



The Art of Writing Letters

You write letters to request information, request action, provide information or describe an event, decline a request, and express appreciation.

In this article, you will learn about two approaches to letter writing, the **Blame Approach** and the **Story-Telling Approach**. You will learn the difference between business letters and therapeutic letters - and why you should **never send therapeutic letters to the school**.

Because you want your letters to create a good first impression, read our companion article, **12 Rules for Writing Great Letters**.

We strongly recommend that you read the **original Letter to the Stranger** by Pete Wright and Janie Bowman. You will meet the panicked parents who wrote an angry letter to the school. After a cooling-off period, the parents wrote a very different letter. The original **Letter to the Stranger** teaches you how strong emotions affect people -- especially parents. You will also meet "the Stranger" and learn how he reacted to these two letters.

Letter Writing and the Need to DO SOMETHING!

When parents fire off a letter to the school, they are usually in the middle of a crisis that involves their child. At that moment, they want to **DO SOMETHING**. They may be trying to right a wrong or protect their child from harm. Sometimes, parents write angry letters after a series of bad experiences or incidents that have occurred over a period months or years.

Before you send a strongly worded letter to the school, it is important for you to keep several things in mind. **First**, after you send a letter to the school, it is out of your hands forever. **You can never change it!**

Second, your letter will be read by strangers. Schools are bureaucracies. In many cases, important decisions will be made by administrators who are a level or two above your contact person. These administrators don't know you or your child. They don't know the "history" behind your letter.

Third, no one will wade through a long letter to a nugget of gold. This means that you have to capture the reader's interest and attention within the first few sentences. If you don't capture the reader's interest quickly, the reader will skim a page or two and put your letter away.

Fourth, your letter is a personal statement about you and your situation. What are you saying about yourself if you give in to the urge to **DO SOMETHING** and write an angry, threatening, or demanding letter? The decision-making strangers who make decisions in the school bureaucracy don't know or care that this was the last straw or that the letter is the culmination of many negative experiences. A letter gives you an opportunity to make an impression and tell your side of the story. You need to think about the impression you want to make on the stranger. Do you want the stranger to see you as

an angry, negative complainer? Or, do you want the stranger to see you as a rational, thoughtful parent who is expressing valid concerns?

Two Approaches to Writing Letters: The Blame Approach v. the Story Telling Approach

At the beginning of this section on Tactics, you read about Marc's situation. You saw the parents' original angry letter and their subsequent Letter to the Stranger. Let's look at letters written by two fathers. The first letter was written by a father after he attended an IEP meeting for his daughter.

Dear Dr. Smith:

You asked that I advise you about my objections to the IEP that your "professional" staff of educators wrote for my daughter. Despite my own lack of training, I found that the IEP developed by your staff was absolutely preposterous. Let me share a few observations with you.

Your staff **FAILED** to include anyone on the IEP team who thoroughly understands my daughter's background, including her current teachers.

Your staff **FAILED** to perform any observation on my daughter before developing the IEP.

Your staff **FAILED** to develop an appropriate IEP because they failed to include information from the new testing, and relied on outdated testing completed nearly a year ago.

Your staff **FAILED** to develop an IEP that targeted her specific needs and unique abilities.

Your staff **FAILED** to develop an IEP that includes objective criteria to measure progress or lack of progress.

Your staff **FAILED** to develop an IEP that included any evaluation procedures to measure progress, as related to the annual goals and objectives that your staff wrote.

(This list continues for several pages.)

Given their years of training and experience, I would expect your staff to be capable of writing a simple IEP. Although I have no training whatsoever in how to write IEPs, even I can see how inadequate this document is.

As I examine the IEP developed by your staff, I can only conclude that they are incompetent and inept. This IEP proves that your staff are incapable of teaching my daughter who is smarter than your entire team.

Sincerely,

Bob Bombastic

What is your first reaction to this letter? Do you understand why Bob wrote the letter? What does he want the school to do? Do you understand his position? Do you agree with him? Or, did you have a different response?

When Bob wrote this letter, he was steamed. He knew he had to give the school system "legal notice" about his objections to their proposed IEP. Because he felt defensive, he included every conceivable objection to the IEP in his letter – from serious to trivial. Earlier, Bob had been accused of not advising the school system specifically about his objections to their IEP. Bob was going to let that happen again.

Unfortunately, when a stranger (like you) reads Bob's letter, the stranger doesn't know about this history. Bob's letter creates a feeling of sympathy for the people who receive the letter. Why is this?

Most of us have seen people arguing in public. You've probably seen couples arguing or a parent disciplining a child. What was your reaction? If you're like most people, you felt uncomfortable. Maybe you had an even stronger emotional reaction. You didn't like it. You felt sympathy toward the child or adult who was being confronted or humiliated.

