

HOW TO WRITE MINISTERIAL CORRESPONDENCE

THE PURPOSE

This purpose of this note is to present public sector writing practices for ministerial correspondence. The focus is on both style and context. Although style and technique are important, it is an appreciation of the context that will distinguish you as a writer of superior ministerial correspondence.

THE CONTEXT

Ministers often regard correspondence as one of their most effective tools for communicating key messages and maintaining relationships with Cabinet colleagues, other Members of Parliament, the Canadian public and constituents. If correspondence is approached as a strategic communications opportunity, the tone and substance of the products can well serve the Minister and the department.

Write as though **you were the Minister** signing the reply. Come at the task with political sensitivity and strategic thinking which will assist you in producing an appropriate response. Operate from the assumption that **your first draft will be too long, verbose and bureaucratic**; avoid all three by rigorously & ruthlessly editing and revising. Here are some **questions to be asking yourself** in the preparation of superior correspondence:

- How can this reply be used as an **opportunity to communicate** key messages? If I don't know what the key themes and messages are on this topic, where do I go to get them?
- If there are important **messages or decisions**, are they mentioned early in the body of the letter?
- If it is a "**negative**" reply, is it communicated as sympathetically as possible and explained satisfactorily? It is not sufficient merely to justify something as departmental policy.
- Is the **tone** appropriate - warm (but not chummy) and certainly not brusque (particularly if to the Minister's Cabinet colleagues).
- Is the **style** clear and concise - free from jargon and bureaucratic language - does each sentence flow smoothly into the next?
- Is the **structure** logical - are points arranged, for example, from general to specific; or in the order mentioned in the incoming letter; or chronologically; or from most to least important?
- Who else should I be talking to, **consulting** on this letter?
- Is the **level of detail** I am providing appropriate to the subject and situation at this time? Is every word and paragraph essential? What can I edit out?

THE STYLE & STRUCTURE

Your department will have a Ministerial Correspondence Manual which you should review before beginning to draft a letter, if you do not want to have it returned to you for revisions. Individual Ministers have very distinct stylistic preferences so you may choose to review examples of previous correspondence that has been approved and signed by the Minister.

The department's Ministerial Correspondence Manual will provide details on:

- Format - margins, spacing, font etc.
- Preferred protocols regarding salutations and forms of address to high-ranking or prominent officials, business persons and the general public
- Opening sentence form and content
- Closing sentence form and content
- Signature block form and content

Here are some tips on the writing the body of the letter:

- Your final draft should be concise - if, possible **only one page long** and rarely more than one and a half pages. If it is essential to communicate more information that one and a half pages, try to prepare a short letter with an accompanying information attachment.
- If feasible, communicate **important decisions early** in the body of the letter. Keep your paragraphs as short as possible. Do not cram unrelated points into the same paragraph.
- Pay careful attention to tone and style. Use the active voice rather than the passive voice (*he made the decision* rather than *the decision was made*). Consult the Correspondence Manual on errors to avoid and tips on general rules of style (abbreviations, capitalization, dates, numbers, measures, punctuation).
- "**Negative**" **decisions** should be communicated as sympathetically as possible, and should be satisfactorily explained. It is not sufficient to justify them simply as reflecting "departmental policy". The reasons for the policy should be stated.
- After you have written the draft, **ruthlessly edit it**. Rework and shorten sentences. Make sure your grammar is correct, syntax is clear. Double-check all facts, numbers, spelling of names.