

Revision Plus Lesson 4

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LESSON 4: REVISING BUSINESS LETTERS

While letters to family and friends might be casual, have minor errors, and ramble on, business letters must be formal, correct, and focused. This lesson offers your students an opportunity to consider their draft business letters and, using *Revision Plus*, make significant corrections and changes.

Focusing Revision Strategies

From each of the five sets of revision task cards, select the **nine cards** discussed below. If any of the revision tasks are unfamiliar to your students, take time to introduce the concepts in a mini-lesson or a series of mini-lessons. You may decide to use one or a few of these cards as your students revise, rather than work with all nine at once. This will depend upon the skills of your students and the time you have in one class period to devote to revision.

Choice

Read aloud your first sentence and your last sentence.

Decide whether these are the best choices for beginning and ending.

Make changes where needed.

By the time students have completed the first draft of their letters, they will have a clearer understanding of the points they are making and the best way to communicate to their readers. Those first sentences may be less clear and less interesting because they were written as the student was warming up to the task of writing the letter. There may even be a sentence within the body of the letter that can be seen, now, as a stronger beginning or ending. For some students, entirely new first and last sentences may be needed.

Correctness

Check your facts. You may need to correct the spelling of people's names, place names, brand names, etc. Make changes where needed.

Especially in the world of business, correct spelling and accurate numbers are necessary, not only in the inside addresses but also in the body of letters. Correctness is to business letter writing what appropriate attire is to a face-to-face business meeting.

Ideas

Find a place where an example would help to explain something to your reader. Write the example.

Although it is advisable that a business letter be brief and to the point, examples can help the writer to be clearer and more interesting. The example is only effective if it does these two jobs.

Ideas

Read your first paragraph aloud and decide whether your main idea is clear to your reader. Make any changes necessary.

Just as the first page of a story or article is important in capturing the reader's attention, so too is the first paragraph of a business letter. When students take the time to read aloud those first paragraphs, they will hear awkward sentences, unclear ideas, and other weaknesses that may confuse readers or, in fact, cause them to lose interest in the letter.

Ideas

Delete any unnecessary words or details in one of your paragraphs.

It is common for writers to lose focus and drift off the main idea of a letter. In the first-draft stages, this could actually be helpful as the writer explores a topic and makes decisions about the best direction to take. But any off-topic ideas must be deleted before the final draft of the letter is complete. Although this task card directs the writer to consider only one paragraph, students can be encouraged to check all paragraphs.

Organization

Read aloud any two paragraphs.

Decide whether a transition is needed to connect the ideas in the first paragraph with the ideas in the second paragraph.

Traditionally, a business letter is three to five paragraphs long. Encourage your students to look closely at ways in which each paragraph leads into and connects to the next one. If, for example, a student finds that the reader must struggle to see the link between the last sentence in one paragraph and the first sentence of the next, it may indicate that transitions are needed. Common transitions can do the job, but they may not be as interesting. For example, students might number their points, beginning a paragraph with "My first point is..." then "My second point is..." More experienced writers might weave paragraphs together with transitions such as "It is also worth considering..." or "Keeping these points in mind..."

Organization

Delete any ideas that are repeated unless you have a clear reason for using this repetition.

When writers attempt to make a convincing argument or explanation, a common tendency is to repeat. Students should consider any ideas that are repeated and decide whether the repetition is effective. For example, an idea from the opening paragraph may be effectively

repeated in a closing paragraph. If, however, there is no clear reason to repeat, the writer must delete those ideas that just don't work.

Organization

Does your conclusion clearly connect to your introduction?

Make changes where needed.

There are several reasons why writers might need to carefully consider the connections between the introduction and the closing of a business letter. Sometimes, the ideas writers initially wrote about are not the ones they decide are the most important. The focus of the letter might shift during the draft writing. At times, writers get side-tracked and actually introduce a new point as they are closing the letter. In such cases, students must decide whether to include the new points or cut them. A conclusion could be missing in early draft writing and must be inserted to complete the letter.

Voice

Think of your audience.

Have you made appropriate word choices for that audience?

Make any changes where needed.

To help your students understand this concept, ask them to imagine calling a friend on the phone and then calling a place of business where the person on the other end of the line is a stranger. They will quickly recognize that word choices add to the tone of the conversation. A business letter has a more formal tone, with word choices that may be more complex and less casual. Slang is not appropriate in the business world, but quite acceptable among friends. A thesaurus should be helpful as students look for appropriate word choices.

Rethinking and Rewriting

When you are confident that your students are familiar with the revision tasks you have selected, invite them to form five groups. Give each group the cards you have selected. It will be more productive if the members of each group work together, one task card at a time. Those who do not need to make changes suggested on the task cards will be able to help by advising others and perhaps showing strong examples from their letters. You will be free to circulate from group to group, listening to the conversations and noticing when individuals need a bit more support from you.

Sharing “Before and After”

Whenever possible, encourage your students to share with each other

some of the changes they make in their draft business letters. This may be achieved by inviting them to work together in small groups or by calling upon individuals to share with the whole class. It will be helpful for those who may be struggling with the revision concepts to see and/or hear the shared examples. You might want to create a classroom display of “before and after” examples generated by the students.

Reflecting on Learning

Finally, suggest that students write notes to themselves, perhaps in a writer's notebook, explaining one strength in their own business letters and one reminder for improvement in the future. These notes can be useful as you confer with students and assess their skill development.