

Audronė Raškauskienė
Ramutė Žemaitienė

prieš egzaminą Letter Writing for Exams



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Preface

About the Book

Letter Writing for Exams is intended as a handbook for students who plan to take the National School Leaving Exam of English. The book helps students to prepare for the writing part of the exam, specifically, for writing a letter.

Letter Writing for Exams is equally suitable for an in-class situation with a teacher and for self-study. The book takes students step by step from improving letter writing skills to completing exam tasks. The experience gained will boost students' confidence during the actual exam and will raise the score for the Writing part.

The rationale for this book is the description of English language proficiency levels and the description of language competences provided in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEFR)¹, *National Curriculum (Vidurinio ugdymo bendrosios programos: kalbos)*² and the description of the writing part of the exam in the *Syllabus of the National School Leaving Exam of Foreign Languages (Užsienio kalbos [anglų, prancūzų, rusų, vokiečių] brandos egzamino programa)*³. In the exam, students are required to demonstrate their English language ability at levels B1 and B2 according to CEFR.

As indicated in the *National Curriculum*⁴ and in the *Syllabus of the National School Leaving Exam of Foreign Languages*, the minimum requirement for the letter is at least 80 words in approximately 30 minutes.⁵

Exam letter is evaluated according to the assessment criteria given in the table below:

Letter Writing Assessment Criteria and Weighting ⁶		
Task response/content (40%)	Structure and organisation (30%)	Language use (30%)
The candidate addresses the topic, communicates the message and uses relevant examples and details with an adequate number of words.	The candidate uses adequate paragraphing and organises ideas logically, achieves unity and coherence and uses adequate letter layout.	The candidate uses a wide range of grammatical and lexical structures with accuracy, correct punctuation and spelling and adequate language register.

Organisation of the Book

The book consists of **two** units: **Unit 1 Informal (Personal) Letter** and **Unit 2 Semi-Formal Letter**. Each unit is a self-contained lesson, which is composed of the following sections: *Letter Writing Skills*, *Letter Writing Practice*, *Language Skills*, *Timed Writing*, *Progress Evaluation* and *Useful Online Sources*.

Letter Writing Skills. Working with Unit 1, students will improve such letter writing skills as planning and organising an informal (personal) letter, writing about a personal experience, giving news, giving and asking for advice and using an adequate language register. Working with Unit 2, students will learn to plan and organise a semi-formal letter, give and ask for information and use an adequate language register.

Letter Writing Practice. Each *Letter Writing Practice* section provides sample letters for analysis and activities for letter writing practice. Using the provided criteria, students learn to evaluate sample letters and the letters they write themselves.

Language Skills. Students build their vocabulary as well as improve sentence skills and grammar.

Timed Writing. Students practise writing a letter within the time limits and self-evaluate it. The *Timed Writing* section aims at creating an exam-like environment and prepares students to write under time pressure. The experience gained boosts students' confidence and performance during the actual exam.

Progress Evaluation. The self-evaluation checklist helps students assess their progress in letter writing skills and their ability to complete the letter writing task.

Useful Online Sources. At the end of each unit, students will find a list of suggested free online resources (video lectures, interactive exercises and helpful study materials) for further self-study.

! In case the provided link is no longer available online, enter the keywords of the entry and you will find a similar useful online source.

Explanation of Symbols

The following symbols appear throughout the units:



The light bulb indicates a theoretical overview.



The flag draws the student's attention to useful tips on letter writing.



The letter sign indicates a sample letter.



The exclamation mark draws the student's attention to an important aspect of writing or a rule to remember.



The cloud indicates brainstorming activities.



The pencil sign indicates writing practice activities.



The clock indicates timed writing.

Answer Key

The answer key is provided online at www.sviesa.lt/atsakymai/LetterWritingforExams.pdf.

