

### Transactional letter

We do not really write letters<sup>1</sup> anymore. Emails, however, we write every day. We are required to write transactional emails in both our private and professional life. In such situations, it is in our own interest not to back out, but write a clear, to-the-point letter in order to achieve our goals.

It is this everyday practical nature of this text type that makes it a regular feature of most language exams, a prime example of a real life exam task.



### What makes a letter transactional?

The key word here is 'transaction'. The writer has a purpose with the text: enquiring, making a complaint, providing information, recommending, recommending someone, applying for a job, introducing themselves etc. From a communication point of view, the most important part of the text is the purpose itself, and the measure of success is whether the purpose has been achieved. In the Euroexam, task fulfilment accounts for as high as 20% of the total marks. The length of the text is relatively strictly limited, just like in real life. A transactional letter/email is not a descriptive or narrative text, but rather a goal-oriented one. Try to express the content, background and reasons briefly, precisely and in a style that is in line with the position of the recipient of the letter if you would like them to read and understand your letter and act accordingly, with their reply or measures taken.

The structure of transactional letters is more or less the same while the content may vary.

### Opening paragraph

Apart from clearly explaining the purpose of writing (e.g. complaint, application, recommendation, enquiry), you also have to refer to an advertisement/source/call that will help the recipient identify the issue you are writing about.

Candidates often ask whether they have to write a letter heading with sender and recipient. When it comes to the Euroexam, the answer is plain and simple: no. The assessed part of the exam starts with 'Dear...'.  
  
when expressing yourself.

### Main body (2-3 paragraphs)

Depending on the topic, issue and goal, you will reason, explain, or provide details, i.e. about the issue that the recipient must be familiar with in order to react. It is important not to get lost in detail about personal account of events. For example, in a letter of complaint, you do not have to refer back to every single unfulfilled promise that you read in the advertisement. The most important thing is to be brief and to the point

when expressing yourself.

It is a typical approach of candidates to try and dedicate an entire paragraph to each piece of information or content point resulting in content being diffused in an odd-looking, spread-out text of 7-8 paragraphs.

Therefore make sure you express yourself in not more than 2-3 paragraphs in this section putting similar ideas side by side, while at the same time bearing in mind the word count of the task as well. Well-chosen cohesive devices can help you with that as well (e.g. '*Equally important is...*', '*As an illustration of...*') by making the connection between ideas clear both within or beyond the paragraph.

There is another important formatting and language aspect that you need to bear in mind. Transactional letters often require the writer to ask the recipient questions. In such cases, try to avoid asking questions randomly in a disorganised way as it may result in the reader feeling under attack by a rude letter. It is much more effective to ask only the most important questions and do so by using polite reported or indirect questions (e.g. Instead of saying '*Can I rent a room for 3 months*

1 Although transactional letters mostly mean emails nowadays, for the sake of simplicity, we use the word 'letter' throughout our materials. However, what we primarily refer to is emails.

*only?*', you can write: '*Furthermore, would it be possible for me to rent the room for 3 months only?*').

## Closing

This paragraph is not merely for saying goodbye, but it gives you the opportunity to close the transaction by letting the reader know what you are expecting from them (see examples below):

- in a letter of complaint, you tell them what kind of

compensation you expect;

- in a letter of inquiry, you specify by when and in what form you expect the information requested;
- in a letter of recommendation, you express your hope that the reasons explained in your letter will be sufficient for a positive response etc.

It is only after all this that you can say goodbye in one sentence, which you can arrange in a separate paragraph or at the end of the last paragraph.

## The style and level of formality of a transactional letter

Every transactional letter – be it a general or business letter – must meet the style requirements of a formal, polite and somewhat distant communication, irrespective of whether we know the recipient in person or not. You need to follow the layout rules, use the correct salutation and complimentary closing and remember that you are not allowed to use contractions '~~...I don't...~~'. Another important feature of these letters is that they shouldn't be too personal or too emotional, therefore try to avoid expressions of outrage (e.g. in a letter of complaint). Such letters usually end up in the bin, and thus they fail to achieve their purpose.

## Transactional letter writing in the business exam

The main difference between general and business letters is the topic and the vocabulary. The formatting and stylistic requirements are the same. Apart from the difference in vocabulary mentioned earlier, a business exam letter differs from the general exam in functions used and its purpose (e.g. in a business environment, you are more likely to be required to write a request for reference or a negative response to a job application).

## Useful links

You can find further tips and sample language for both business and general letters on these websites:

English: [English with a Twist](#)

## Format requirements in the Euroexam writing test

Recommended length: B2 – 100-120 words; C1 – approx. 200 words. This word count is a recommendation only and normally we do not penalise deviation from it (being overlong is the most common occurrence). However, it is in your own interest to keep yourself to the instructions of the task. Incidentally, counting words is time-consuming and it distracts you from the task. Anyway, before starting the letter, we suggest that you jot down a few keywords and ideas to help yourself decide what to include in the letter and what to leave out.

## Using a dictionary in the Euroexam writing test

Although using a dictionary is permitted throughout the entire writing test, we recommend that you primarily use your active vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Remember that looking up words in a dictionary is time-consuming and therefore only resort to it if it is absolutely necessary in order to express yourself. The dictionary will probably prove more useful when proofreading your finished letter.