

# **Writing Clear, Successful Business Letters**

## **Script**

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Script Text Is Below the Slides in White

### **Writing Business Letters Workshop Contents**

- When Do You Communicate by Letter, E-mail, or Talking?
- Letter Format
- Writing a Letter Providing Information
- Writing a Response Letter
- Writing a Letter to Inspire Commitment
- Writing a Persuasive Letter

### **Sample: Writing a Letter Providing Information**

Focus on three tasks:

1. Prepare the reader to read the information with understanding.
2. Convey the information successfully.
3. Write clearly and effectively.

We'll start with a letter providing information, the letter you probably most commonly write.  
To write an effective letter providing information you must accomplish three tasks:

1. Prepare the reader to receive the information with understanding.
2. Convey the information successfully.
3. Write clearly and effectively.

We're going to look at a letter Julie Castle, senior analyst at a management consulting firm, wrote to Patrice McLaughlin, an executive at Silverstein Hotels and Resorts. Silverstein wants to build hotels in the Asian market, partly because Silverstein knows a competitor, Glastonbury Hotels, is planning to expand its presence in Asia. Patrice asked Julie's firm to find out what they could about Glastonbury's plans. This letter contains the results of her research.

## Standard Opening

### Baney, Frank, & Plato, LLC

2 West Mill Creek, Tuliptree, IL 61700 815 432-9322

June 15, 2009

Ms. Patrice McLaughlin  
Silverstein Hotels and Resorts  
4326 Paradise Road  
Las Vegas, NV 89169

Dear Ms. McLaughlin:

Julie begins with a standard opening with the date, inside address, and Dear Ms. McLaughlin. You recognize this from the format I explained earlier.

I am Julie Castle, one of the analysts with Baney, Frank, & Plato LLC.  
You asked our company to provide information about Glastonbury

## Prepare the Reader to Read the Information with Understanding

1. Introduce yourself.
2. Explain why the reader is receiving this information now.
3. End by stating what is in the letter.

Hotel's plans to expand into the Asian market. The results of our research follow.

Manage the reader right from the beginning of your letter. You will be most successful if you give the reader everything he or she needs to understand perfectly, starting with the first words.

Julie begins her message by introducing herself. Always introduce yourself if the reader doesn't know you. That lets the reader know you're someone worth listening to, and it builds a feeling of partnering with the reader. You will be most successful if the reader feels you are working together.

Next, she explains why the reader is receiving this now. Even if this resulted from a phone call or you're sure the reader will remember why you wrote this letter, remind the reader of what is behind it. That saves the reader time in trying figure out why he or she is receiving this now, and it gives the reader a feeling that you're on top of things. It looks good for you and your company. Don't include too much detail—just enough to remind the reader.

Julie ends the paragraph by stating what's in this letter. The reader can then begin to read with understanding because she knows everything she needs to know about the letter at this point.

## Convey the Information Successfully

1. Break with a blank line to start the message of the letter.
2. State the conclusion up front.

Glastonbury does plan to set up hotels in South Asian nations to tap into what they expect to be an increase in business and leisure travel.

Their primary interest is in India. They have described three reasons for their interest:

1. Since 1991, India has lowered import tariffs and allowed foreign companies to own businesses, encouraging companies

3. Break after the conclusion and state the first main idea.
4. Present the details clearly by breaking out lists.
5. Prepare the reader to read with understanding by describing the list's contents.
6. Indent the list and put blank space between the items.
7. After the list, put a blank line to close that section.
8. Refer to the attachment.
9. End cordially with contact information.

such as Ford Motor Co. and General Electric Co. to boost their presence. That has lured more business travelers to the region.

2. The Soffit Research Group forecasts that demand for rooms will rise 44 percent during the next three years, from the current 90,000 to 130,000.
3. Tourism has increased dramatically. India attracted 3.36 million foreign tourists in 2008, or 24 percent more than a year earlier. The country earned \$4.81 billion from foreign tourists last year.

Glastonbury has indicated that it will invest 8.5 billion rupees (\$190 million) to set up budget hotels in India and the rest of South Asia. Within 10 years, they expect to own 150 luxury hotels across India and other South Asian countries.

The full report of my research findings is attached. Please contact me at 309 828-2509 if you have any questions.

