

How To Write a Strong Letter

Print your name and address at the top

Put in the date

Keep a copy of the letter

Dear Friend,

A strong letter starts with a one-sentence paragraph.

Best it be a one-liner, just a single clause, to grab the attention while asserting the message.

Facts follow. Arrange them in a meaningful sequence. Facts are tougher than complicated arguments. Facts transcend outrage or resentment. Facts are like bullets zapping error and evil. All the rest is huff and puff.

Don't prove too much. Paradoxically, reasons can weaken assertions. Use understatement. And no threats, prophecies, suggestions or opinions of your own... Other peoples threats, prophecies, suggestions and opinions, however, are facts, because "a subjective state is an objective fact."

Purge out the emotion. Don't draw attention to yourself. Beware of adjectives and adverbs. For a preacher, they can petrify the nouns and verbs; in a strong letter, they can inflame them. Avoid nouns like 'crooks' or 'disasters' when speaking of people or situations.

Avoid weak syntax [i.e. grammatical constructions]. Never start a sentence with 'an apology'. Remember, subordinate clauses, especially conditional clauses, and qualifying phrases, weaken your assertions. Avoid conjunctions like 'if, 'because' and 'although', and be sparing with 'but', 'however' and 'therefore'. Never hesitate to use a full-stop.

Don't cram. White space is a form of emphasis — perhaps the only legitimate form. When it won't fit in one page, refer to an accompanying report (please see over, "More DOs and DON'Ts"). When facts require documented evidence, use a letter file with plastic slips for each sheet of paper.

Civility costs nothing. Be courteous, always. Use correct titles, from Mr to The Most Revd. Never refer to third parties by their raw surnames — or mere Christian names.

Be diplomatic. Do not attack the person you are addressing, even if he is guilty — especially if he is guilty. Let him draw his own conclusions — guided by your transparent logic. And don't tell him what to do. No one likes that, especially people in charge.

How to conclude? Ask for redress of wrongs, or for an investigation, or simply for guidance. Begging your prayers and assuring you of mine in your apostolate, I remain, good friend,

Yours sincerely in Our Lord,

Signature

Finally, print your name

OVER 25 YEARS AGO...

BACK IN 1973, I wrote to the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy (which was and still is, the authoritative body for catechetics), outlining the catechetical situation in Australia. The reply came from the Cardinal's personal secretary: "You are quite right. But there is nothing we can do about it. Rome is not well obeyed. You will have to fight the battle yourself." In 1974 the Cardinal Prefect himself wrote, "Any support I might give you would be counter-productive..." What an admission! And more than 25 years ago! But that's what was said and that's what was done. Clearly nothing will get fixed up in a hurry.

EVIDENCE MUST BE IN WRITING

In dealing with spoken words, your letter must be more than "he said..." Even if you took copious notes during the lecture, it is so easy to miss a nuance, to miss a qualification, to misunderstand.

And there do exist lecturers who specialize in apparent contradictions to leave themselves a way out in case they are reported. So write to the lecturer, seek confirmation of what he said. Then you have document to prove to the Church authorities about confusions and doctrinal inaccuracies which you have heard at seminars. Evasive answers, even no answer, is itself evidence.

Some More "Do"s!

- Be clear, calm, cool and kindly in what you say.
- Persevere! Do not be put off.
- Write again. And again. Then, friend, go up higher... with copies of what went before.
- Do not overlook the cumulative effect of many straws on the camel's back...

When you are satisfied with your Strong Letter, sleep on it. Read it afresh as though it were yourself receiving it. Perhaps try it out on a trusted friend.

- Is it true?
- Is it really fair?
- Is it kind? Does it radiate goodwill?
- Does it radiate faith, hope, and charity?
- Is it relevant?
- Is it practical?
- Is it *actionable* at law...?
- Is it accurate in every detail? (One mistake and your credibility may be zilch.)
- Can your Guardian Angel read it without a blush?

"In essential things, unity; in other things, liberty; in all things, charity;" (St Vincent of Lerrins).

Some More "Don't"s!

