
UNIT 4 INFORMAL LETTERS-1

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to give you examples of informal communication, i.e. personal letters, and make you aware of the difference between formal and informal letters.

After completing the unit you should be able to write informal letters to friends and relatives

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Informal letters are like private conversation and are ordinarily written to the members of one's family and friends. For instance, a husband writing to his wife, a father writing to his son or daughter, or someone writing to a friend are typical examples of informal situations. Since the relationship between the participants is not formal, one can write in one's own way instead of following any particular rules or customs.

The content of informal letters is also varied, in fact almost as varied as human beings are. In an informal letter, you may give news about yourself, or you may wish to sermonize, argue, express sorrow, remorse or disgust. In fact, you may do anything that you wish to do.

There are certain common features of language in all informal communication. This may include the use of contracted forms (e.g. *isn't* for *is not*), colloquialisms (that is, expressions used in familiar conversation) and ellipsis (i.e. the leaving out of words from a sentence when the meaning can be understood without them). But each situation demands the use of language that is suitable for an expression of the particular attitude or emotion one wants to convey.

There is also a greater variety of tone (that is, manner of expression) in informal letters. The tone of your letter depends very much on the relationship with the person to whom you are writing. At one extreme, you may be writing to someone you don't know very well or to a much older person, and your tone may tend to be somewhat formal. At the other extreme, you may be writing to your best friend, and your tone in that case will be more chatty and relaxed.

It is true that informal letters are essentially private letters, meant only for the person to whom the letter is addressed. In fact the meaning will not always be clear to a third person, since a number of things are left unsaid which only the receiver can understand. But these private letters would help you to develop your writing skills.

In this unit and the next, we shall give you examples of informal letters and also give you practice in writing different types of informal letters, e.g. thank you letters, letters of condolence, letters of congratulations, letters of invitations, etc.

4.2 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN INFORMAL AND FORMAL LETTERS

Informal letters are to a certain extent linguistically, and more importantly, thematically different from formal letters. Some of these differences are :

- 1 In a formal letter you may often write to someone you do not know. It is written in order to make a specific point, and every word in the letter should be relevant to the end which you wish to achieve. In an informal letter you may dwell on several subjects and your letter may even ramble a bit.
- 2 Formal letters aim primarily at conveying information. Informal, personal letters do not seek to convey information in the same sense. They often deal with private thoughts and feelings—topics that are likely to interest the person to whom they are addressed.
- 3 Linguistically, there are certain features which one may find mainly in informal writing. For instance, items of vocabulary are often different in informal and formal writing. In informal letters, you will often find expressions which characterize conversation—exclamatory expressions, questions, contracted forms, etc. Let us look at some of these features.

i) Exclamatory expressions

Exclamatory expressions are quite common in informal letters. They express emotions and feelings—surprise, happiness, fear, anger, appreciation, etc.

Examples

Dear Mr. Russell,

We'll be glad to come and we'll both be so happy to see you again. *How nice of you to ask us!*

You can't imagine how glad I was to get your card! I'm afraid there is no hope that we'll meet before long

Dear John,

Thank you for your letter. I was pleased to hear that you have been offered a job in this area. *Congratulations!* You must be feeling very cheered after job-hunting for so long. From what you say I would imagine that you will have real prospects of promotion in that organization. *Well done!*

You asked what this town is like to live in. Well, after having lived here for all of six months I feel qualified to tell you. You must remember how at school I was always ready to impart information—*so here goes!*

(From *Certificate English* by A.J.S. Pringle, Oxford University Press.)

Back in Germany! How I envy you! Although I have not seen it since my school days, the spell is still strong upon me—the breath of intellectual freedom, the discussions, the music, the lighthearted comradeship

(From *Addressee Unknown* by Kressmann Taylor)

ii) Questions

Questions are generally used to seek information, but they can also be used as a stylistic device to reinforce a point, to persuade the hearer to agree with the questioner and to make oneself better understood.

Notice how questions have been used in the following extracts from letters. They seldom elicit new information but rather consolidate the relationship by expressing a certain mood and attitude.

Dear Garnett,

Did I answer your last letter? I can't for my life remember. Why do you take so much trouble for me?

(From D.H. Lawrence : *Selected Letters*, Penguin Books)

Why can't you ever come? You could if you wanted to, at Christmas. Why not? We should love to have you, and it costs little.

I was shocked to hear the news of your terrible accident. Why should this happen to you? You have never done anything to deserve such an unkind treatment from Nature!

iii) Imperatives

Imperatives are more often found in spoken than in written English, and lend a distinct intimate tone to the letter.

