

FORMAT GUIDELINES FOR LETTERS



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INTRODUCTION

The letters a minister writes can be a key medium for influencing some audiences. Ministers may write to elected officials in other levels of government whom they may never meet. They often write to members of the public or key stakeholders whom they never meet. They may also write to foreign dignitaries whom they never meet. Whatever the audience, the letters a minister writes are often circulated to many others besides the addressee.

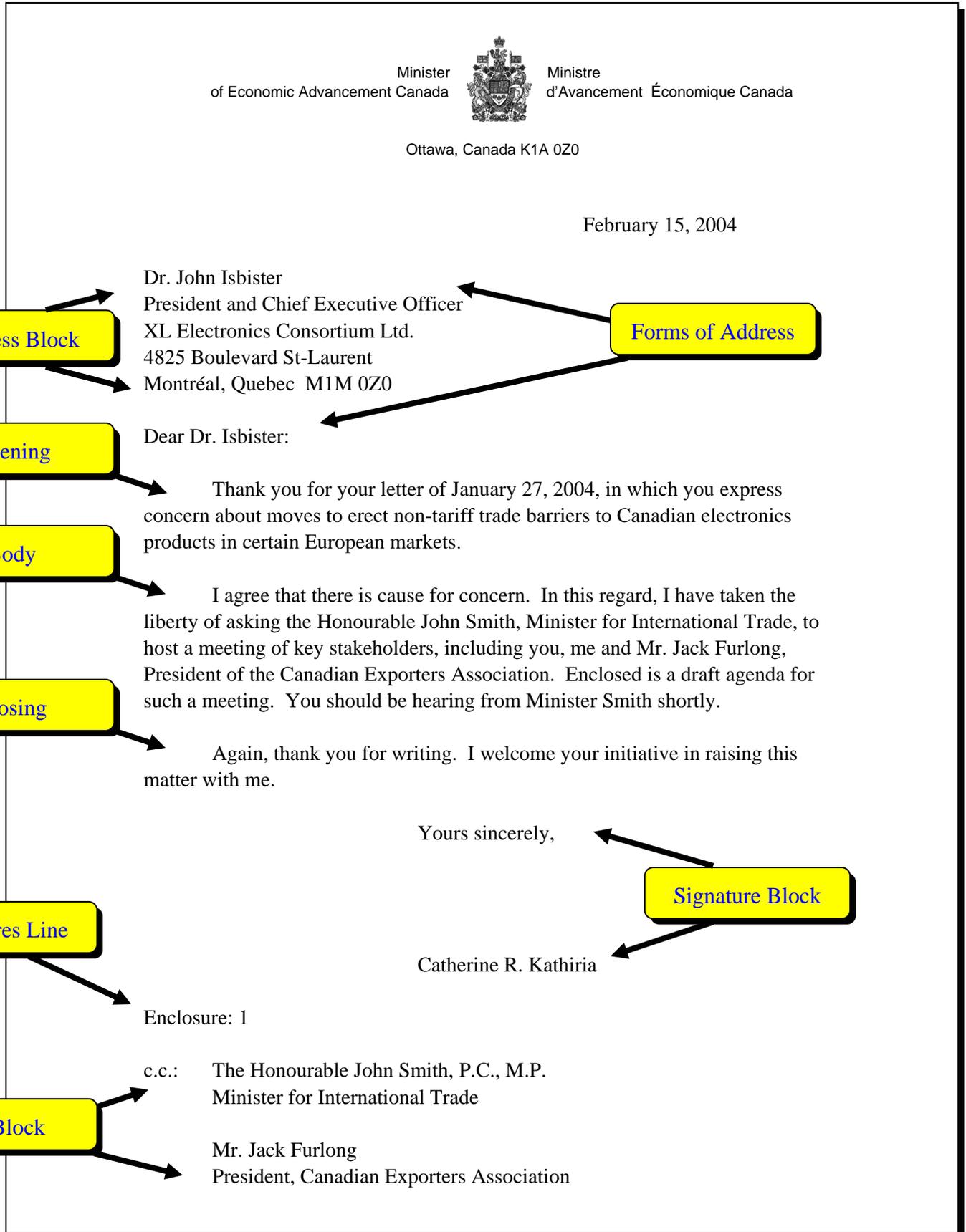
The format and content of those letters can make a lasting impression. This section is designed to help you sort out some of the more common issues that arise in drafting a letter.