- Do not begin, "The reason I am writing this letter to you is because..." Cut out the verbiage, circumlocutions, rhetorical questions, flowery prose.
- Do not be cold, belligerent, disdainful or egotistic.
- Do not use block capitals, underlining, bold print or italics for emphasis.
- Do not draw attention to your own subjective states...
- Do not impute motives.
- Do not be intemperate
- Do not claim too much.
- Do not use impolitic terms such as heretic, Modernist, trendy, rather say "dissenter". It covers them all.

MANNERS

OFFICIAL LETTERS must be sent to the Cardinal in charge or, for administrative matters to the Archbishop Secretary of a Congregation, or to the Bishop Secretary of a Pontifical Council. If you write to lower officers it is simply for their own information and cannot be acted upon officially.

Starting a letter to a Cardinal

His Eminence Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos, Prefect,
Congregation for the Clergy, 00132 Vatican City, Europe
Dear Cardinal Castrillon

Starting a letter to an Archbishop or Bishop

The Most Rev. Javier **Lozano** Barragan Dear Archbishop
Lozano *or* Your Grace *or* Your Excellency; *OR* Dear
Bishop XXX *or* My Lord *or* Dear Monsignor (which
means 'My Lord').

Concluding a letter to a Cardinal

Begging Your Eminence's blessing and with the assurance
of my prayers, I am,
Yours sincerely and obediently in Our Lord.

Concluding a letter to an Archbishop or Bishop Begging
Your Grace's blessing (*or* Your Excellency's blessing); **OR**
Begging Your Lordship's blessing. Then, "and with the
assurance of my prayers, I am" etc.

Courtesy is more important than technical manners.

Heads of the Roman Curia

• Information is as at July, 2003. If in doubt, contact the Apostolic Nuncio in Australia, His Excellency Most Rev. Francesco Canalini, Apostolic Nunciature, (2 Vancouver Street, Red Hill); Postal address PO Box 3633, Manua ACT 2603; phone 02 6295 3876; fax 02 6295 3690. He may suggest that you write via him and that is always an option. Or you might care to write independently.

• Dicasteries and personal surnames are in bold. Note how the Spanish and Portuguese and South Americans add the mother's maiden name after the surname.

Secretariat of State: Secretary of State, His Eminence Cardinal Agnelo **Sodano**; he processes all letters sent to the Pope; his answers will always be sent back through our Nuncio in Canberra;

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Prefect, His Eminence Cardinal Joseph **Ratzinger**; usually only answers letters from bishops; and only published work counts as evidence (because handouts, tapes or personal letters can be so easily forged);

Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments: Prefect, His Eminence Cardinal Francis **Arinze**; all matters concerning the conduct of the liturgy, its translations etc.

Congregation for Bishops: Prefect, His Eminence Cardinal Giovanni Battista **Re**; suggestions for future bishops will probably be referred back to our Papal Nuncio in Canberra;

Congregation for the Clergy: Prefect, His Eminence Cardinal Dario **Castrillon Hoyos**; competent body for catechetics and catechisms;

Congregation for Catholic Education: Prefect, His Eminence Cardinal Zenon **Grocholewski**; competent body for educational institutions such as seminaries, universities and Catholic schools;

Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life: Prefect, His Eminence Cardinal Eduardo **Martinez Somalo**;

Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples Prefect, His Eminence Cardinal Grescenio **Sepe**;

Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts: President, His Eminence Cardinal Julian **Herranz Casado**;

Pontifical Council for the Family: President, Cardinal Alfonso **Lopez Trujillo**;

Pontifical Council for the Laity: President, His Eminence Cardinal James Francis **Stafford**;

Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers: President, The Most Rev. Archbishop Javier **Lozano** Barragan; deals with immorality of drug rooms, needle exchange, etc. and all matters concerned with 'harm reduction';

Synod of Bishops: Secretary General, His Grace Archbishop Jan Pieter **Schotte**.

POSTAL ADDRESS:

Most of the Roman Congregations and Pontifical Councils are located just outside the Vatican City and so they can be reached through their postal addresses in Rome, Italy.

However, all mail can be sent to them at: **00120 Vatican City, Europe.**