Examples

You sound so miserable. It's the damned work. I wish you were here for a while. If you get run down, do come quickly. Don't let yourself become ill. This is such a beastly dangerous time. And you could work here, and live cheap as dirt with us.

Don't mind if I'm impertinent. Living here one gets so different

..... I have, however, succeeded in having the questionnaire typed. Am sending you a copy. Just let me know whether it's ok—or if you have to suggest changes—do so.

And now, you two, for God's sake don't get in a state. I myself am always on the brink of another collapse. I begin to tremble and feel sick at the slightest upset : you letter for instance. Do be mild with me for a bit. Don't get silly notions. I've waited for you for two years now, and am far more constant to you than ever you are to me—or ever will be. Which you know. So don't use foolish language.

iv) Contractions

The use of contractions is a very common feature in informal writing of any kind, especially letters.

Examples

My dear

I'm not so lucky as you are—to be doing work. Well, I've been doing something—struggling to get well so that I may be able to start work.

..... It'll take a long time for the Pune trip to go to the back of my mind. You know, parting is sad and painful especially when one knows and is sure that such a dose of happiness may not come again. I don't know how Deepa feels, I don't know how you feel, but I feel quite terrible

v) Ellipsis

In informal letters, one often tends to omit certain 'grammatical' items. This is known as ellipsis. Despite this, the meaning remains clear.

a) *Good Luck and cheer up. Anything you want just let me know. Honestly—okay?!*

b) *Will be writing a letter to Manjit apologizing for the dinner, etc., etc. Will also keep in touch with S. Banerjee. Should write to Alok and Rina too. Have to keep my public relations strong. Will be writing a letter of thanks to Yogi shortly.*

- c) *Arrived here on the 28th and fell ill on the 30th with viral infection and a very high temperature. Thank God it's over, I was back at office on the 12th. So you see no work at all for a fortnight! I have, however, succeeded in having the questionnaire typed. Am sending you a copy*

Notice the omission of certain words in these letters. For example in extract (a), the complete sentences would have been

'If you want anything, just let me know.'

'I mean this honest.'

In extracts (b) and (c) the first person pronoun 'I' is missing in most of the sentences.

'(I) will be writing a letter to Manjit

'(I) should write to Alok and Rina too

'(I) arrived here on the 28th

'So you see (I've done) no work at all for a fortnight'

'(I) am sending you a copy

vi) Order of constituents in a sentence

Very often the way parts of a sentence are arranged lends it a certain informality or intimacy. In a formal communication, the usual 'subject + verb + object' pattern is followed. However, in speech and intimate communication, the ordering of constituents in a sentence may be changed.

Examples

A bit of loud thinking that was. I should have started by wishing you, your family and all our friends a very happy and peaceful new year.

4.3 THE LAYOUT OF AN INFORMAL LETTER

The layout of an informal letter is much less rigid than that of a formal letter, which is based on accepted rules and customs as shown in Units 2-3. However, it may be useful to adopt the layout shown below.

(1) Flat No. 15, 2nd Floor,
Shanti Building 2,
19, Pedder Road,
Bombay-400 026.

(2) 20 Sept., 88

(3) Dear Neera,

Thanks a lot for your letter which I received today

(Body of the letter)

(4) Love,

Anju

Notes

- 1) If you are the sender of the letter, your address always goes into the top right-hand corner. Even if you are writing to a friend who knows your address, it is still better to write it. *Never* write your name in this place.

The address can be written as shown in (1), or *each succeeding line beginning* farther to the right as shown below :

Flat No. 15, 2nd Floor,
Shanti Building 2,
19 Pedder Road.
Bombay-400 026.

In a personal letter certain words can be abbreviated; for example,

Street	St.	Society	Soc.
Road	Rd.	Apartment	Apt.
Avenue	Ave.		

Note that the address of the person you are writing to *does not appear* in a personal letter.

- 2) The date always goes under the address. Leave a little space between the address and the date as is shown in the specimen layout. The date can be written in any of the following ways :

20 September, 1988
20th September, 1988
20 Sept., '88
September 20, 1988
20/9/88
20.9.88

- 3) The salutation of greeting in an informal letter depends upon your relationship with the reader of the letter. But generally the forms of address are :

- i) Dear (or My dear) + first name e.g. Dear Rita
- ii) Dear + title + Surname
e.g. Dear Mr. Goel

Note that if you are writing to Ashok Goel, the salutation should be either

Dear Ashok
or
Dear Mr. Goel

But not

*Dear Mr. Ashok

- 4) The complimentary close : you can end a personal letter in a number of ways, and this again depends upon your relationship with the person addressed. In fact the end of your letter must match the greeting at the beginning of your letter.

