# INTRODUCTION

# The Basics

The blank piece of paper stares at you. You have to write a letter. But where do you begin? What do you write? How can you make it professional but not stuffy? What are the rules for a good letter? How can letters be a tool for growing your ministry?

Letters are a part of every day. We enjoy getting letters from friends. Letters are a essential part of keeping in touch and informing people of upcoming events, necessary information, and making them aware of what our ministry is about.

Good letters are important because people will often form opinions about our ministries and our leadership from them. Are they professionally formatted? Are they well written? That will benefit our ministries. If they come across stilted or sloppy, people may form negative opinions about our leadership skills and ministries. People will form impressions about us and our ministries from the correspondences that they receive from us.

A good letter begins with the paper it’s written on. Letters written for your ministry should be written on letterhead. If you’re a local leader, ask your church for church letterhead. Your conference should make letterhead available to conference leaders. Ask for a supply of letterhead and envelopes. If letterhead is not available, you can create your own. When creating your own letterhead, invest in good paper. Instead of using the lesser expensive copy paper, choose a paper with a cotton fiber or other heavier paper. Paper with a 25% cotton fiber has a nice feel to it and is slightly heavier than normal copier paper (24 lb versus 20 lb.), and will give your letter a more professional look.

When creating your own letterhead, choose a font that will reflect your ministry without being “cute.” Typically when writing a letter, you’ll choose fonts that are easy to read. The best fonts are crisp and clear without a lot of extra lines to them. These fonts, like Arial and Times New Roman, are easier for the eye to read. However, for the first line of your letterhead, where you will type your ministry’s name, you can be creative and use a font that reflects your ministry. Want to convey conservativeness? Choose a font like Castellar. Want to use something more feminine? Try Commercial Script or French Script. Try different looks until you find something that suits you and your ministry.

The letterhead belongs at the top of your page, approximately ½ inch from the top of the page. The name of your ministry and your church or conference should be in larger letters, typically centered, with the address and phone number in smaller print under it. You may want to include a fax number and/or an email address. The second line should be typed in a different font― something less elaborate and easy to read. **If you use the SDA Church logo, you must follow the guidelines for using it on a letterhead.**

Plain paper is traditionally used for letters. White or an off white like cream are the most popular colors. However, you may want to choose a paper with a design or color to it when writing a more personal letter to your committee members or local Women’s Ministries Leaders. It will give the letter a more personal feel, thus encouraging the feel of a friendship.

Once you’ve chosen your paper, preferably with letterhead, you need to choose how you will format your letter. There are a number of different styles. The most common formats are Full Block, Block, Modified Block, Simplified Block and Square Blocked.

With the Full Block style, everything in the letter― date, address, salutation, paragraphs and closing, are all aligned to the left margin.

The Block format is just slightly different than the Full Block, with the date and closing lines beginning at the center of the page while everything else in the letter begins at the left margin.

The Modified Block format begins with the Block format and adds a five-space indentation for each of the paragraphs. This is the only style where the paragraphs are indented.

In the Simplified format, everything is aligned to the left margin, but the Salutation and the Closing line have been omitted. The Salutation and Closing lines help to make a letter more personal, so you will not want to use this format if you want a personal touch.

The last style is the Square Blocked format. For this type of letter, the date goes on the same line as the first line of the address. Beginning at the left margin, type the name of the person the letter is being addressed to. The date is then typed at the right margin. The Writer/Typist initials are typed at the right margin on the same line as the Title Line under the signature.

**Parts of the Letter**

Once you’ve chosen your format, you’re ready to begin typing your letter. The first part of a letter, after the letterhead, is the date. When typing the date, always spell out the month. The order should be month, day and year with a comma after the day.

The inside address should be identical to the address on the envelope and typed four lines below the date, single-spaced at the left margin. The first line of the address is the name of the person to whom the letter is going. Their title belongs on the same line as their name if the title is short, or typed on the line below their name. After the name and title, type the name of the organization. If you’re sending the letter to a specific department, this will be typed on the line below the organization’s title. Then comes the address. Use the two-letter abbreviation when typing a state’s name, followed by the zip code without a comma between them.

If your letter is addressed to an organization, but you want a specific person to handle it, use an attention line. The attention line is typed either in all capitals or is underlined. Most letters will not have an Attention Line.

The salutation is the greeting to the addressee and is placed two lines below the inside address, beginning at the left margin. The salutation usually begins with *dear* and ends with a colon. A first name can be used unless you are uncertain whether it’s appropriate to call someone by his or her first name. In that case, use their title and last name until they ask you to use their first name or if they sign their letters with just their first name when they are writing you. No title or other designation should be used after a name in the salutation.