LANGUAGE

Writing letters to other countries often poses the question of whether to write in English. Even though you know that your correspondent's mother tongue is not English, it is often sound practice to use English as your language of correspondence. Translating a letter increases the chances of error, sometimes significantly. If you have the translation done yourself, the responsibility for error falls on you.

Some countries have more than one official language. In Canada, for example, both English and French are official languages. In such cases, it is best to write domestic correspondence in the official language that is your correspondent's mother tongue, if it can be determined beforehand.

FORMAT MAP FOR A LETTER



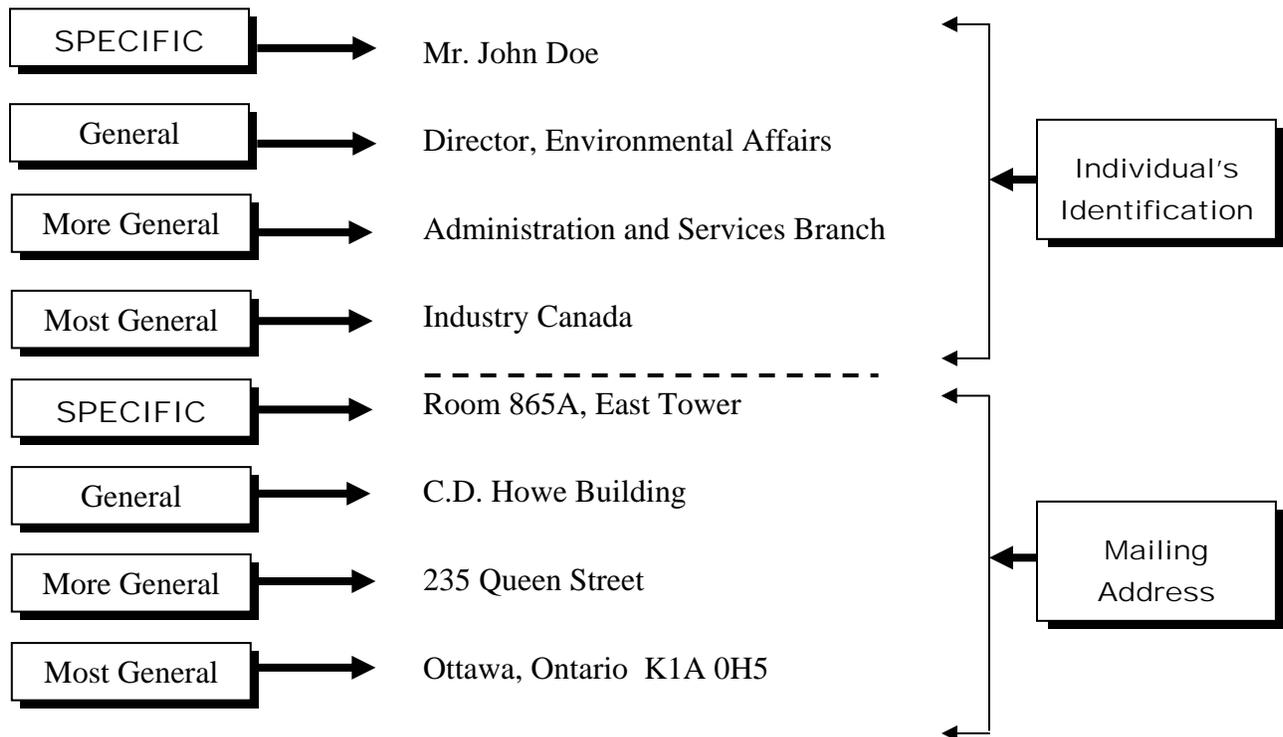
GENERAL FORMAT

Most letters follow one of two styles for their general format: block, or indented. The [Templates Page for Letters](#) provides examples of each of these formats.

However, there is no rule book that dictates how a letter must look. Individuals tailor formats to their own preferences. When writing for a signing authority other than yourself, your job is to find out what that authority likes and then draft a letter in conformity with that format.

