

WRITING A LETTER TO A PERSON WHO HAS HARASSED OR OFFENDED YOU

If someone has offended you, you may wish to consider going back directly to that person. You will find it easier to go back to the offender, in person or on paper, if you first write a draft of how you see this matter. Then you can decide whether to send the letter, go back in person (or choose some other option – such as a formal grievance – to deal with the situation now that you have collected your thoughts on paper).

Writing the final draft of this letter may take a little time. If you have been hurt, if you feel very angry, if you are at all afraid, you may find you need to write several drafts. Do not be worried if your first draft is a messy stream-of-consciousness, and do not worry about the tone of your early drafts. In fact, the more upset you are, the more worthwhile it is actually to write (drafts of) a letter. It will help to "get the anger outside yourself", it will help you to remember the facts, and it will help in the process of deciding which option to choose in dealing with the situation. In addition, your last (polite, civil, factual) draft will be more effective if early drafts have helped you deal with your feelings.

Sometimes a person who has been offended will worry whether a direct approach to the offender will cause that person to retaliate. This is an important question to consider, but in North American society a well-prepared, direct approach to an offender may actually be the option least likely to result in retaliation. Remember that most people in this culture would rather hear about a problem directly, and not from a third party.

You should keep a copy of the letter you send; this is likely to help in dealing with the problem if there should be retaliation or if the offense recurs. (Letters like this help to build evidence. You may not be able to prove that the offense took place. But if you send a letter you can prove that you thought the offense took place and that you took a civil, responsible, private action to get the offense to stop.)

A letter can be used by anyone who feels unreasonably offended, intimidated or harassed. It is particularly useful where people's backgrounds are different. For example, energetic managers may offend older people, with allusions to age, without really understanding the offense. Ethnic slurs, anti-Semitism, anti-gay jokes, poking fun at the handicapped, racist behavior and sexual harassment are all problems where a letter may help. Letters have been effectively used by non-technical people who feel that "the computniks are sneering at them" and vice versa; so also with smokers vs. non-smokers. A letter may help you to deal with the garage that messed up your car.

I do not recommend a "form" letter. Sometimes a brief note is better among friends. Whatever the case, the letter should fit the particular situation exactly.

I do recommend three parts to a note or letter. The first is an objective statement of "the facts as I perceive them." No feelings, judgments or opinions belong in this section. (This section is hard to do even after many drafts. Be sure that you get some trustworthy person to help you get the first section down to just facts. The test for a "fact" is whether it could have been recorded on audio tape or video tape). In serious cases it will help for this section to be quite long and very detailed. It must be scrupulously accurate, to be effective (and fair). The first section should not use euphemisms. It should be very matter of fact. If you are not sure whether a statement is factual, then say "I believe (this happened)...; I think (this was the case)...."

The second section is for opinions and feelings. "This is how the facts as I know them make me feel." This is the appropriate place for a statement of damages, if any: "I feel I can no longer work with you;" "I was not able to work effectively for the following two weeks...."; "I felt terrible about what you did....."

Finally, the writer should state clearly what she or he thinks should happen next, and, if appropriate, ask for a specific remedy. "I ask that our relationship be on a purely professional basis from now on." "I want a chance to go over my work with you again and to reconsider my evaluation (grade)." "Since I was unable to go on this sales trip because of your behavior, I want immediate assignment to the next trip." Sometimes the writer will request a sum of money, if that is an appropriate remedy.

Many people ask if a letter really should be the first or the only attempt to deal with offensive behavior, and of the course the answer is, "This depends on the people and the problem." Criminal acts may better be brought to the attention of supervisors or the courts, although occasionally a letter may be the right choice. At the other end of the spectrum one may wish to write a letter, and then not send it. (You could consider forgetting the incident in the spirit of tolerance of diversity.) Also, many people prefer to try talking with an offender before sending a letter, and there are many ways to do this effectively. Or you can talk with the offender after giving the letter to him or her.

A letter may be an especially effective choice when verbal remonstrance has been ignored. It is particularly useful with sexual harassment, with offenders who believe that "no" means "maybe" or "yes". A letter may work well in situations where an offender seems to have no idea of the pain being caused, that is, for people who "just don't get it". Writing a letter may be particularly helpful when an offended person fears to come forward because she or he lacks conclusive proof of the offense, or where the offended person wishes to avoid the situation of "his word against mine." Letters are useful beyond the hope of stopping offensive behavior; they provide good evidence for management or a court to take action if necessary. Letters are especially effective in dealing with very powerful people where a junior person otherwise has little leverage or fears retaliation. Writing a letter usually provides hope of ending harassment when the offended person wishes to avoid public exposure, and to protect his or her privacy.

Letters are especially useful where a school or corporation has well-drafted policies against (all forms of) harassment. They work best where there are responsible grievance counsellors to help in sorting out alternatives and in drafting letters. They may, however, be written anywhere by any responsible person seeking in an orderly way to stop offensive behavior. A letter may be a good choice when an offended person particularly wishes to be scrupulously fair (because no supervisor need see the letter). And letters often work well in union situations, for example, worker with co-worker.

Once the letter is written, actually sending the letter to an offender should be carefully weighed against other alternatives. As you think about this remember that once the letter is sent, that copy belongs to the recipient, who then has control over it. Should you instead send a formal complaint letter to a supervisor? Should you now go talk with a trusted colleague or personal or legal counsellor? Or with a women's group or a spouse? Writing a letter does not commit you to send it. It will, however, be a good way to deal with your feelings and to organize your thoughts, in the process of deciding your best option. Sending a letter is an option that is likely to protect your privacy, to avoid retaliation, to get the harassment stopped, and to provide you with more evidence if needed. But it is not certain to work and you will want to consider other options carefully.

If you want to send your letter as an informal private communication, I usually do not recommend sending copies to other people. If you have decided to bring a formal complaint, then do address or send a copy to the department head or higher supervisor of the offender. Either way, be sure to keep the letter and proof that you sent it (the statement of a friend who watched you deliver it, a registration receipt, or whatever made sense for this letter). These proofs may be needed for evidence. Keep the letter also for another reason – it may make you feel good about yourself for years, knowing you had the courage to speak up.