Acknowledgements

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Key Points

Letter writing skills

- Features of an informal (personal) letter
- Organising an informal (personal) letter
- Planning and writing an informal (personal) letter

Letter writing practice

- Writing about personal experience
- Giving news

Helpful tips

Language skills

- Vocabulary building: expressing preferences
- Improving sentence skills: achieving sentence clarity
- Improving grammar: describing hypothetical situations

Timed writing

Progress evaluation

Useful online sources



Letter Writing Skills



Features of an Informal (Personal) Letter

In the Writing part of the School Leaving Exam of English, you may be asked to write an informal letter or e-mail.⁷ Informal letters are written to friends, relatives and people you know very well and are on friendly terms. Personal letters are written in an informal, friendly tone. Following are the features of informal language:

- grammatically incomplete sentences (e.g. omitted pronouns: *Looking forward to seeing you*)
- question forms to make the letter sound like a conversation (e.g. *We're meeting on Friday evening, aren't we?*)
- active voice (e.g. *Tom wrote a letter.* The same sentence in the Passive: *A letter was written by Tom.*)
- phrasal verbs (e.g. *hand in, turn up*)
- contracted forms (e.g. *we'll, I'm, don't*)
- personal pronouns (e.g. *I, we, you*)
- emotional language and exclamations (e.g. *Great! Wonderful!*)
- humour, idioms, colloquial English (e.g. *I'm full of beans, I reckon*)
- informal punctuation use (e.g. the use of dash (—), ellipsis (...), question mark (?) and exclamation mark (!))⁸

✓ • "How to Write a Letter" by Garrison Keillor, <http://fs.huntingdon.edu/english/johnson.michelle/Keillor.pdf>

✓ • Writing Letters: formal & informal English, *engVid*, <https://goo.gl/riRbHy>

! Even though personal letters are written in an informal tone, the level of language formality largely depends on the nature of the relationship.⁹ As you will be writing a letter in an exam situation, mind that you have to be polite and respectful to your addressee.

Organising an Informal Letter

A personal letter includes the following parts:

- a greeting or salutation (*Dear / Hello / Hi* followed by the addressee's first name or just *Hello! / Hi! / Hey!* (e.g. *Dear Emma, Hello / Hi Emma*, etc.))
- an opening statement (e.g. *How are you? How is life?*, etc.)
- the introduction in which you clearly state the reason for writing (e.g. *I thought I'd drop you a line...*, etc.)
- the main body in which you develop the topic of the letter; it is recommended to develop each main point in a separate paragraph
- the conclusion in which you write your closing remarks, express your wish for something to be done, etc.
- a closing statement (e.g. *Send my love to...*, *Write back soon, I can't wait to hear from you*, etc.)
- an informal ending or signing off (e.g. *Wishes, / Love, / Kindly*, etc.)
- the signature (your first name, e.g. *Michael* or your nickname, e.g. *Mike*)¹⁰
- PS (abbreviation for a Latin word *post scriptum* meaning *written after*) is added below the signature if the sender wants to give some additional information¹¹

✓ • Writing in English – How to Start Any Letter, *engVid* (6:39), <https://goo.gl/tbk6Tx>
• An informal letter or email © UPV (5:09), <https://goo.gl/L4k8yn>
• IELTS Writing Lesson 2 – General Task 1 Informal Letter, *IELTSChannel* (3:56), <https://goo.gl/jCwMEU>
• IELTS General Module Task 1 Writing an Informal Letter for a High Score PART 5, *GeneralIELTSHelp* (11:47), <https://goo.gl/6NnpnB>

For more examples of greetings, opening and closing statements, and signing off phrases, see Table 1.