A subject line is used to summarize the content of a letter in a few words. It clues the reader into what your letter is about. You will not use the subject line in all letters, but when you choose to, it is placed two lines below the salutation. Place it against the left margin or indented five spaces if your paragraphs are also indented. Like the attention line, the subject line should be either capitalized or underlined. You may or may not want to type out the word “subject.” If you choose to type “subject” out, put a colon after it and before you type out subject.

The next part of your letter is the body. This is the actual “letter.” We’ll talk more in depth later about the how to’s of writing the letter and what to include or not include. Each line is single spaced with double spacing between the paragraphs. Paragraphs are indented only in the Modified Block format.

When you want to include information in your letter, like a short report on statistics or a few lines with the costs for a retreat—any special data, you can use special paragraphing. Every line of the information is indented five-spaces on the left and right. This sets it off and draws the eye to the information.

Once you’ve finished writing the body of the letter, it’s time to close. A simple closing line follows two spaces after the body of the letter. In many cases, people tend to use “Sincerely” or “Sincerely yours.” Because you are writing on behalf of a ministry, you may want to include “In His service” or something similar. Capitalize the first word of your closing, but no other words are capitalized. (An exception is for words referring to God.) A comma follows your closing, unless you choose to use open punctuation in which case you use neither a colon after the salutation or a comma after the closing. The only time a comma is used after the salutation is in personal correspondence.

Four spaces below the closing is the title line. Here is where you type your name and either next to your name or on the line below it type your title (i.e. Women’s Ministries Director). Your signature is written in the four spaces between your closing line and your title line. Sign your name the way it is typed on the closing line except in cases where people might know you well enough to just sign your first name or a shortened version of your name which you go by.

When the letter has been written by one person and typed by another, you will need to include the Writer/Typist information. This information is typed two spaces below the title line. The initials of the person who wrote the letter, who the letter is from, are typed in capital letters followed by either a colon or slash. Then they typist’s initial’s are typed in small letters next to it.

If you are including anything in your letter, copies of reports, a handout, brochures, any other material besides the letter, you will need to type an enclosure note. Single-spaced below the writer/typist information or double-spaced below the title line if there is no writer/typist information, the first letter is capitalized. If there are more than one enclosure, type “Enclosures” with the number of enclosures in parentheses afterward.

There will be times when you will want to send a copy of your letter to someone else. Single-spaced below the enclosure notation or the writer/typist initials, simply type, ”cc”, in small letters, followed by the name or names of the people receiving the copy. If the copy is going into a file, type, “file” (“cc” stands for “carbon copy”.) Often people will make a check next to each name on the original letter when they send the copy or place it in a file, to show that the copy was sent.

When your letter runs into two pages, you will want to place a heading on the second page. Begin four to six lines from the top of the second page and type the full name of the person the letter is being addressed to, the date of the letter and the page number. This information can be typed on separate lines all at the left margin; in a single line with a comma between each item, or with the name at the left margin, the page number at the right margin and the date centered in between the two, all on the same line.

Once completed your letter needs to be centered on the page. As a rule you center your letter based on the white space available on your letterhead paper. If typing on a computer you can use your zoom to look at the entire page and decide if you need to move up or down on your page. This is important since you do not want your letter to be too high up or low down leaving a large amount of white space which can make your letter look unprofessional.

## Writing the Letter

Now it’s time to write the body of the letter. How do you make it sound professional without sounding stuffy? How do you write a letter that will make sense and help the reader to understand what you’re trying to convey?

One of the biggest mistakes a letter writer can make is to attempt to make the letter sound professional. Using big words or “professional-sounding” jargon can quickly cause the reader to miss the points and disregard the letter. Instead, keep it simple. Relax. The best letters are ones written with a natural tone, like you are talking to someone. This makes the letter personal and friendly. When we attempt to sound business-like or formal the letter will come across stilted and stiff. Avoid using phrases and jargon that the reader may not understand. Language that is typical of one area might not be understood in another region. Religious phrases make sense to those of us in ministry, but might not to someone in the community to whom you are writing.

Keep the tone of the letter relaxed and positive. Avoid sounding critical or complaining. There may be times when you will have to write a letter of complaint or when you will feel critical of something, but attempt to write the letter from a positive view. Point out things that are positive. Thank the person for what they’ve contributed. Then carefully make suggestions of what could be done in the future to make the situation better. A letter that is critical or complaining will put the reader on the defensive. Write the letter remembering that we are all a part of the same team, God’s team. We need to work together, encouraging one another and looking for ways to work in unity.

Before you begin writing your letter, organize your thoughts. What do you want to say? What are the key points you want to make? You may want to write an outline of what you want to share to refer to as you type your letter. Organize your key points in the order of their importance. You’ll want to make sure you information is logical, complete, and concise.

