Letters II

Letters of Inquiry

- A letter of inquiry asks someone for specific information.
- In some cases, such as a request for promotional material, the recipient will have a clear interest in responding to your letter.
- In other cases, such as a request for specific information on a product, the recipient may or may not be as motivated to respond quickly.
- Consequently, always make the tone of the letter friendly and make it easy for the recipient to identify and provide the information you need.

Format of a Letter of Inquiry

- Follow this format in writing a letter of inquiry:
  - In the first paragraph, identify yourself and, if appropriate, your position, and your institution or firm.
  - In the second paragraph, briefly explain why you are writing and how you will use the requested information. Offer to keep the response confidential if such an offer seems reasonable.
  - List the specific information you need. You can phrase your requests as questions or as a list of specific items of information. In either case, make each item clear and discrete.
  - Conclude your letter by offering your reader some incentive for responding.

Example

- The following letter of inquiry is written by a computer programmer requesting specific information about an upcoming release of a software product.

Head

Arlington Heights Programming Associates
16 Oak Street
Springfield, CA 90467

November 11, 1996

Customer Relations
Turing Data Solutions
2345 Maple Avenue
Mountain View, CA 94941

Dear Customer Relations:
I am a systems engineer at Arlington Heights Programming Associates developing a new client-server networked database system for two non-profit corporations.

My team is considering using your new release of Omega Database Plus 1.0 as a key part of the system. If we incorporate your product into our design, our clients will need to purchase at least a total of 140 copies of your software.

We have read your promotional material and are very interested in using your product. We need, however, the answers to the following questions before we can decide whether or not to use Omega Database Plus:

1. Are you still planning to release the Omega Database Plus Version 1.0 on February 12, 1998?

2. What LAN environments will your product support?

3. Will your product support PGP encryption?

I would be happy to talk to you further about your product. You can call me at (415) 666-4323 or e-mail me at egarrels@arlpro.com.

Sincerely,

Edgar Garrels
Senior Systems Engineer

cc: Mr. R. Williams
Technical-Information Letters and Memoranda

- Technical-information letters and memoranda are short documents that announce new technical information, such as a software bug and its solution, or a new feature.
- Use the memorandum format if the information is being sent inside an organization. Use the letter format if the document will be sent to outside individuals.
- The following example is adapted from a technical-information memorandum written by Information Systems at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- The document informs users of MIT's network of a change in the protocols of MIT's main World Wide Web (WWW) server that allows users to place shorter Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) in their WWW pages.

Body

The addressing scheme for the World Wide Web relies on Uniform Resource Locators (URLs). Each Web document has a URL, which identifies the protocol being used, the name of the Web server the document is on, and the path name to get to the document. (Note: in common usage, the more specific term "Uniform Resource Locator (URL)," is frequently used where the more general term "Universal Resource Indicator (URI)" would be more appropriate.)

A URL must indicate the protocol, Web server, and path name (e.g., "http://web.mit.edu/afs/athena/techreview/www/index.html") as opposed to a relative URL, which assumes the same protocol and server, and just gives the path relative to the location of the current document (e.g., "/comments.html"). A URI can be either a URL or a relative URL. One problem with URLs is that they can become long and unwieldy.

MIT Information Systems has come up with a scheme for shorter URLs for files stored on the Athena network and accessed through the Web server, web.mit.edu. Since electronic publishers at MIT can now use and publicize shorter URLs for their documents, addresses will be easier to reference and remember. In the past, for example, to get the Technology Review home page, you had to enter the following URL in your Web browser:

References and Letters of Recommendation

• You should follow standard procedures in obtaining references, and use conventional formats in writing letters of recommendation.

• References are an essential component of almost all admissions, grant, and employment processes.
• Managers and other individuals in any selection process need evaluations from individuals who have had long and close contact with applicants in order to assess accurately their abilities and accomplishments.
• The number of recommendations required by employers and universities usually ranges from one to five, with three being the most common number.

• There are two basic forms of references: oral and written.
• Most often, oral references are conducted by telephone.
• The name, professional title and affiliation, address, and phone number of each reference are included in a list of references, which is often mentioned in résumés and application letters but always kept separate from them.
• Give your list of references to a potential employer or to a selection committee only when it is requested.
• Your recommenders are doing you a favor.
• If you subject them to too many intrusions, you may find them less willing to help you in the future.