Table 1. Useful phrases to start and end an informal (personal) letter

Greeting / Salutation	Opening Statement
Dear John, Dear Emma and John, Dear all, Hello / Hi John, Hello! / Hi! Dear Mum / Dad, Dear Aunt Julia, Dear Uncle George,	How are you? How have you been? How is life? How is everyone? How is your family / work? How are your studies? I thought I'd drop you a line to ask about... I hope you're OK. Thanks a million for your letter. It was very good to hear from you again. I'm sorry I haven't written sooner. I'm sorry it's been so long since I got in touch. Just imagine, ...! Have you heard that...?
Closing Statement	Signing off
Looking forward to seeing you. I can't wait to see you soon. I can't wait to hear from you. I hope to be hearing from you soon. See you soon. Send my love to... Give my regards / best wishes / love to... Don't forget to write! I must finish now because... So, that's all my news. What's happening at your end?	Yours, Take care, See you soon! Take care and see you soon. Your friend... Best wishes, Kindly, Love, Lots of love, Hugs and kisses, Miss you, With love from... ¹²

! Remember that in the National School Leaving Exam, you should leave your letter without your signature, i.e. without writing your first name or your nickname.

Note that there are differences in punctuating the greeting and signing off and in writing dates in British and American English.

In British English, use a comma (,) after the greeting (e.g. *Dear John*,) and after the signing off (e.g. *Regards*, *Tomas*). See Example A in Table 2.

In American English, use a colon (:) after the greeting (e.g. *Dear John:*) and a comma (,) after the signing off (e.g. *Regards, Tomas*). See Example B in Table 2.

In American English, the so called **open punctuation**, i.e. no punctuation mark can also be used after the salutation (e.g. *Dear John*) and after the signing off¹³ (e.g. *Regards Tomas*). See Example C in Table 2.

In writing the date in British English, write **day-month-year**. For example: 30 June 2017 (Example A in Table 2). In writing the date in American English, write **month-day-year**. For example: June 30, 2017 (Example B and Example C in Table 2).

! Whatever English language variant you choose, British English or American English, always be consistent.

Table 2. Punctuating informal letters

Example A: British English	Example B: American English	Example C: American English
<p>Saulės g. 225 LT-12345 Vilnius</p> <p>30 June 2017</p> <p>Dear John,</p> <p>Kindly, Tomas</p>	<p>Saulės g. 225 LT-12345 Vilnius</p> <p>June 30, 2017</p> <p>Dear John:</p> <p>Kindly, Tomas</p>	<p>Saulės g. 225 LT-12345 Vilnius</p> <p>June 30, 2017</p> <p>Dear John</p> <p>Kindly Tomas</p>

In real life letters, you write your own address and the date (but not your name) at the top right-hand corner of the page and then start the letter on the left-hand side.

! Remember that in the National School Leaving Exam, you are not required to write your address and the date at the start of your letter; make sure that you follow the instructions carefully.

Letter Layout

When writing an informal letter for the exam, pay attention to the letter format: you may use either a **block** or a **semi-block** format.

Using a **block** format, all parts of the letter are aligned to the left margin of the page skipping a line between paragraphs (Example A, Table 3).

Using a **semi-block** format, the greeting is left-aligned, the beginning of each paragraph is indented while the signing off and the signature are right-aligned. A line can be skipped between paragraphs (Example B, Table 3).¹⁴

Table 3: Informal letter format[illegible]

Coherence

In order to make your letter coherent and easy to read, you are supposed to

- develop each main point in a separate paragraph
- arrange ideas from general to specific
- arrange ideas from the least important to the most important or vice versa
- use time order (chronological presentation of events)
- use transitional expressions

For more on coherence, see Unit 1 in *Essay Writing* by Raškauskienė, A., I. Ragaišienė, and R. Žemaitienė. Kaunas: Šviesa, 2015, 12-13.



Task 1 Read a letter by the American writer and Nobel laureate John Steinbeck that he wrote to his son. Identify the structural parts of the letter.

You can also read the computer written version of the letter at the end of the book (Appendix I).

New York
November 10, 1958

Dear Thom:

We had your letter this morning. I will answer it from my point of view and of course Elaine will from hers.

First — if you are in love — that's a good thing — that's about the best thing that can happen to anyone. Don't let anyone make it small or light to you.