Make your point in the first sentence of each paragraph. Then explain or build on the point in the rest of the paragraph. Each point should be a new paragraph. Your opening paragraph should draw the reader in, causing them to want to read the rest of the letter. In your closing paragraph, remind the reader of any action you want them to make. You don’t need to reiterate all your points. Many people attempt to keep their letter to one page. A person may tend to skim a long letter instead of reading it in its entirety.

The most common uses for punctuation include the following list:

Colon (:) A colon is used after a word introducing a quotation, explanation, example or a series. (Like this series of explanations on punctuation and the above colon.)

Comma (,) Commas are used to indicate a separation of ideas or elements in a sentence. Commas go between items in a list. If there are three items or more, place a comma before the word “and”.

**Example: “Several women from our church will be attending the retreat including:** Pam, Tina, Eileen, and Jody.” Commas are also used to set off a name when the sentence would be complete without the name. Example: “My oldest son, Joshua, will be managing the sound board.” Or “My son Joshua will be managing the sound board.” In the first sentence, I only have one oldest son. So the sentence would be complete without his name. But because I have two sons, the second sentence needs Joshua’s name to distinguish which son I’m talking about.

Dash (—) The dash should be used sparingly in correspondence. It is used to set off clauses or to set off a thought repeated for emphasis or to introduce a series. Use two hyphens if handwriting or using a typewriter; on a computer use the em-dash.

Ellipsis Points (…) Three periods are used in the middle or beginning of a sentence to indicate omitted material. Four periods are used at the end of the sentence with one point representing the period.

Exclamation point (!) An exclamation point is used at the end of a sentence to indicate emphasis. It should also be used sparingly in correspondence. In some languages it appears at the beginning of the sentence also.

Hyphen (-) A hyphen is used in between the parts of a compound word or name. It is also used between syllables of a word that is divided at the end of a line.

Parentheses ( ) When you would like to enclose an explanation, use parentheses. Brackets are used to set off items inside of parentheses.

Period (.) A period is used to indicate the end of a sentence and the end of an abbreviation.

Question Mark (?) A question mark is used at the end of a direct question. Be careful to not use it when the sentence is meant to be a statement and not a question. Example: “Would you please return the enclosed form by December 31”. The question mark is inside the quotes only if the quotation in a question.

Quotation Marks (‘ “) Double quotation marks are used to set off a quotation. Single quotation marks are used to set off a quote within a quotation. In American punctuation, commas and periods are always used within quotation marks, but colons and semi colons are not.

Example: “I will come,” she said, “but later.”

Sign this letter “Sincerely” or “Sincerely yours.”

Semi Colon (;) Semi colons are used to connect independent clauses when you want to include them all in the same sentence. It is also used to separate a series that contains commas.

Once you’ve finished writing your letter, reread it. Proofreading is so important! Read through your letter looking for proper punctuation, misspelled words, the wrong use of a word that sounds the same but is spelled several different ways (i.e. there, their, they’re) and to make sure that your thoughts flow and your points are made. It is very helpful to have someone else proofread your letter as well. You can easily read through a letter and see what you want it to say instead of what’s actually typed.

**The Envelope**

After your letter is written and proofread, you’re still not finished. There is still the matter of the envelope. The envelope needs to be professional and addressed properly to add the finishing touch to your letter. It’s the first part of your letter everyone will see.

Most of the time, you will want to use envelopes that already have the return address printed and that match your letterhead. However, if you don’t have preprinted envelopes, the return address belongs in the upper left hand corner of the envelope only one or two lines from the top.

The return address should match the address on the letter. It is typed four inches from the left edge of the envelope and fourteen lines from the top. Use the two state abbreviations with one space between it and the zip code when addressing a letter within the United States or spell the state out entirely.

If you’d like to include an attention line on the outside of the envelope type the attention line four lines below the return address beginning at the left margin. Do not type anything below the zip code. Many times people want to type the attention line two spaces below the address, but the post office uses this space. Type the attention line like you do inside the letter with either all capital letters or underlined with a colon after the word “attention.”

If there are any special instructions (“Photos enclosed, do not bend” or “Address Correction Requested”) these are also typed at the left margin four lines below the return address and should be typed in all capitals.

When the letter is sent Priority Mail or Certified Mail, these special mailing service instructions are typed below the stamp.

## Memos vs. Letters

What is the difference between a memo and a letter? How do you know when it is appropriate to send a memo instead of a letter? What parts are necessary for a memo?

A memo is a short, informative message. It is used to convey information in a less formal way than a letter. Usually used between coworkers, it can also be used within a committee or the team you work with—anyone with whom you have a friendly, close working relationship. It is not as informal as a personal note. There is a standard format.