People have the same reactions when they read letters. Let's take a look at another letter. This letter was written by another who just got back from an IEP meeting:

Dear Dr. Smith:

First, let me thank you for allowing me to participate in the development of my daughter's IEP. I appreciate your willingness to meet with me so that I could share my concerns about her and what she needs in her education.

At the IEP meeting last week, your staff was very kind in answering my questions. Their kindness was especially appreciated since I had not met most of the people at the IEP meeting before. I was very sorry that neither of my daughter's teachers could make the meeting. I understood that one teacher was on a field trip and the other teacher had a doctor's appointment.

I had concerns that we did not have enough time to develop an IEP for Carrie. Although 25 minutes was allotted for the IEP meeting, we started more than 10 minutes late. I understand that several earlier IEP meetings ran late. I know that things get very rushed at the end of the year, which makes scheduling these meetings especially difficult.

I was also concerned that we did not have time to discuss the recent testing done on Carrie. You may recall that I had additional testing completed on her two months ago. After I received the test results, I provided you with a copy of the new testing. At that time, I shared concerns with you that Carrie had not made any progress during the two years she's been receiving special education services.

Unfortunately, the results of this testing were not included in the new IEP. The psychologist thought the new test results may have been mislaid. Perhaps this is why the school team gave me an IEP to sign that placed Carrie back into the same program. You will recall that I expressed serious concerns about her IEP and its lack of objective measures and evaluation procedures.

I'm sure you can understand why I did not sign the IEP presented to me at this meeting. Given the rushed atmosphere and general confusion at that time, I thought it would be better to schedule another IEP meeting later, so that we can discuss these issues in depth. I thought the IEP team needed to have a chance to review the new testing before trying to write an IEP. I'm including another copy of the evaluation with this letter.

Please check with your staff and send me some times so that we can get together for a productive meeting. If you have any questions, please call or write.

Sincerely,

Jim Manners

What is your first reaction to Jim's letter? Do you know why Jim wrote the letter? Do you know what he is asking for? What does Jim want? Do you understand his position?

When you read Jim's letter, did you realize that his letter dealt with the same facts as Bob's letter? Both letters describe an IEP meeting held about a child – the same child. Both letters mention several serious violations made by the school when they developed the child's IEP. In both cases, the parent was presented with an IEP that pre-determined the child's program and placement. The parents had little or no real input into the IEP and were expected to sign it. In both cases, the child was tested by an independent evaluator. In both cases, the new test results (which showed minimal progress in the existing program) weren't included in the child's IEP. In both cases, the child's teachers did not attend the IEP meeting.

Your goal is to write diplomatic "Mr. Manners" letters. List the problems but keep your tone pleasant and businesslike. The facts in these letters are important. Jim lays out his facts without blaming or name-calling. If Jim needs to go further – to a mediator, a hearing officer, or a judge, he'll be in good shape.

If Bob has to take his case to an outside decision-maker, he'll be in trouble. Bob's letter is filled with angry, blaming statements. He didn't include any information to help the stranger understand the background. The tone of his letter will alienate any neutral decision-maker – mediator, hearing officer, or judge.

The "Sympathy Factor"

If you're tempted to write an angry letter to the school, realize that you may trigger the Sympathy Factor. This sympathy will not be for you or your child. When people read angry, sarcastic or threatening letters, they have a sympathetic response to the person who receives the letter. This is what happened with Bob's letter.

"Why?" you ask.

At some point in our lives, most of us have received an angry letter. Your letter may have come from a jilted lover, an ex-spouse, an angry relative, a creditor, or the IRS. When you read your letter, you felt threatened, guilty, ashamed, and angry. Later, you filed these negative emotions away in your emotional memory bank.

If you read an angry letter, it will evoke a feeling of sympathy for the recipient. Based

on your own experiences, you will think that the recipient didn't deserve to be attacked. Instead, you'll think: "Well, maybe the person made a mistake - but we all make mistakes. After all, no one's perfect." From the perspective of the stranger, the fact that someone makes a mistake doesn't give you an excuse to attack.

First Impressions are Lasting Impressions

In writing letters to the school, you must understand that your letter will be read by people who don't know you. Remember, you are dealing with a bureaucracy - which means that teachers, guidance counselors, and assistant principals probably don't have the authority to make important decisions. You are writing your letter to strangers in the system who do have power.

In your letter, you are introducing yourself to strangers who are also decision-makers. After reading your letter, these strangers will form an impression of you. If their first reaction is negative, they won't be able to accept positive information about you later. You'll have a hard time "rehabilitating" yourself in their eyes.

This is what happened to Bob. After Bob fired off his letter, the school went into a defensive mode. From their perspective, if they gave Bob **anything** he asked for, they would be admitting that he was right - and that they FAILED to educate his child. The school had a different perspective. They didn't agree with the father's analysis - that they FAILED to provide his daughter with an appropriate education. What happened?

