March 25, 2016, and I am confident I would be an asset to your company. I have completed several relevant education programs (certificates enclosed) during my incarceration, and I am eager to apply what I have learned. I am also enclosing a copy of my GED, my completed application, and a current resume.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I hope you have a great week, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

John Doe

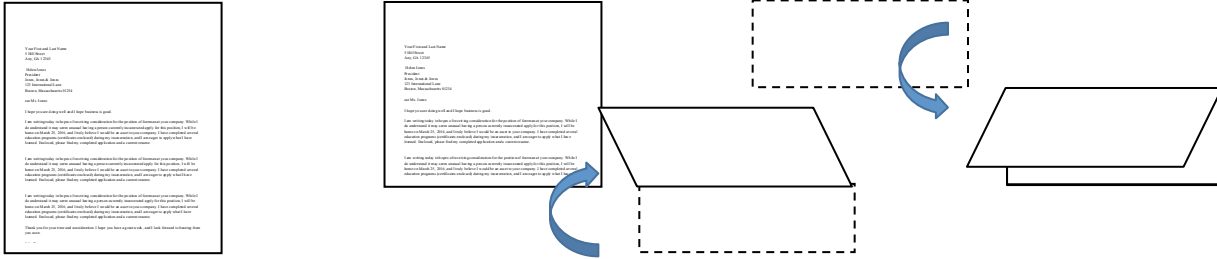
Enclosures – Copy of vocational certificates
Copy of GED
Application
Resume

INSERTING YOUR CORRESPONDENCE AND ADDRESSING YOUR ENVELOPE

The same amount of care that goes into letter writing should be taken when folding your letter and addressing your envelope. If possible, use a computer or typewriter to print your envelope, and check the recipient's name and address, as well as your return address for errors.

If using a standard envelope

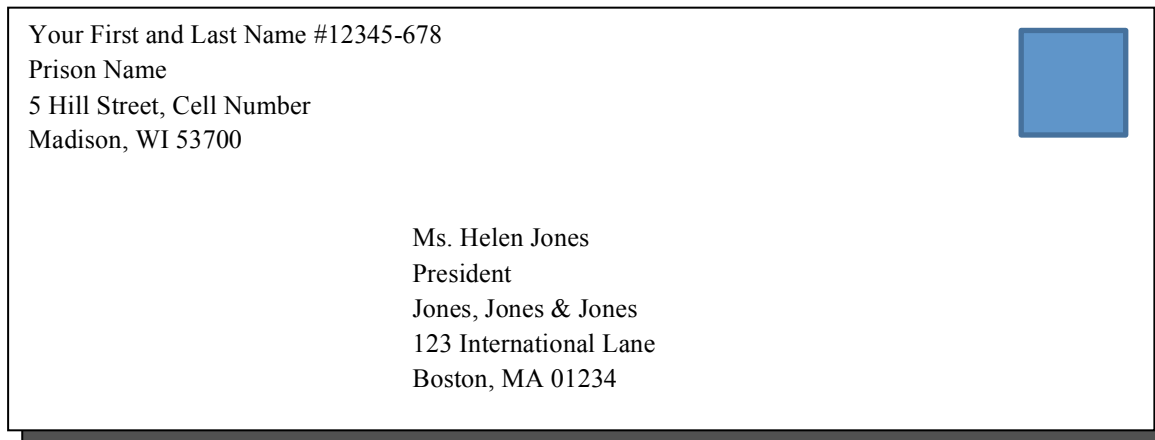
Neatly fold your letter into horizontal thirds. With the letter facing up, fold the bottom one third of the letter upward. Then fold the top of the letter down to meet the first fold.



If using a large envelope

Do not fold your letter; insert your letter neatly into a large envelope without folding.

Place any enclosures behind your letter. Do not staple or use tape. Insert all correspondence into the envelope so when the envelope is opened, the letter is the first thing the recipient will see. The same rules apply when addressing your envelope as in your letter. Do not abbreviate street names, and address the recipient with the appropriate title:



Success story or suggestion? We want to know what worked for you so we can share it with other inmates.
If you have a suggestion to make about this resource, please do so at:
Self-help Suggestion - P.O. Box 10 - Edgewater, FL 32132 USA

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