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Modified from Source: <http://www.nichcy.org/pubs/parent/pa9txt.htm>

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## Communicating Questions or Concerns through Letters

Throughout your child's school years, there is always a need to communicate with school: teachers, administrators, and others concerned with your child's education. There are also times when the school needs to communicate with you. This is particularly true when your child is receiving special education services. Some of this communication is informal, such as phone calls, comments in your child's notebook, a chat when picking your child up from school, or at a school function. Other forms of communication are more formal and need to be written down. If you have a concern or a specific request, UM PAGE suggests that you write a letter to the appropriate teacher or administrator.

Letters provide both you and the school with a record of ideas, concerns, and suggestions. Putting your thoughts on paper gives you the opportunity to take as long as you need to:

- state your concerns,
- think over what you've written,
- make changes, and
- have someone else read over the letter and make suggestions.

Letters also give the teacher or administrator on the receiving end the opportunity to go over what's been suggested or discussed. A lot of confusion and misunderstanding can be avoided by writing down thoughts and ideas. UM PAGE suggests when you write a letter that you always keep a copy for yourself.

Writing letters is a skill. Each letter you write will differ according to the situation, the person to whom you are writing, and the issues you are discussing.

### **In general, what do I say in my letter?**

When writing any business letter, it is important to keep it short and to the point. First, start by asking yourself the following questions and state the answers in your letter:

- Why am I writing?
- What are my specific concerns?
- What are my questions?
- What would I like the person to do about this situation?
- What sort of response do I want: a letter, a meeting, a phone call, or something else?

Each letter you write should include the following basic information:

- Put the date on your letter.
- Give your child's full name and the name of your child's main teacher or current class placement.
- Say what you want, rather than what you don't want. Keep it simple.
- Give your address and a daytime phone number where you can be reached.
- Always end your letter with a "thank you."

### **What are some other tips to keep in mind?**

You want to make a good impression so that the person reading your letter will understand your question, concern, or request. Remember, this person may not know you, your child, or your child's situation. Keep the tone of your letter pleasant and businesslike. Give the facts without letting anger, frustration, blame, or other negative emotions creep in. Some letter-writing tips include:

- After you write your first draft, put the letter aside for a day or two. Then look at it again and revise it with fresh eyes.
- Read your letter as though you are the person receiving it. Is your question, concern, or request clear? Have you included the important facts? Does your letter ramble on and on? Is it likely to offend, or is the tone businesslike?
- Have someone else read your letter for you. Is your reason for writing clear? Can the reader tell what you are asking for? Can your letter be improved?
- Use spell check and grammar check on the computer. Or, if you don't have one, ask someone reliable to edit your letter before you send it.
- Keep a copy for your records.

### **How long will it take to get an answer to my letter?**

Depending upon the nature of your question or concern, most teachers or administrators will reply to you within five days or less. If you have not heard from the school within five days of sending your letter, phone the office to make sure the school received your letter. Ask when you can expect an answer. If you have asked for a meeting or other services that require coordinating with several other people, it may take some time to do this.

If you need a letter answered in less than five days, let the school know that you have sent or are delivering a letter and need a response as soon as possible or by a specific date. That way, the teacher or administrator can try to get you a quick response.

### **Following the "Chain of Command"**

When writing a letter, be sure to send it to the appropriate teacher or administrator. Depending on the question or concern, administrators or gifted support teachers may or may not be involved. **Always write directly to the teacher or administrator involved with the question or concern. The appropriate chain of command is teacher, then principal, then Director of Special Education.** If it is appropriate, you may "cc" a copy of your letter to additional administrators or the gifted support teachers. For example, if you write to the teacher about a problem, you may choose to send a copy to the principal. If other teachers are directly involved with the question or concern, you may "cc" them as well. This follows the "chain of command." It also lets people involved know your concerns and that you are taking steps to get answers to your questions or to resolve your concerns. **Not following the "chain of command" may cause unnecessary complications and slow down the response to your letter.**

## Sample Letter: Discussing a Concern

Today's Date (include month, day, and year)

Your Name  
Street Address  
City, State, Zip Code  
Daytime telephone number

Name of Teacher or Principal  
Name of School  
Street Address  
City, State, Zip Code

Dear Teacher or Principal's name,

In this paragraph say who you are, give your child's full name, and his or her current class placement. Say something positive about your child's situation here, before you state your reason for writing.

BRIEFLY, explain why you are writing. Give *relevant* history and facts that support your concerns. (For example, your 3rd grader is struggling in school and you want to ask for help. You might say that your child's school work has been getting worse throughout the year. That fact is relevant. Talking about something from your child's infancy probably isn't.)

In this paragraph state what you would like to have happen or what you would like to see changed. You may BRIEFLY say what you would *not* like, or what has been tried and not worked. However, spend most of this paragraph saying what you want.

Say what type of response you would prefer. For instance, do you need to meet with someone, do you want a return letter, or a phone call?

Finally, give your daytime telephone number and state that you look forward to hearing from the person soon or give a date ("Please respond by the 15th"). End the letter with "Thank you for your attention to this matter."

Sincerely,  
Your name

cc: Principal