

Drafting—and perhaps sending—a private letter to a person who has harassed or offended you

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If someone has offended you, you may wish to draft a letter to that person. There are many reasons to do this. If you have been very upset, drafting a letter—and writing several drafts of a letter—may make it easier for you to deal with the rage, grief or confusion. You may also find it easier to deal with your feelings—and with the offense—if you first sort out the facts from your feelings.

It will also be easier to choose an effective option for dealing with an offense if you first collect the facts, and think clearly about any damage you have suffered because of the offense. In fact *drafting a letter to someone who has offended you is an excellent preparation for many different options for dealing with the offense*. Different options might include: approaching the offender directly, in person or on paper; seeking informal third party intervention; formal mediation; formal grievance or legal suit; and systems efforts or a generic approach, to *prevent* the kind of behavior that offended you.

In addition, if you decide to postpone action, or forgo action, you may feel more comfortable having “drafted a letter.” This is because you will have collected the evidence together, in a way that may be useful in case you change your mind.

If you are not at all sure what you want to do with respect to an offense, drafting a letter costs nothing, in terms of privacy or money. In addition, you may find it is suddenly much easier to decide what to do, after you write a number of drafts of a letter.

Writing a *final* draft of this letter may take a little time. If you have been hurt, if you feel very angry, if you are at all afraid, you may find that you need to write several drafts. Do not be worried if your first draft is a messy stream-of-consciousness and if you feel confused. Do not feel you must struggle with the tone of your early drafts — they do not need to see the light of day. In fact the more upset you are, the more worthwhile it is actually to write many drafts of a letter. Reviewing and re-writing may help you to recall and organize the facts of the situation.

When one is very upset it can be hard to sleep or work; rage and grief are very distracting. People who have used the letter-writing method suggest that drafting a letter may help to “get the anger outside yourself.” If the facts are safely collected outside yourself, your mind no longer needs to struggle to remember and understand what has happened. The distraction may lessen; you may be able to sleep better. In addition, in case you decide to *send* the letter, your last (polite, factual, well-organized) draft will be more effective if early drafts have helped you deal with your feelings.

As you decide whether to send the letter, you may worry whether a direct approach to the offender will cause that person to retaliate. This is an important question to consider, but in North American society a well-prepared, direct approach to an offender may actually be the option least likely to result in retaliation. Remember that most people in this culture would rather hear about a problem directly, and not from a third party.

If you send the letter you should keep a copy; this is likely to help in dealing with the situation if there should be retaliation or if the offense recurs. Letters like this can “help to build evidence.” You may not be able to *prove* that an offense took place. But if you send a letter you can prove that you *thought* the offense took place and that you took a civil, responsible, private action to get the offense to stop.

A letter can be used by anyone who feels unreasonably offended, intimidated or harassed. It is particularly useful where people's backgrounds are different. For example energetic managers may offend older people, with allusions to age, without really understanding the offense. Ethnic slurs, religious slurs, anti-gay jokes, poking fun at the disabled, racist behavior and sexual harassment are all problems where a letter may help.

Letters have been used effectively by non-technical people who feel that "the computniks are sneering at them" and vice versa; so also with smokers vs. non-smokers. A letter may help you to deal with the garage that messed up your car. (A letter may also be a useful *response* to someone who has written you a letter of complaint if you need to present your side of the story in a polite, factual way.)

I do not recommend a "form" letter. Sometimes a brief note is better among friends. Whatever the case, the letter should fit the particular situation exactly.

I do recommend three parts to a note or letter. The first is an objective statement: "These are the facts as I perceive them." No feelings, judgments or opinions belong in this section. (This section may be hard to write even after many drafts. If you plan to send the letter, consider asking some trustworthy person to help you get the first section down to just facts. One test for a "fact" is whether it could have been recorded on audiotape or video tape.) In serious cases it may help for the first section to be quite long and very detailed. It must be scrupulously accurate, to be effective (and fair). The first section should not use euphemisms. It should be very matter of fact. If you are not sure whether a statement is factual, and want to include it, then say, "I believe (this happened)." "I think (this was the case)."

The second section is for opinions and feelings. "This is how the facts as I know them make me feel." This is the appropriate place for a statement of damages if any: "I feel I can no longer work with you." "I was not able to work effectively for the following two weeks." "I felt terrible about what you did."

Finally you should state clearly what you think should happen next, and, if appropriate, you can ask for a specific remedy. "I ask that our relationship be on a purely professional basis from now on." "I want a chance to go over my work with you again and to reconsider my evaluation (grade)." "Since I was unable to go on this sales trip because of your behavior, I want immediate assignment to the next trip." Sometimes you might wish to request a sum of money, if that is an appropriate remedy.

Many people ask if a letter really should be the first or the only attempt to deal with offensive behavior. Of course the answer depends on the people and the problem, and it depends what you want out of the situation. Criminal acts may better be brought to the attention of supervisors and/or the courts. Those routes might also be the best if you believe "that the offender should pay for what he or she did." At the other end of the spectrum you might wish to draft a letter — and then not send it. (You could also consider forgetting an incident in the spirit of tolerance of diversity.) Also, many people prefer to try talking with an offender before sending a letter, and there are many ways to do this effectively. Or you can talk with the offender after giving the letter to him or her.

A letter may be an especially effective choice when verbal remonstrance has been ignored. It can be especially useful with sexual harassment, with offenders who believe that "no" means "maybe" or "yes." A letter may work well in situations where an offender seems to have no idea of the pain being caused, that is, for people who "just don't get it." Writing a letter may be particularly helpful when an offended person fears to come forward because she or he lacks conclusive proof of the offense, or where the offended person wishes to avoid the situation of "his word against mine." Letters are useful in addition to the hope of stopping offensive behavior; they provide more evidence for management or a court to take action if necessary. For example a letter can provide evidence that you indeed found a certain behavior offensive. Letters are especially effective in dealing with very powerful people where a junior person otherwise has little leverage or fears retaliation. Writing a letter may provide hope of ending harassment when you wish to avoid public exposure, and to protect your privacy, if, for example, "all you want is for the harassment to stop."

Letters are especially useful where a school or corporation has well-drafted policies against (all forms of) harassment. They work best where there are responsible grievance counselors to help in sorting out alternatives and in drafting letters. They may however be written anywhere by any responsible person seeking in an orderly way to stop offensive behavior. A letter may be a good choice when you particularly wish to be scrupulously fair, (because no supervisor need see the letter). And letters often work well in union situations, for example, worker with co-worker.

Once the letter is written, your actually sending the letter to an offender should be carefully weighed against other alternatives. As you think about this option, remember that once the letter is sent, that copy belongs to the recipient, who then has control over it. The recipient may tell other people, and may write you back to “set the record straight.” Would that be OK? Should you instead send a formal complaint letter to a supervisor? Should you now go talk with a trusted colleague, or personal or legal counselor? Would you prefer to talk with a family friend or your spouse?

Sending a letter is an option that may protect your privacy, avoid retaliation, and get offensive behavior to stop. Being able to prove that you sent a letter may provide you with more evidence, if needed. However letter-writing is not certain to work and you will want to consider other options carefully. If you want your letter to be a private communication, I usually do not recommend sending copies to third persons, since they may decide to act on the matter—unless you do indeed wish them to take action.

If you decide to bring a *formal* complaint, then revise your letter as a grievance, and address it to the department head or higher supervisor of the offender (or to another appropriate person). Either way, be sure to keep a copy of the letter, and proof that you sent it, (the statement of a friend who watched you deliver it, a registration receipt, or whatever made sense for this letter). These proofs may be needed for evidence.

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