

The content of each letter or fax can be completely different. Nevertheless, there are a number of general rules that you should respect if you want your letter or fax to be read *and* understood, by the person who you send it to. Even apply these rules to people you know very well. This Skill Sheet presents these rules, but first explains why a fax or letter are still the most effective means of communication.

## 1 Why write a fax or letter

People rely increasingly on telephone messages more than on written ones. When you want to contact a person quickly, it seems more appropriate to phone than to send a letter. Often, however, it can take far more time to make successful contact by telephone than via a fax or - if the recipient has no fax or electronic mail - even via a letter sent by ordinary mail. There are at least four reasons why this occurs regularly:

- the person you need is *not available* at the moment you phone;
- you are asked to phone back, but *you don't have time* or forget to do so (the burden to get in touch remains with you);
- the person you need is '*protected*' by a secretary who, sometimes at random, might tell you to call back, or stalls your messages even when the person is 'in';
- phoning someone can mean that you try to establish contact at the *wrong time*, which creates all sorts of additional communication problems, and can result in complete rejection, or the request to phone back another time.

A letter might reach the person you want to contact *earlier* than your phone call could. Besides, it might come at a better time: recipients can decide themselves when to read the letter or fax. It might be very effective to send a letter or fax in terms of timing, especially if your first effort by phone has failed. With very complex messages or requests a written message remains by far the most appropriate medium for communications.

## 2 Contents

- In general, it is better *not to write long letters*. They should not be longer than one page in which you make your intentions clear. Everything else can be included in annexes. Always give a *short reference* at the top of your letter in which you summarise the contents of the letter in a few words.
- If the letter contains *annexes*, they should be mentioned in the main text of the letter.
- If you have *sent the letter to other persons*, that should also be mentioned in the letter (to give the reader a better understanding of the status and intention of the letter).
- Even if you do not know the person yourself, it is preferable to write the letter to *someone specific* and not to a whole company or institution. In the latter case a letter can circulate for months. You can get the name of a contact you can write to from several publicly available sources, or you can request the name through the Public Affairs department, if one exists in the company you wish to contact. When it is impossible to come up with a name, write to a *department* of the organisation even if you are not sure that this department exists.
- *Never rely solely on the letter* if you want the person to *do* something for you. State in your letter that you will contact the person within a week, or any other specified period of time.
- Respect the principles of 'barter' (⊕A9): explain in your letter what your recipient will get in return for the effort.

### 3 Layout

- Include the name of the person, the institute and the address on the first page of your letter. The heading on your letter should be the same as the one on the envelope, because the envelope may be thrown away. Make a copy of the letter for your own files, and you will have the address readily available as well. If you fax the letter, include the fax number of the recipient under the address.
- The short (less than one line) *summary of the contents* of your letter should be one of the first messages read by the recipient. Therefore, it should be at the top of the letter and can be noted as 'ref.' or 're' (meaning 'reference' or 'referring to...'): after which you could include: 'in response to your letter dated 11 November 1875' or for example 'application for internship'.
- Put the address of the recipient and your own address on the right and/or left side of the letter according to national convention.
- Include the number of annexes in the space below your signature (your name should be printed beneath it) so that the reader can check whether everything has been received. They can be labelled as 'Annexes:', 'encl.:' or 'Enclosure:'. After this announcement you either list the number of annexes or the title of each annex.
- Type the names of the other people who you have also sent the letter to below this list. Announce them with 'cc:' (meaning: copies sent to).
- Only turn on the left justification on your word-processor. This means that there is only a straight margin on the left side of the page. Otherwise, it gives the reader the impression of a standard letter, which then lessens the likelihood that you will receive a (personal) answer.
- When you write more than one page, include the number of the next page at the bottom right-hand corner, so that the person who receives the letter knows that another page should be there, or that a page is missing, or that something has gone wrong.
- When you write a fax, always write the number of pages on the first page of your letter (or the cover sheet): 'This fax contains ... pages (including this cover)'; or: 'Number of pages including cover sheet: xx' (which is commonly used by Americans). Your readers will then know whether or not they have received all of the pages and can reconstruct your message if the fax has not arrived in the right order. There are many *pre-printed fax cover sheets*. You only have to fill them in. If you do not use one, your fax could look like the example given below.

#### Examples

##### letter

[Organisation Name]  
 [Full Address]  
     [Recipient Name]  
     [Address]  
     [City, State]

[Full Date]  
 Ref: [subject]

Dear [recipient],  
 Bla, bla, bla (see Annex 1).  
 [message text etc.]

Sincerely,

[your name]  
 [your position]

Enclosure: [Number]  
 cc: [Name(s)]

##### fax

[Organisation Name]  
 [Full Address]  
     [Recipient Name]  
     [Address]  
     [City, State]

fax. no: [number]  
 This fax contains 4 pages (including this cover)

[Full Date]  
 Ref: [subject]

Dear [recipient],  
 [message text]  
 Sincerely,

[your name]  
 [your position]

Enclosure: [Number]  
 cc: [Name(s)]