Love, and variations (*lots of love*, etc.) are intimate and affectionate.

Yours, Regards, With best wishes

show friendliness without expressing intimacy.

There may be other very intimate ways of ending a personal letter, which you'll develop 'naturally' with a close friend.

- 5) P.S. means Postscript. If you have forgotten to write something in your letter, or wish to add something, write it as a P.S. Keep the P.S. as short as possible.

Example

See you on Sunday.

Yours,

Rita

P.S. Don't forget to bring my book!

The points given above show you the general layout of an informal letter. We now suggest certain ways of opening and closing a letter which you may find useful. Of course these are merely suggestions, as there is really no set way of beginning a letter.

If someone has already written to you, thanking that person for the letter is a fairly common way of beginning the letter for example,

- Many thanks for your letter
- Thank you for your letter
- Thanks for your letter
- Thank you so much for your letter.

You may also begin your letter in some of the ways given below :

- I was glad to get your letter, and
- We were very glad to hear from you.
- I received your letter yesterday, and the books this morning. It is very good of you
- Had your letter the other day—glad that you are well and happy.

Many of us are lazy about answering letters. So when we write after a long time, we often have to apologize for the delay, and then give the reason or excuse for not writing for so long. Some of the ways in which you could begin such letters are :

- I'm sorry I haven't written for so long but I've been very busy recently.
- I've been wanting to write to you for such a long while, but
- I really wish I could manage to write to you more regularly

Here are suggestions for ending an informal letter. In a personal letter, it is customary to send good wishes to the family of the recipient of the letter.

Examples

Remember me to Rina and the kids. All good wishes to you and your family. Please do remember me to both Rama and Anjani and convey to them and their family my greetings and goods wishes. Please convey my regards to your family.

Check Your Progress 1

Given below is an incorrect layout of a personal letter. Make corrections wherever necessary.

Salim Khan
Amrita Sher Gill Marg,
House No. 7
New Delhi.

14th Feb, 1988

My dear Ahmed,

Thanks for your letter

Sincerely,
R.K. Ram

4.4 'THANK YOU' LETTERS

As we have already told you, the subject matter of a personal letter may be almost anything. However, certain common feelings—of gratitude, sorrow, good wishes, and so on—often need to be expressed. We hesitate or avoid writing such letters because we don't know how to express these feelings, especially to people we know rather well. When we do write such letters, they appear stilted and formal. Let's write in such a manner that our letters sound as sincere expressions of emotion rather than a mere formality.

'Thank you' letters

We often need to write letters expressing gratitude—for services rendered, for acts of kindness shown, and so on.

Example

You and your family have just spent a vacation with some friends. Given below is a letter thanking them for the good time you had.

Flat No. 15,
Navjivan Colony,
Mahim,
Bombay-400 501.

11 Feb., 1988

My dear Sunita and Salil,

Just a short note to tell you that we reached home in one piece—and how much we enjoyed staying with you!

This was one of the best vacations we have had in a long time—and you contributed so much to making it so. Thanks a lot for looking after us so well!

The children still keep talking about the picnic at Kamptee Falls and the joy they felt while putting on their new swim-suits and splashing around in the water. We're looking forward to the photographs.

It goes without saying that we hope you'll spend the next summer with us. We'll have fun together again.

Renu and the kids send their love.

Yours,

Rajesh

4.6 KEY WORDS

colloquial/ke'leukwiel/ (adj.) : suitable for informal conversation rather than formal writing.

con'tracted'forms : shortened forms of words; for example, *don't* for *do not*

el'ipsis : the leaving out of one or more words from a sentence, when the meaning can be understood without them.

im'perative : the form of a verb used in commands, e.g., *sit down*.

ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

	House No. 7, Amrita Sher Gill Marg, New Delhi.
	14th Feb., 1988
My dear Ahmed,	
.	
Thanks for your letter	
With love	
R.K. Ram	

Check Your Progress 2

	3C Century Towers, 46 Barnaly Road, Kilpauk, Madras-600 010.
	15/7/87
My dear Suraj,	
Just a note to tell you that I am much better and should be returning in about two weeks.	
It was really nice of you to invite me to your house and let me stay there for several days when I was not well. I remember how you took me to the doctor when I fell ill—in fact, I sometimes feel that you saved my life! Am I being very dramatic?!	
Please thank Saroj also for making me feel at home and looking after me so well. It was such a joy to get to know your children. My love to everyone.	
Looking forward to seeing you soon.	
Yours,	
Suresh	