ADDRESS BLOCK

The address block is broken into two sections: the individual's identification, and the mailing address. Each of those sections progresses from the most specific information through general information to the most general information. The diagram below illustrates these concepts.



FORMS OF ADDRESS

There are as many forms of address as there are countries, cultures and position titles in the world. Full books have been written on the subject, and I won't try to reproduce them here. If you are in doubt about the proper form for addressing a given audience, your best bet may be to consult your executive documents coordinator. Alternatively, check to see if your library has a book on forms of address. Another option is to buy one of the books available. Surprisingly, www.Amazon.com and www.BarnesAndNoble.com have few such books. You will find more on the Web site of a Canadian bookseller, www.chapters.indigo.ca.

OPENING PARAGRAPH

Opening paragraphs come in two varieties: letters initiated by the signing authority, and letters in response to a letter that has been received by the signing authority.

Letters Initiated by the Signing Authority

If the signing authority initiates the correspondence, the opening paragraph should briefly state what the letter is about. Here is an example:

Dear Mr. Jones:

I am writing to seek your views on options for increasing stakeholder participation in Industry in Action, a program operated by my department to increase the commercialization of advanced technology in Canada.

Letters in Response to a Letter That Has Been Received

If the correspondence was initiated by the audience of the present letter, the opening paragraph should thank the sender for the letter and briefly refer to the subject of that letter. Here is an example:

Dear Mr. Jones:

Thank you for your letter of February 11, 2004, in which you offered your support for my department's Industry in Action Program.

BODY OF THE LETTER

The possibilities for the body of the letter vary so widely that it is impossible to provide useful rules that will apply in all situations. The best I can do is refer you back to the guidelines on [message content](#). The principles used for a [Memo to the Minister](#) are helpful in guiding the content of a letter, although the style of a letter is less rigid.

Beyond that, be particularly wary of negatives in letters. There is almost always a way to turn a negative statement into a positive. Here is an example:

Negative

You cannot buy topographic maps directly from us. Please contact your local authorized map dealer.

Positive

Topographic maps are available only from authorized map dealers. For ease of reference, I have enclosed a list of such dealers in your area.

Finally, be careful about the length of the letter. It is sound practice to keep letters to no more than two pages. Added information can be placed in enclosed briefing notes. As with memos to your minister, it takes hard work and discipline to keep some letters to just two pages. But the result is often a significant improvement in the final product.

CLOSING PARAGRAPH

As with the opening paragraph, closing paragraphs come in two varieties.

Letters Initiated by the Signing Authority

If the signing authority initiates the correspondence, the closing paragraph should briefly and politely bring things to a conclusion. Here is an example:

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to your response.

Letters in Response to a Letter That Has Been Received

If the correspondence was initiated by the audience of the present letter, the closing paragraph should thank the sender again for the letter and, where possible, bring the letter to a positive close. Here is an example:

Again, thank you for the invitation. I look forward to the opportunity of addressing this important conference.

Here is another example:

Again, thank you for writing to convey your concerns. My department makes every effort to serve stakeholders in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

SIGNATURE BLOCK

Most signature blocks follow some variation of this format:

Yours sincerely,

John Doe

Different signing authorities may have different preferences for the amount of space needed between “Yours sincerely,” and “John Doe”. If the individual’s signature is expansive, you might need five or six blank lines. If the signature is compressed, three or four lines might be more appropriate.

ENCLOSURES

As with attachments to a memo, enclosures with a letter can serve any number of purposes. The [Templates Page for Letters](#) provides templates that cover most of the types of enclosures that you are likely to require.

The letter itself should note the number of enclosures, usually just below the signature block. Here is how the enclosures line would look:

Enclosures: 3

C.C. BLOCK

If copies of the letter will be sent to individuals outside of your organization, normal practice is to list those individuals and their titles in a c.c. block. The c.c. block is usually the last element of the letter. Here is an example:

c.c.: Mr. Jack Furlong
President, Canadian Exporters Association

The Honourable John Smith, P.C., M.P.
Minister for International Trade

Copies sent to people within your organization should not be included in the c.c. block. Instead, a note inside the file should show the names of those who should be copied inside your organization.