In the body of the letter, Julie has two goals: she wants to ensure that her letter is successful, and she wants Patrice to regard Julie and her company as highly capable. To attain those goals, she has carefully structured the letter so Patrice will be able to read and understand it easily, and she'll be impressed with the care, organization, and precision Julie has put into it.

Julie begins with the conclusion about Glastonbury Hotels because that is Patrice's primary interest. Generally, state conclusions at the beginning unless the reader needs to understand the details before reading the conclusion.

She puts the conclusion in its own paragraph to give it importance and impact. If you want a statement to have impact, put it in its own paragraph. You can add even more impact by using one short sentence in its own paragraph.

After she states the conclusion, Julie breaks for a new paragraph and begins the detail that led to the conclusion. She starts the first main idea by stating the point: "Their primary interest is in India." Opening the section by stating what's in it prepares the reader to understand the content of the section.

Julie breaks out the reasons into a numbered list. The old way to write lists was to put them in a paragraph.

A list looked like a page out of a novel, with the words in a clump. That made it difficult to see the individual items. Business writers are now breaking out all lists that have longer items into numbered or bulleted lists.

She is going to list the reasons Glastonbury Hotels is focusing on India, so she opens the list by telling Patrice what is in it: “They have described three reasons for their interest.” She uses the exact number three. In all business writing, use the exact number when you know it. Don’t use “some” or “a few,” and never use “a couple.”

She then states a name for the items in the list. In this case, it’s “reasons for their interest.” That helps the writer and the reader. The name becomes a guide for the writer to make sure only reasons for their interest are in the list. And it becomes a guide for the reader because the reader can now start putting the items from the list into her memory as “reasons” right from the first item.

She indents the list ½ inch and states each item. She breaks between the items using ½ a blank line. In Microsoft Word, that is 6 points. You can put points between paragraphs using the paragraph function.

After the list, she puts a blank line to let the reader know that section is closing. She then starts the detail of the next section. The name of that section is the “invest” section. That is a key term. Julie uses that key term name to help her make sure she includes only “invest” information in that section. Using the name in the text lets the reader know what’s in the section so she can store all the information together in her mind under the name “invest.”

By writing carefully, Julie is managing Patrice so they both end up being successful.

Julie then refers to the attachment. Always refer to attachments and explain to the reader what to do with them.

Finally, she ends cordially and includes her contact information, even though it is in the letterhead. The reason for doing that is that it shows the reader that she genuinely is interested in contact if the reader wants it. It’s part of the partnering tone of the letter.

## Write Clearly and Effectively

1. Write letters in idea blocks.
2. Mark the blocks to make them clear.

I am Julie Castle, one of the analysts with Baney, Frank, & Plato LLC. You asked our company to provide information about Glastonbury Hotel’s plans to expand into the Asian market. The results of our research follow.

**Glastonbury does** plan to set up hotels in South Asian nations to tap into what they expect to be an increase in business and leisure travel.

3. When you begin a new idea, break for a new paragraph. Make paragraphs short: around 7 lines.
4. Write sentences that are clear and easy to read.
5. Sentences should be shorter, averaging around 15 words.
6. Write sentences with the subject first, then the verb.
7. Put only one or two ideas in most sentences.
8. Avoids excess words that don't add to the meaning.
9. Use simple vocabulary you would use if you were speaking to the reader.

**Their primary interest** is in India. They have described three reasons for their interest:

1. Since 1991, India has lowered import tariffs and allowed foreign companies to own businesses, encouraging companies such as Ford Motor Co. and General Electric Co. to boost their presence. That has lured more business travelers to the region.
2. The Soffit Research Group forecasts that demand for rooms will rise 44 percent during the next three years, from the current 90,000 to 130,000.
3. Tourism has increased dramatically. India attracted 3.36 million foreign tourists in 2008, or 24 percent more than a year earlier. The country earned \$4.81 billion from foreign tourists last year.

Glastonbury has indicated that it will invest 8.5 billion rupees (\$190 million) to set up budget hotels in India and the rest of South Asia. Within 10 years, they expect to own 150 luxury hotels across India and other South Asian countries.

The full report of my research findings is attached. Please contact me at 309 828-2509 if you have any questions.

Now we'll take a look at how to write the information letter so it is clear and effective. Write your letter providing information so the reader cannot misunderstand.

