

Writing a Letter

A Tool for Conflict Resolution

If a person has offended, harassed, or intimidated you, a useful first step is to draft a letter describing the offense. You can decide later whether or not to send the letter. You do not need to decide on your choice of options before you start writing—drafting a letter is the best possible preparation for any other options for dealing with the offense.

In the process of writing and re-writing, you'll have opportunities to clarify the facts, express your feelings of anger, sadness, or fear, identify harm you may have suffered, and consider the remedies you might desire. It can be hard to do this clearly and completely at first, so it is often useful to draft and re-draft several times.

Your first draft is likely to be filled with feelings and judgments about the situation mixed together with the facts, and it is therefore unlikely to be an effective letter to send. That's okay! The more upset you are, the more useful it is to write several drafts, giving yourself time between each draft to recover more facts, separate the facts from your feelings, and think more clearly. The final draft, if sent, needs to be factual, civil, and tactful to be most effective in resolving conflict and getting the remedies you want.

An effective letter has three parts:

1. An objective statement of the facts as you experienced them.

No feelings, judgments, or opinions belong in this section. Ideally, a fact is something that could be recorded by camera or audio tape. If you were watching the scene on T.V., how would you report what was said and done? This section should be very accurate and matter of fact, giving details where helpful. If you do need to refer to an opinion or belief as part of your facts section, label it as such: For example, "I believed that you were planning to teach us about geologic rock formations and therefore I went on the field trip."

2. Feelings and opinions about the offensive situation.

Here, you can let the person know how you felt about their behavior and any harm you felt as a result. Harm includes not only emotional distress, but financial and time hardships as well. For example: "I thought what you said was unjust, because you did not present any evidence...I felt humiliated in front of my co-workers...I was so upset that I could not work the next day...It cost me a day's pay."

3. A statement about what you would like to have happen next.

In the final section, you ask for specific remedies, if appropriate, and tell the person what you request for the future. For example: "I'd like to meet with you in person together with the teaching assistant to review my paper, and I'd like you to reconsider the grade you gave me...From now on, I'd like our relationship to be strictly professional." If you want a response, either verbal or in writing, specifically request one and indicate a time frame.

Diversity. If the person who has offended is from another culture, consider consulting with someone familiar with that culture before sending a letter. You may find that sending a letter is not the best option in this case, or you might appreciate help to use language that can best express your concerns cross-culturally.

It's worth it to consult with someone.

Feeling harassed, intimidated, or offended is always an upsetting experience. Before deciding to send a letter to someone who has offended you, it may be useful to consult with a third party who has an objective viewpoint. This can be a friend, co-worker, or professional. The Ombuds Office is a good place to get this kind of assistance.

Why you might send your letter...

1. You may have already tried to talk with the person, and the outcome did not feel successful.
2. The person may be unaware of the pain they caused.
4. There may be cultural differences in interpreting the event. The offending person may need to be taught about your culture.
5. Most people—at least in North American culture—would prefer to hear about a problem directly, not from a third party.

If you're dealing with powerful people, a wellprepared, private, and direct approach may be least likely to result in retaliation. It provides the offender a chance to save face, yet creates a record.

6. If you decide to take the matter further, a letter is evidence that you indeed thought an offense had occurred and that you took civil, responsible, and explicit action to get it to stop.

If you decide to send a letter, you should always keep a copy for your records. If there is retaliation or a repetition of the offense, you then have some evidence to back your story. You might want to send a doubly-sealed letter to yourself by registered mail and keep the receipt and the sealed letter (which has been postmarked and dated).

Why you might not send your letter right away or decide not to send it at all...

1. You may wish to try and talk with the person first, by yourself or with a colleague.
2. You might decide to consider forgetting the incident in the spirit of tolerance.
3. You might want to see if the offense happens again or if a pattern of harassment develops before you decide on a course of action. You might be concerned about the fact that, once the person receives the letter, they then have control of to whom they show the letter and how they use it.

Even if you decide not to send the letter at first, you should always keep a copy. You may want to take action later, and the letter provides a record of information written at the time the offense occurred.

To whom should you send the letter?

Two issues should be considered before you decide to whom your letter should be addressed. First, do you plan to have an on-going relationship with this person? Second, do you wish to keep your communication informal or use more formal means (by involving authority figures or invoking institutional policies) to resolve the dispute?

- **Just the offender:** If this is a first offense and you're mainly concerned with stopping the behavior, keeping the communication informal and private allows the other person to save face and is the best option for maintaining a working relationship. Other informal options include talking directly with the offender, asking a trusted colleague to intervene "off the record," or requesting confidential mediation through the Ombuds Office.
- **The offender and supervisor(s):** This option moves beyond a request for change into a more formal complaint. If the person has not responded to your previous requests for behavior change or if there has been a pattern of offenses, you can send copies of your letter to their supervisors for protection and possible supervisory action. This option might also be used if the offense was felt to be a grievous one, or you fear that the other person might retaliate. Be aware that the supervisor may feel that she or he must take certain institutional actions, so you may lose control of the process. While it may be appropriate, supervisor involvement might also make the offender feel apprehensive or angry so that maintaining a working relationship could become more difficult.
- **The offender and policy-making groups:** If you feel that the offense may be against the policy of the institution, you can take the *formal* option of writing or reporting to the appropriate policy making bodies (for example, the Sexual Harassment Committee). This option puts the offender on notice that policy may be involved and that an investigation may occur. Again, be prepared for the official office to take action. This approach may be appropriate, but it will result in some loss of privacy and control.

Adapted from Drafting-and perhaps sending-a private letter to a person who has harassed or offended you by Mary Rowe, UCOA Handbook, 2000. The full text of this article may be accessed online at http://web.mit.edu/ombud/drafting_a_letter.html