

Writing a formal letter or email

IGCSE English

When to write formally

The second writing task sometimes asks for a **formal** 正式 or **semi-formal** 半正式 letter or email.

Spot a formal task

- A formal task is written to someone you do not know well — a head teacher 校长, a manager 经理, or an event organiser 活动组织者.
- The task tells you the **format** 格式, the **purpose** 目的 and the reader. Use all three.



A formal letter is read at a desk like this — by someone who does not know you, and who is busy

Keep a polite tone

- Be **polite** 礼貌 and respectful. Do not use slang 俚语 or jokes.
- Do not use short forms. Write “I am”, not “I’m”.

informal - to a friend

formal - to someone you do not know

I'm writing ...

I am writing to ...

full forms, no short forms

Guess what!

I would like to tell you ...

no chat, no slang, no jokes

Thanks a lot!

I would be grateful if ...

polite, respectful requests

Turning friendly phrases into formal ones



A formal letter: careful structure, polite register and a clear reason for writing

Building a formal letter or email

A formal letter follows a clear order.

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing to ask about ...

I would be grateful if you could ...

Yours faithfully,

B. Chen

— first paragraph: say **why** you are writing

— middle paragraphs: **one point** in each

— end: what you would like to **happen next**

match the pair:
 Dear Sir or Madam, → Yours **faithfully**,
 Dear Mr Lee, → Yours **sincerely**,

The shape of a formal letter - and the greeting decides the sign-off

Opening and closing

- Open with *Dear Sir/Madam*, or *Dear Mr Lee*,
- If you start with a name, close with *Yours sincerely*.. If you start with *Sir/Madam*, close with *Yours faithfully*..

Clear paragraphs

- First paragraph: say why you are writing.
- Middle paragraphs: give your points, one idea in each.
- Last paragraph: say what you would like to happen next.

Formal language

- Use formal phrases: *I would like to...*, *I am writing to...*, *I would be grateful* 感激 *if...*
- Keep sentences clear and complete. Check your grammar and spelling.

A model formal letter

See how a polite, complete opening sets the right tone.

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing to suggest an improvement to the town library. At present it closes at five o'clock, which is too early for students who finish school

at four. I would be grateful if the council could consider opening it until seven in the evening on weekdays.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter.

Yours faithfully, J. Chen

Notice the *Dear Sir or Madam* / *Yours faithfully* pair, the clear first line stating the purpose, the polite request, and the complete sentences with no short forms.

Exam tips

- Match the greeting to the ending: Dear Mr Lee → Yours sincerely; Dear Sir or Madam → Yours faithfully.
- Say why you are writing in the first line: “I am writing to apply for...” saves words and sounds formal.
- Do not use short forms: write “I am” and “do not”, never “I’m” or “don’t”.
- One paragraph per point, and end by naming the action you hope for: “I would be grateful if...”.
- Stay polite even in a complaint: “I was disappointed to find...” wins marks; “This is terrible!” loses the tone.