First, decide what the parts are. In most letters, you will explain one main idea. In Julie's letter, the one main idea is whether Glastonbury Hotels is planning to develop hotels in the South Asian area. But you might have two main ideas in a letter, such as whether Glastonbury Hotels is planning to develop hotels and whether the Middle East is another area to develop hotels. Write each main idea as a block in the letter. Set off the blocks with white space and headings so the reader can follow your points easily.

Inside each main idea block, you will have smaller blocks. In Julie's letter, you can see a block for the introduction, a block for the conclusion she came to, one describing Glastonbury's reasons for their interest,

one with projected growth, and a closing block.

Julie marks the blocks to make them clear for the reader. She puts a blank line between each block. As you're writing your letters, when you come to what seems to be a new idea, break for it by putting in two carriage returns. You can combine the blocks later if you need to.

Julie also opens each block using a key term that tells the reader what's in the block. That key term becomes the name for the block. Keep that name in mind as you write to help you decide what should be in the block. The key term for the first block is "introduction." Julie didn't need to write that key term because it's obvious. The key term for the second block is "Glastonbury does." In it, she writes what Glastonbury does, and when she's finished with that, she breaks for a new block. For the third block, the key term is "their primary interest," and she begins with those words. She'll keep that in mind as she writes. When she finishes talking about their primary interest, she breaks for a new block and opens the new block with a new key term.

She uses paragraphs and numbered items to mark smaller blocks. In Julie's letter, the reasons are a list and it's easy to see the blocks because of the numbers before each item and the white space around them.

Each time she starts a new idea, she breaks for a paragraph. Paragraphs are great ways to keep ideas straight, like the compartments in a silverware drawer that keep knives in one area, spoons in another, and so forth. Keep paragraphs short, around 7 lines.

All of Julie's sentences are clear and easy to read. She makes them that way by using shorter sentences, averaging around 15 words. Most start with the subject and then have the verb. She writes "I am," "You asked," "Glastonbury does." She limits sentences to one or two ideas. Long sentences don't show the writer is knowledgeable; they're just confusing.

Julie eliminates excess words as she writes so the writing is concise. To do that, when she went back through the letter after she wrote the first draft, she looked specifically to see whether she could reduce the number of words by a quarter. If you do that, you'll be surprised at the words you'll find that you can eliminate without losing meaning.

Finally, she uses the same simple, clear words she would use if she were speaking. She knows that if she wouldn't say it, she shouldn't write it. Work at being simple and clear. That makes good business writing.

## Skills Summary

This is a summary of the skills that will create a successful letter providing information:

- **Use the Standard Letter Format**

- **Introduce yourself.**
- **Explain why the reader is receiving this now and what's in the letter.**
- **State conclusions or other important information up front.**
- **Break out lists with numbers or bullets.**
- **End cordially with contact information.**
- **Make the blocks in the letter clear.**
- **Write clear, short, easy-to-read sentences.**
- **Write concisely.**
- **Use simple vocabulary you would use if you were speaking in person to the reader.**

## **Special Tip**

### **Active Voice**

- Let the reader know who is acting.
- Write the actor first, then the action.

**NOT** – The report was written and approved before being sent to the client.

**INSTEAD** – After Brian and Lee wrote the report, Dr. Simpkins approved it, and had Joan sent it to the client.

**NOT** – This purchase was requested by the department manager before it was sent through by Tom in Purchasing.

**INSTEAD** – The department manager requested the purchase before Tom sent it to Purchasing.



Here's a special writing tip. Let the reader know who is acting in your sentences. That's important in business writing because the reader needs to know who performed or didn't perform. It also provides a written record of the actions for use later.

Sentences that hide the actor are in passive voice. They're passive because it seems like no one performed the action. For example, this is a sentence in passive voice: "The report was written and approved before being sent to the client." The reader doesn't know who wrote the report, who approved it, or who sent it to the client." Write so the actors are clear. Sentences that state the actor are in active voice, because the reader knows who is active. You would change the sentence to "After Brian and Lee wrote the report, Dr. Simpkins approved it, and Joan sent it to the client."

State the actor first. Don't write the sentence with the words "by the" that puts the actor after the action. Instead of "this purchase was requested by" and "it was sent by," write "the department manager requested" and "Tom sent."

Let the reader know who is acting by stating the actor up front. That will make your writing clearer and stronger.