Letterheads are not used when typing a memo. Many parts of a letter are not included in a memo: addresses, salutation, closing line, signature, and titles. While it is typically not signed, the writer’s initials are often typed or handwritten two spaces below the body of the message or beside your name in the “From” line.

The most common format for a memo begins with the word “Memo” or “Memorandum” typed at the center of the page about one inch from the top margin. A memo also contains four lines beginning at the left margin and single-spaced which include:

 To: (The person or persons to whom the memo is going.)

 From: (Your name.)

 Date: (Type the date out just as you would for a letter.)

 Subject: (Briefly state what the memo is about.)

The words are typed with a colon followed by either one or two spaces before filling in the information. Be consistent. Use the same number of spaces on all four lines. The body of the memo follows with the message.

After typing a memo, proofread it just as you would a letter. Again, you may want to have someone else read it as well to make sure you haven’t missed anything and that your thoughts are written in a concise and understandable way.

**Emails**

Email writing is possibly the simplest and most popular method of writing letters in this high-tech age. There are already specified areas for address, copies, and subject. The body of the letter can be written using the full block format. The style of letter writing is very informal and if used as a means of sending business letters then you may want to use the modified block format for the body of the letter to give it a more formal appearance.

**Who will you write letters to and why?**

Now that you know the mechanics of letter writing, who will you be writing letters to? And why? While many different letter writing needs and opportunities will arise, some of the many people to whom you will want to correspond will include:

* ***Church/Conference/Union/Division Leaders***

Letters are a great way of keeping the leaders in your ministry area aware of what you and your team are doing. If you’re a local leader, it’s important to let your local church leaders know what Women’s Ministries is up to. Share with them the many ways your team are serving your local church congregation and your community. Your Conference Women’s Ministries Director will also appreciate knowing what your local church team is doing. If you are a Conference Women’s Ministries Director, it’s important to keep the administration of the conference informed of how Women’s Ministries is making a difference—from the local church activities to what you are planning on a conference level. Follow up retreats and seminars with a letter to your president sharing with him numbers and stories of how God worked. You will also want to stay in contact with your Union Women’s Ministries Director, sharing with her what is happening and how events are going. She is also the person you would contact for resources and information. No matter what level we serve on, we can send letters to the administrators on each level, sharing with them how God is using Women’s Ministries, thanking them for their support, and/or sharing how they can help to support Women’s Ministries as well.

* ***Team members***

Who do you work with? Do you have a committee? Are you providing resources and information for a team of people (i.e. a conference director serving the local leaders or a union director serving conference directors)? Letters and memos will be key tools for sharing ideas for ministry, keeping them informed of upcoming events and information they will need to know, and as follow up after planning meetings reiterating what was discussed or following a retreat or seminar to tell them how many attended and any stories of how God worked.

* ***Pastors***

Whether you are a local leader keeping in touch with your pastor, a conference director building support amongst the pastors in your conference, or a union director doing the same for the pastors in the union, this is a group of people we may overlook but are an important part of our Women’s Ministries team. They can help to support and promote Women’s Ministries in their churches by promoting events from the pulpit, encouraging the nominating committee or church board to nominate a Women’s Ministries Director, and occasionally attending events planned by their Women’s Ministries team to show support.

* ***Speakers***

When you invite a speaker for an event, a letter is an important follow up. Use the letter to confirm the invitation, reiterating the date, time, topic, length and number of talks, and the location of the events. It’s good to remind them of what they need to do before the event, whether it’s making their own travel arrangements and sending the itinerary and copy of the bill for reimbursement, or sending copies of handouts to be copied, a bio and blurbs for promotional materials and a picture if needed. Make sure you include when you need each item and how they are to send it to you. (Sometimes it’s easier to have them e-mail pictures or information.) Also confirm the arrangements you’ve made for reimbursing their costs and any agreement for speaker’s fee or honorarium. You may want to share with them how the room where they will be speaking is laid out, the number of women you expect, and what materials or tools are available. Include any information needed for travel arrangements, so that they know where to fly or drive to and what timetable will be necessary.

* ***Those who write to you***

 Answer in a timely manner, answer all questions, etc.

## Conclusion

Writing a letter is an important and basic tool of our ministries today. Through them we can promote a positive impression of Women’s Ministries—not only via the information in the letter, but by the professional tone and look. When writing a letter, think about (and pray for) the person who will be receiving the letter. Keep a friendly tone. Not only will you be sharing information, but you will also be building relationships.

## About the author

Tamyra Horst is wife to Tim and Mother to two sons, Josh and Zack. She is currently the Women’s Ministries Director for the Pennsylvania Conference. She is the author of six books and several magazine articles. She is also a speaker for retreats, seminars, and camp meetings across the United States. She enjoys hiking, walking and time with family and friends.