Second — There are several kinds of love. One is a selfish, mean, grasping, egotistical thing which uses love for self-importance. This is the ugly and crippling kind. The other is an outpouring of everything good in you — of kindness and consideration and respect — not only the social respect of manners but the greater respect which is recognition of another person as unique and valuable. The first kind can make you sick and small and weak but the second can release in you strength, and courage and goodness and even wisdom you didn't know you had.

You say this is not puppy love. If you feel so deeply — of course it isn't puppy love. But I don't think you were asking me what you feel. You know better than anyone. What you wanted me to help you with is what to do about it — and that I can tell you. Glory in it for one thing and be very glad and grateful for it.

The object of love is the best and most beautiful. Try to live up to it.

If you love someone — there is no possible harm in saying so — only you must remember that some people are very shy and sometimes the saying must take that shyness into consideration.

Girls have a way of knowing or feeling what you feel, but they usually like to hear it also. It sometimes happens that what you feel is not returned for one reason or another — but that does not make your feeling less valuable and good.

Lastly, I know your feeling because I have it and I'm glad you have it.

We will be glad to meet Susan. She will be very welcome. But Elaine will make all such arrangements because that is her province and she will be very glad to. She knows about love too and maybe she can give you more help than I can.

And don't worry about losing. If it is right, it happens — The main thing is not to hurry. Nothing good gets away.

Love,
Fa

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Planning and Writing an Informal (Personal) Letter

During the exam, you will have approximately 30 minutes to write an informal (personal) letter.¹⁵ To complete the task successfully, it is a good idea to use a five-stage plan:

- Stage 1: Analysing the task (approx. 1 minute)
- Stage 2: Making an outline (approx. 5 minutes)
- Stage 3: Writing the text of the letter (approx. 14 minutes)
- Stage 4: Revising (approx. 5 minutes)¹⁶
- Stage 5: Transferring the letter onto the answer sheet (approx. 5 minutes)

While practising for the exam, you may take more time for each of the stages.

Stage 1: Analysing the task

Before starting to write a letter, read the task carefully: identify the topic and underline the key words to understand

- whom the letter is addressed to
- why you have to write it
- what you have to write in it

You may be required to do the following:

- **Describe.** You may have to describe somebody / something by answering *who / what, where, when, how, how often, what kind*, etc.
- **Narrate.** You may have to tell about an interesting or important event or experience.
- **Explain.** You may be asked to explain *why* you like somebody / something or *why* somebody / something is important to you.¹⁷
- **Thank / ask for a favour**, etc. You may be required to thank a friend or relative for something they have done for you or ask for a favour.

✓ For more on description and narration, see Unit 3 and Unit 4 in *Essay Writing* by Raškauskienė, A., I. Ragaišienė, and R. Žemaitienė. Kaunas: Šviesa, 2015, 30-39; 46-54.

Imagine that you have to write a letter following the exam task below.

Your cousin and her family are coming to visit you. Write a letter to the cousin. In your letter:

- ☐ refer to the time you met your cousin last;
- ☐ describe what you plan to do together;
- ☐ express your feelings about your cousin's upcoming visit.

Your analysis may look like this:

Topic: *cousin's upcoming visit*

Your cousin and her family are coming to visit you. Write a letter to the cousin. In your letter:

- ☐ refer to the time you met your cousin last;
- ☐ describe what you plan to do together;
- ☐ express your feelings about your cousin's upcoming visit.

Thus, to complete the task, you have to refer to the time you met your cousin last, describe what you plan to do together when your cousin comes and express your excitement about that.

Stage 2: Making an outline

Making an outline helps you to organise the ideas in a logical order and achieve coherence in your writing.¹⁸

To make an outline of the text of your letter, take the main points from the exam task and brainstorm ideas.

Your outline may look as follows:

Topic: *cousin's upcoming visit*

Main idea 1: Refer to the time you met your cousin last:

- Detail: *two years ago*
- Detail: *when in London*

Main idea 2: Describe what you plan to do together:

- Detail: *visit to the Museum of Devils*
- Detail: *different types of devil sculptures*

Main idea 3: Express your feelings about your cousin’s upcoming visit:

- Detail: *very excited*
- Detail: *impatiently waiting*

After making an outline, proceed to write your letter.

