

Putting Your Best Foot Forward

Practical tips for effective correspondence

by Donna Rafanello



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Are you true to your word?

Are you an effective communicator?

How well does your writing represent you?

There are a myriad of writing tasks that confront you as a director of an early childhood program.

Correspondence is one of the most frequent and time-consuming tasks of all. We often feel a particular pressure when it comes to writing letters, wanting them to express our thoughts eloquently and persuasively. How often are you called on to write the following letters?

- letters to parents
- letters of reference for employees
- thank you letters to donors
- grant application cover letters
- memoranda of understanding with community partners

- employment contracts
- director's letter in your program newsletter
- invitations to fundraising events / open houses
- letters to the editor
- letters to elected officials

Despite the number of times we are asked to write letters, most of us have never had any formal instruction in professional writing. It is no wonder that the idea of writing strikes fear into the heart of the many. Here are some guidelines for getting started with the writing tasks you face on the job.

Step One: Define your purpose

The purpose of your writing task, while in most cases readily apparent, requires your serious consideration:

- Why are you writing this particular letter?
- What do you hope to achieve with your writing?

- What specific content, if any, is required or desirable?

Step Two: Speak to your audience

Every time we commit our thoughts to paper we are considering a particular audience, a reader whom we are trying to reach, educate, inform, or mobilize.

- Who are you addressing in your letter?
- What is your relationship to this person?
- How formal or informal is your relationship?
- How familiar is your audience with the topic you are addressing in your writing?

Step Three: Set the right tone

Defining your audience will give you some information about the tone you want to create in your writing. Additionally, the writing task itself will dictate the tone you take: formal, friendly, persuasive, instructive, inviting, decisive, conciliatory. There are many occasions when

the director must use diplomacy and tact. At no time are these more important than when you put your message in writing. Reading your writing aloud is a great way to hear what your writing sounds like. Having a trusted staff member read your letters is another great way to get some feedback on the tone of your writing.

Some practical tips for effective correspondence

- Consider your reader.
- Be responsive.
- Be personal.
- Be concise and to the point.
- Be friendly; build the relationship.
- Emphasize the positive.
- Be prompt.
- Check spelling, grammar, and facts.
- Proofread.
- Use the correct format (margins, spacing, salutation/greeting, closing).
- Keep copies.

Developing strong writing skills, like everything, takes time and practice. And as we know from our experiences in developing other skills over time, in order to strengthen our writing, we must:

- Prioritize it as an area for growth.
- Identify our areas of strength and weakness.
- Allow ourselves the time and space to focus on developing our skills.

Good luck and good writing!