



Self-Advocacy: How to Write an Effective Letter

A well-written letter can be a useful tool for addressing or resolving a problem. These guidelines are designed to help you advocate for yourself effectively. Remember that the Office of the University Ombudsman is a good place to get confidential, neutral, and informal feedback on your letter – before you send it, or to develop options for next steps after you’ve received a response.

Before you Start Writing:

Think about the purpose -- Why are you writing? What would it take for the issue to be resolved? Is a letter the best communication method at this point in time?

Think about the audience -- What does the recipient already know about the issue? Given his or her perspective, role, responsibilities, beliefs, etc. . . ., what information might the recipient find useful and persuasive?

Think about how to clearly articulate your concerns and begin distinguishing facts from your own assumptions and opinions.

Drafting the Letter:

Keep it short – A concise letter will keep the reader’s attention.

Address the letter to the appropriate person – Do your research so time is not lost while your letter finds its way to the right recipient. The letter should be addressed to the person with sufficient authority to solve the problem and no higher. If you’re considering copying others on the letter, explore your motivations for doing so.

Use a professional format and tone – Type your letter, if possible, and follow-up an electronic version with a hard copy. Use a business-like tone, staying away from inflammatory language, i.e., threats, insults and sarcasm. At the end of the letter, thank the recipient for giving time and attention to the matter.

Stick to the relevant facts -- Briefly recap the relevant facts in a logical sequence. Be specific about dates, times, locations and the identity of any other individuals involved. Reference and include copies of documents that relate to your situation. Highlight relevant portions of the attachments, if the attachments are lengthy.

Don’t ignore facts or policies that are not in your favor -- If there are contrary policies or facts, explain why an exception is warranted in your case.

Be persuasive – Describe how you were affected by the issue you are trying to resolve. This may include emotional distress, financial or time hardships, and academic or professional consequences. Be careful not to over-dramatize.

Request a specific outcome. – Make sure your request is realistic and reasonable.

Be specific about next steps -- Indicate when and how you will follow-up on your letter.

Include a way for the recipient to contact you – Make sure your full name and contact information are clearly included at the start and/or end of the letter.

Before Sending

Consult a proofreader – Have someone you trust read your letter to ensure that it uses an appropriate tone and is grammatically correct. A neutral third party may also provide an objective viewpoint on the underlying situation.

Keep a copy -- Keep a copy of all letters sent and received and all related documents and forms. This will be helpful should you ever need to show proof of the communication.

Remember that you must give the recipient a reasonable amount of time to respond!