Stage 3: Writing the text of the letter

Completing the exam task above, include the following points in your letter:

- a greeting or salutation
- an opening statement
- the introduction clearly stating the reason for writing
- the main body (main ideas and details from your outline)
- the conclusion in which you write your closing remarks, express your wish for something to be done, etc.
- a closing statement
- an informal ending or signing off

Stage 4: Revising

After writing your letter, evaluate your letter according to the *Letter Writing Assessment Criteria* and see whether you

- address the topic
- communicate the message
- use relevant details
- use an adequate number of words (at least 80 words)
- use adequate paragraphing (have at least 3 paragraphs)
- organise ideas logically
- use appropriate transitional expressions to link ideas between and within paragraphs
- use an adequate letter layout
- use a wide range of grammatical and lexical structures with accuracy
- use informal language
- use correct punctuation and spelling

Stage 5: Transferring the letter onto the answer sheet

Transfer your letter onto the answer sheet neatly and legibly; otherwise, you risk losing marks.

- ✓
- IELTS Invitation Letter for GT Writing Task 1, *IELTS Liz*, <http://ieltsliz.com/ielts-invitation-letter/>
 - IELTS Invitation Letter for GT Writing Task 1, *IELTS Liz*, <http://ieltsliz.com/ielts-letter-sample-answer/>
 - An informal email, LearnEnglish Teens, *British Council*, <http://learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org/skills/writing-skills-practice/informal-email>
 - How to write an informal letter or email for New FCE exam, *English Exam Help*, <http://englishexamhelp.com/how-to-write-an-informal-letter-or-email-for-new-fce-exam/>
 - Free Sample IELTS Letter - 007 - Thanking & Inviting a Friend, *Good Luck IELTS*, <http://www.goodluckielts.com/sample-IELTS-letter-007.html>
 - Free Sample IELTS Letter - 008 - Describing a New Job, *Good Luck IELTS*, <http://www.goodluckielts.com/sample-IELTS-letter-008.html>

Task 2 Read a sample letter written using the outline on p. 12 and indicate the structural parts of the letter.

30 June 2017

Dear Ruth,

It was very nice to hear from you again. I'm so happy to know that your Mum and Dad and your little brother are also coming to visit us in Lithuania.

It's hard to realise that it's been two years since we met, isn't it? I often remember the fun we had when I was visiting you in London. I'll never forget the life-size wax replicas of famous people and celebrities at Madame Tussauds. But nothing can beat the figures of my favourite Star Wars heroes: Luke, Princess Leia and Darth Vader. Jabba the Hutt was the most impressive, though. Awesome!

In return, I will take you to the Museum of Devils when you come. It houses a huge collection of sculptures and carvings of devils from all over the world. Some devils look scary and some look funny. Some are just art objects and some can be used as walking sticks, pipes and nutcrackers. You'll see for yourself.

I'm dying to see you all and especially your little brother whom I've only seen in the pics on Facebook. He looks so cute!

Impatiently waiting for your arrival!

Love,
Rasa

Task 3 Evaluate the letter above according to the following criteria. Tick ✓ the appropriate box.

Letter evaluation checklist	1	The layout is appropriate for the letter.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
	2	The letter has an appropriate greeting / salutation.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
	3	The letter has an adequate number of words (at least 80 words).	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
	4	The letter has adequate paragraphing (at least 3 paragraphs).	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
	5	The letter addresses the topic.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
	6	The letter has relevant details.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
	7	Transitional expressions link ideas between and within paragraphs.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
	8	The letter is revised for grammar.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
	9	The letter is revised for spelling.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>
	10	The letter is revised for punctuation.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

Task 4 Read the task below, identify the topic and underline the key words.

You have a quad bike that you no longer want. You plan to sell it. Write a letter to your friend.

In your letter:

☐ explain why you no longer want it;

☐ describe your quad bike;

☐ explain why your friend may want it.

Topic: _____