



How to Write Business Letters That Get Results

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How to Write Business Letters That Get Results

A simple formula lets you cut through jargon and messy language to create straightforward writing that works

A recent TV commercial informed viewers that the U.S. Post Office handles 300 million pieces of mail every day. That's a lot of letters. And letters are an important part of communicating with your customers, coworkers, and colleagues.

But how many letters actually get their messages across and motivate the reader? Surprisingly few. In direct-mail marketing, for example, a 2 percent response rate is exceptionally high. So a manufacturer mailing 1,000 sales letters expects that fewer than 20 people will respond to the pitch. If high-powered letters written by ad-agency copywriters produce such a limited response, you can see why letters written by busy business executives (who are not professional writers) may not always accomplish their objectives.

Failure to get to the point, technical jargon, pompous language, misreading the reader these are the poor stylistic habits that cause others to ignore the letters we send. Part of the problem is that many managers and support staff don't know how to write persuasively. There is a solution, stated as a formula first discovered by advertising writers, and it's called "AIDA." AIDA stands for Attention, Interest, Demand, and Action a sequence of psychological reactions that happen in the mind of the reader as he is sold on your idea. Briefly, here's how it works.

First, the letter gets the reader's attention with a hard-hitting lead paragraph that goes straight to the point or offers an element of intrigue.

Then, the letter hooks the reader's interest: The hook is often *a* clear statement of the reader's problems, needs, or wants. For example, if you are writing to a customer who received damaged goods, acknowledge the problem and then offer a solution.

Next, create demand. Your letter is an offer of something a service, a product, goodwill, an agreement, a contract, a compromise, a consultation. Tell the reader how he or she will benefit from your offering. That creates a demand for your product.

Finally, call for action. Ask for the order, the signature, the donation, the assignment.

What follows are actual examples of how each of these steps has been used in business letters.

Attention.

Getting the reader's attention is a tough job. If your letter is boring, pompous, or says nothing of interest, you'll lose the reader. Fast!

One attention getting technique used by successful writers is to open with an intriguing question or statement a "teaser" that grabs the reader's attention and compels him to read on. Here's an opening teaser from a letter written by a freelance public relations writer to the head of a large PR firm:

Is freelance a dirty word to you?

Even if you hate freelancers, you can't help but be curious about what follows. And what follows is a convincing argument to hire the writer:

Is freelance a dirty word to you?

It really shouldn't be, because in public relations, with its crisis-lull-crisis rhythm, really good freelancers can save you money and headaches. Use them when you need them. When you don't, they don't cost you a cent.

Use me. I am a public-relations specialist with more than 20 years' experience in all phases of the profession. MY SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE TO YOU ON A FREELANCE BASIS

Another freelance writer succeeded with a more straightforward approach:

Dear Mr. Mann:

Congratulations on your new business. May you have great success and pleasure from it.

I offer my services as a freelance public relations writer specializing in medical and technical subjects

Here, the writer gets attention by opening with a subject that has a built in appeal to the reader namely, the reader's own business. Most of us like to read about ourselves. And just about everybody would react favorably to the good wishes expressed in the second sentence

Interest.

Once you get the reader's attention, you've got to provide a "hook" to create real interest in your subject and keep him reading. This hook is a promise a

promise to solve problems, answer questions, or satisfy needs. The hook is often written in a two paragraph format: The first paragraph is a clear statement of the reader's needs, while the second shows how the writer can satisfy these needs. Here's the hook from a letter written by a job seeker to the vice president of one of the television networks:

To stay ahead, you need aggressive people willing to take chances. People who are confident, flexible, dedicated. People who want to learn who are not afraid to ask questions.

I am one of those people one of the people you should have on your staff. Let me prove it. Start by reading my resume. It shows I can take any challenge and succeed.

What better way to hold someone's interest than to promise to solve his problems for him?

A principal rule of persuasive writing is: Remember that the reader isn't interested in you. The reader is interested in *the reader*. And because we want to hear about ourselves, the following letter was particularly effective in gaining and holding my interest:

As you may already know, we have been doing some work for people who have the same last name as you do. Finally, after months of work, my new book, THE AMAZING STORY OF THE BLYS IN AMERICA, is ready for printing and you are in it!

The Bly name is very rare and our research has shown that less than two one thousandths of one percent of the people in America share the Bly name

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Desire.

Get attention. Hook the reader's interest. Then create the desire to buy what you're selling. This is the step where many business people falter. Their corporate backgrounds condition them to write business letters in "corporatese," so they fill paragraphs with pompous phrases, jargon, clichés, and windy sentences. Here's a real life example from a major investment firm:

All of the bonds in the above described account having been heretofore disposed of, we are this day terminating same. We accordingly enclose herein check in the amount of \$22,000 same being your share realized therein, as per statement attached. Notwithstanding the distribution to you of the described amount, you shall remain liable for your proportionate share.

Don't write to impress—write to express. State the facts, the features, the benefits of your offer in plain, simple English. Give the reader reasons why he or she should buy your product, give you the job, sign the contract, or approve the budget. Create a desire for what you're offering. Here's how the manager in charge of manufacturing persuaded the president to sign a purchase order for a \$20,000 machine.

I've enclosed a copy of my report, which precludes an executive summary.

As you can see, even at the low levels of production we've experienced recently, the T-1000 Automatic Wire-Wrap Machine can cut production time by 15 percent. At this rate, the machine will pay for itself within 14 months including its purchase price plus the cost of training operators.

We've already discussed the employees' resistance to automation in the plant. As you know, we've held discussion groups on this subject over the past three months. And, an informal survey shows that 80 percent of our technicians dislike manual wire-wrap and would welcome automation in that area.

Benefits are spelled out. Anxieties are eliminated. The reader is given the reasons why the company should buy a T-1000. (And the president signed the order.)

Action.

If you're carried AIDA this far, you've gained attention, created interest, and turned that interest into desire. The reader wants what you're selling, or at least has been persuaded to see your point of view. Now comes the last step asking for action.

If you're selling consulting services, ask for a contract. If you want an interview, ask for it. If you're writing a fund raising letter, include a reply envelope and ask for a donation. In short, if you want your letter to get results, you have to ask for them.

Here's a letter from a customer who purchased a defective can of spray paint. Instead of just complaining or venting anger, she explains the problem and asks for a response:

Recently, I purchased a can of your Permaspray spray paint. But when I tried using it, the nozzle broke off. I cannot reattach this nozzle, and the can, though full, will have to be thrown away.

I am sure your product is generally well packaged; my can was probably a one in a million defect. Would you please send a replacement can of white Permaspray? I would greatly appreciate it.

An exchange of business letters is usually an action--reaction situation. To move things along, determine the action you want your letter to generate and tell the reader about it.

Formulas have their limitations, and you can't force fit every letter or memo into the AIDA framework. Short interoffice memos, for example, seldom require this degree of persuasiveness. But when you're faced with more sophisticated writing tasks a memo to motivate the sales force a mailer to bring in orders, a letter to collect bad debts AIDA can help. Get attention. Hook the reader's interest. Create a desire. Ask for action. And your letters will get better results.

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