The school wrote a pleasant non-committal letter back to Bob. In this letter, they explained that they disagreed with him but were willing to meet with him to resolve their differences. They offered several meeting times. The tone of their letter was pleasant and businesslike. When Bob didn't respond, they filed his letter away. Nothing changed about his daughter's education.

Later, Bob requested a Due Process Hearing. The school district submitted this and several similar letters as exhibits in their case. Why? The school wanted the Hearing Officer to see Bob from their perspective and conclude that he was a jerk. The underlying message was that although Bob was a "difficult parent," they were prepared to provide his daughter with an excellent education. They succeeded!

There is a moral to this story. If the first impression you create is negative, you increase the odds that you will lose the battle and the war. Strangers who read your negative letter will write you off as a "loose cannon." They'll probably feel sorry for your child: "That poor kid. No wonder he has so many problems. Can you imagine how hard it must be to live with such a crazy parent!"

This is not the outcome you want.

Example

Let's look at a problem and decide how you can document the problem.

Background. *The principal wrote a letter advising that he is suspending your child for three days next week for the offense of being late to class. Earlier, you attended a meeting at the school to develop an IEP. After the principal wrote the letter, the school didn't get around to sending the letter until the day of your meeting. When you went to the IEP meeting, no one mentioned the letter. You didn't know that there **was** a letter.*

A day later, you receive this letter about suspending your child from school. You're angry that no one mentioned the letter or the suspension during the meeting.

Don't say it!

Instead, write a letter:

Dear School:

On *so and so DATE*, we attended an IEP meeting for our son at the school. Later, on *so and so DATE*, we received a letter from you. In this letter, you advised us that you are suspending our son from school for three days. This letter was postmarked the same day we attended the IEP meeting and was dated three days earlier.

It seems that either the letter was misdated or you decided not to discuss the suspension with us when we went to school for our meeting.

We were quite confused and are not sure what sense to make of this.

Sincerely,

Mr. and Mrs. Frank

That's all. You don't need to write anything else. You didn't make judgments. What happens next? When a Stranger reads your letter, he or she will think "Good Grief! What jerks!"

You don't belabor the absurdities about how the situation was handled. **You** don't make judgments. Instead, **you lay out facts** by providing enough information that Strangers will be able to "fill in the blanks" with their personal experiences and imagination.

The **Story Telling Approach** is far more powerful and effective than the **Blame Approach**. If you don't judge or attack overtly, you minimize the risk of evoking the Sympathy Response.

"Therapeutic Letters"

Writing letters can be therapeutic. The writing process can help you get things off your chest and deal with frustrations. You can tell THEM whatever you WANT!

NEVER send "therapeutic letters!"

There's a big difference between "therapeutic letters" and business letters. In a business letter, you are writing to make a point, clarify an event, make a request, and create a paper trail. Therapeutic letters can form the basis of a journal or diary. People who go through difficult times often find that a journal or diary helps them during the crisis.

Two approaches to letters, the Blame Approach and the Story-Telling Approach. The Sympathy Factor, importance of first impressions. Difference between business letters and therapeutic letters, you never send therapeutic letters.

12 Rules for Writing Effective Letters

Read the **12 Rules for Writing Effective Letters**. If you follow these Rules, you make it more likely that you will get the relief you want.

1. Before you write a letter, answer WHY and WHAT.
2. First letters are always drafts.
3. Allow time for "cooling off" and revisions.
4. You are always negotiating for services.
5. Never threaten. Never telegraph your punches.
6. Assume that you won't be able to resolve your dispute, that the dispute will escalate, that a special education due process hearing will be held, and that you won't be able to testify or tell your side of the story.
7. Make your problem unique.
8. You ARE writing letters to a Stranger. You are NOT writing letters to the school.
9. You ARE writing business letters. When you write business letters, you DO use tactics and strategy (your brain). You DON'T ventilate anger or frustration (your emotions).
10. NEVER make judgments.
11. You are telling a story. Write your letter chronologically. Don't broach the main issue in the first paragraph of the letter.
12. Write letters that are clear and easy to understand. Make your letters clear, short, alive, and right.

Write letters that open the door to services.

Do you want to open the door to better services for your child, or do you want to shoot yourself in the foot and damage your child in the process because your letter backfired?

Now that you have read our primer on writing letters, continue your learning process. In **Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy**, (FETA) read Chapter 22 "Creating Paper Trails," Chapter 23 "How to Write Good Evidence Letters," and Chapter 24 "Writing the 'Letter to the Stranger,'" and then read the numerous "Sample Letters to the School" in Appendix I of FETA. You will become the expert on writing effective and powerful letters.



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