

Writing a Letter— A Tool for Conflict Resolution

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If a person has offended, harassed, or intimidated you, sometimes a useful first step is to draft a letter describing the offense. *You can decide later whether or not to send the letter.* In the process of writing and re-writing, you'll have opportunities to express your feelings of rage, grief, or fear, clarify the facts, identify harm you may have suffered, and consider the remedies you might desire. Drafting a letter is the best possible preparation for all future options for dealing with the offense.

Your first draft is likely to be filled with feelings and judgments about the situation and is 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 settle feelings and think more clearly. To be effective in resolving conflict and getting the remedies you want, if you send the final draft, it needs to be factual, civil, and tactful.

An effective letter has three parts:

- **An objective statement of the facts as you experienced them.** *No feelings, judgments, or opinions belong in this section.* If you were watching the scene on TV, how would you report what was said and done? This section should be very accurate and matter of fact, describing as much detail as possible.
- **Feelings, opinions, and information about how the offensive situation has affected you.**
Here, you can let the person know how you felt about their behavior and the harm you suffered. Harm includes not only emotional distress, but financial and time hardships as well. For example: "What you said was unjust because you had no evidence...I felt humiliated in front of my co-workers...I was so upset that I could not work for the rest of the day...It cost me a day's pay."
- **A statement about what you think should happen next.**
In the final section, you ask for specific remedies, if appropriate, and tell the person what you need for the future. For example: "I'd like to meet with you in person 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 us is from another culture, it is important to consult 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 may need help using 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 is 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.
3. There may be cultural differences between your interpretations of the event. The offending person may need to be taught about your culture.
4. Most people would prefer to hear about a problem directly, not from a third party—at least in North American culture.
5. If you're dealing with powerful people, a well-prepared direct approach may be least likely to result in retaliation.
6. If you decide to take the matter further, a letter is evidence that you thought an offense occurred and that you took civil, responsible, and private 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 repetition of the offense, you then have some evidence to back your story. You might want to send the letter by registered mail and keep the receipt.*

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

- You may wish to try and talk with the person first.
- You might decide to consider forgetting the incident in the spirit of tolerance.

- 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 whom they show 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.*

Who should you send the letter to?

Just the offender: If this is a first offense and you're mainly concerned with stopping the behavior, keeping the communication private allows the other person to save face and is the best option for maintaining a working relationship.

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, if there has been a pattern of offenses, or if you fear that they might retaliate, you can send copies to their supervisors for protection and possible supervisory action. Be aware that the supervisor's involvement may make the offender feel apprehensive and maybe angry so that maintaining your working relationship could become more difficult.

The offender and policy-making groups: If you feel that the offense is clearly against the policy of the institution, you can inform the appropriate policy-making bodies (for example, the Sexual Harassment Committee). This puts the person on notice that policy is involved and that an investigation may occur. Again, be prepared, as this step may make the person feel defensive.

Adapted from *Drafting-and perhaps sending-a private letter to a person who has harassed or offended you* by Mary Rowe, UCOA Handbook, 2000