

English Corner



Dr. Mable Chan is a lecturer at the Department of English, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She was awarded the Faculty Award for Outstanding Teaching in the 2005/2006 academic year and has vast experience in teaching academic and business English to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Her new book 「職時上位：名人英語全面睇」, which is about business English, is now available. In this column she talks about the main style points you need to remember when writing a business letter.

There are different kinds of letter layouts. The five letter layouts include full-blocked style, blocked style, semi-blocked, square-blocked and simplified. Each letter layout has its distinct features, and full-blocked style is the most popular letter layout in use today.

Let's analyze the letter format of the following enquiry letter.

Mable Chan English Learning Centre 28 Kowloon Road, TST Tel: 2888 9999 Fax: 2999 8888	
9 September 2009	
Ms Mary Wong 18 Nathan Road Mongkok	
Dear Ms Wong	
Re: Your Enquiry about AG888	
Thank you for your letter dated 8 September 2009 concerning the new business English course offered by our Centre.	
The new business English course is tailor-made to address the needs of working adults who intend to master the skills of effective writing and speaking in the workplace. There is no prerequisite for application, and anyone interested in the course can enroll now to enjoy the early-bird discount.	
Seats are limited. Fill in the application form on or before 18 September 20—to register. Call our 24-hour customer hotline at 2898 8989 for further queries and questions. Thank you.	
Yours sincerely	
Chan Mable	
Mable Chan (Dr) Director	
MC: cu Enclosure	
cc: M Leung (Manager)	

1. **Letterhead:** The letter starts with the company's letterhead, providing information like the company name, address and contact details.
2. **Date:** There are two models for the date: day-month-year or month-day-year. If you use the day-month-year model, there is no comma after the month (i.e. 9 September 2009), whereas a comma is needed after the date for the month-day-year model (i.e. September 9, 2009). Remember not to use abbreviated ordinal numbers (i.e. 1st, 2nd, 3rd); do not shorten the spelling of the month (e.g. Jan, Feb, Mar) and never use an abbreviated form of the date (e.g. 10.9.09, as this refers to October in the American context but September in the British context).
3. **Receiver's address:** Leave two line spaces below the date for the reader's address. Include the name of the receiver, his/her title, the full company name and its address (for business correspondence). Use courtesy titles appropriately (e.g. Ms, Mrs., Miss, Mr., Dr.). Use *Ms* if you are not sure if the receiver is married or single. If you know the marital status of the receiver, use *Mrs.* for married women and *Miss* for single ones.
4. **Salutation:** Leave two line spaces below the receiver's address for the salutation. In formal business correspondence, last name is commonly used in addressing the receiver (e.g. *Dear Ms Wong* instead of *Dear Mary*). Other forms of salutation include: *Dear Sir* or *Dear Madam* (used when you are writing to a specific job title, and you know the gender of the receiver); *Dear Sir/Madam* (used when you are writing to a specific job title and you do not know the gender). Remember that the first word and every noun in the salutation must be in capital letters.
5. **Subject line:** Leave one line space below the salutation for the subject line. The purpose of a subject line is to give the reader a brief idea of what the message is about. Some people use the word *Subject* or *Re* before the subject line while others simply leave it. You can make the subject line bold, underline it or italicize it.
6. **Closing phrases:** Leave one line below the message for the closing phrase. Use either *Yours sincerely* (used in conjunction with the salutation *Dear Mr./Ms/Mrs./Miss/Dr. Chan*) or *Yours faithfully* (used in conjunction with the salutation *Dear Sir/Madam/Dear Sir* or *Dear Madam*). Remember to use small letters for the word after 'Yours'.
7. **Signature:** Leave three line spaces for the signature before typing the writer's name, title and/or department. You can sign for yourself or for someone else. For example, if you are authorized to sign for your company, use *for* or *pp* (i.e. per pro: for and on behalf of) put right after the closing phrase.



8. **Reference initials:** Reference initials refer to the initials of the person who wrote the letter (on the left) and the person who typed it (on the right). This is found one line space after the writer's name, title and/or department.

9. **Enclosures:** This is to indicate that you append something to the letter. This can take several forms:

- Price list enclosed
- 3 Enc./Enclosures 3
- Enclosures:
 1. 2009 brochure
 2. Leaflets

10. **Carbon copy:** If you want to send the letter to parties other than the primary recipient, you need to indicate this by using *cc*: (The colon after *cc* is optional and *cc* can be capitalized).



Quiz:

1. True or False? The first word of the salutation and every noun in the salutation must be written with a capital letter.

2. If the initials in a letter are DL/cc, who typed the letter?

3. True or False? The “typical” business letter/fax/email has four sections: before the message; the message; after the message; and, a postscript.

Key:

1. True.
2. A person whose initials are cc (could be, for example, Candy Chan, Cindy Cheng or someone else).
3. There are three sections in business correspondence. *Postscript (PS)* is not normally used to include your afterthoughts. You need to plan carefully and include all the necessary points in the letter. *PS* is mainly used in sales letters, where a company wants to remind potential customers of the benefits of a product/service and urge them to take action.