• Written letters of recommendation are more formal.
• Often, they are written to a specific individual for a specific position.
• In other cases, however, letters of recommendation are written for a general type of job or for graduate school and are included in a collection of letters of recommendation called a dossier.

Obtaining Letters of Recommendation

• Make your candidacy as strong as possible by carefully soliciting references and letters of recommendation.
• Letters of recommendation are extremely important in decisions to hire or admit an individual or to award a scholarship or grant.
• Consequently, be sure to spend adequate time and effort to ensure their effectiveness.
• In some cases, you list an individual as a reference, and the organization or individual considering your application will contact that person, often only if you are a finalist for the position.
• Other situations, however, require a formal letter of recommendation from each reference.
General Guidelines for Requesting References or Letters of Recommendation

• If possible, always ask one or two more persons than the minimum number you need.
• Ask a range of persons who can testify to different abilities and accomplishments relevant to the position or award.
• If possible, ask someone in person to write a recommendation or to be a reference.
• If the individual is far away, ask him or her by phone or through a written letter.
• Generally, unless you know the person extremely well, do not ask someone to be a reference or write a letter of recommendation through e-mail.
• Never list a person as a reference or as someone who will provide a letter of recommendation until the person has agreed to do so.
• Give each person serving as a reference or writing a letter of recommendation the following written information:
  • a description of the position or award you are applying for
  • a short statement of your professional goals longer than a one-sentence career-objective statement included as part of your résumé
  • a current Resume
  • background material to refresh the recommender's memory of specific work you did with him or her that you feel should be included in a letter of recommendation

Guidelines for Written Letters of Recommendation

• Generally, people give more weight to recommendations that contain a waiver of your right to see the recommendation.
• Sometimes, however, it may be prudent not to waive your right to review the recommendation, especially if you are unsure of the recommender’s attitude toward you or of his or her writing ability.
• Recommenders are busy people.
• Ask a person to write the recommendation and give him or her all the necessary material at least three weeks before the recommendation is due.
• Sometimes recommendations are sent to a central office, such as a university career center, which then forwards the recommendations to specific individuals.
• In these cases, you may be able to ask someone in the office to review the recommendations on file and suggest which combination of recommendations best present an overall picture of your abilities and accomplishments related to your career objectives.
• If appropriate, provide each recommender with
  • all required recommendation forms; be sure you have completed all parts of the form you are required to fill out.
  • a sheet stating to whom or where the recommendation should be sent.
  • When appropriate, include addressed envelopes and, in some cases, postage.
• One week before the recommendations are due, tactfully ask each recommender if he or she has sent the recommendation.
• After the letter of recommendation has been sent or the reference has been given, write a short letter thanking the recommender.
• The recommender has spent time helping you, and such a recognition of his or her efforts not only is polite but also may make it easier for you to request future references or recommendations.
• Keep all letters of recommendation and references current.
• In general, written recommendations that are older than three or four years carry little weight.

Writing Letters of Recommendation
• Write letters of recommendation to provide relevant information and to present an individual truthfully and positively.

Guidelines for Writing Letters of Recommendation
• In most cases, agree to write a letter of recommendation only if you can honestly write a supportive letter.
• If you cannot portray an individual positively, decline to write the recommendation.
• Ask for a current Resume and as complete a description as possible of the position or program to which the person is applying.
• Assemble and review all other relevant information you may have about the person you are recommending.
• It is often easy to overlook some important accomplishment.
• Present the person truthfully but positively.
• A recommendation that paints an unrealistic picture of a candidate may be discounted.
• A recommendation that focuses on negative qualities may do more harm than intended.
• Tailor the recommendation to the position. A letter recommending an individual for a job as a camp counselor should contain different information from that in a letter recommending the same individual for a job as a computer programmer.
• Begin the letter by describing how you know the individual you are recommending and the specific contexts upon which you are basing your evaluation. In what situations have you known the individual? For how long? How closely?
• Present the individual's general qualities relevant to the position along with one or two detailed examples. Including vivid detail will make the recommendation much more effective.
• In most cases, a letter of recommendation should consist of three or four paragraphs and not be over one page in length.
• A sample letter of recommendation is given is now showing on your screen.

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