Tips to Writing An Effective Critical Letter

You can you write a critical letter that does not harm a working relationship if you follow these 5+ steps

Have you ever tried to write a letter or email that includes negative and critical information? Not just a letter to a company complaining about their customer service, but a letter to a colleague or employee? Some people express themselves better in writing and some through spoken words, but putting words in writing often has more weight. Perhaps it has more weight because you you have more opportunity to invest thought into the written word before presenting your opinion.

A 5 step process for writing an effective critical letter

Step 1 – Do not write the letter when you are upset.

As a matter of fact, do not write it when you are hungry or if you recently had a negative interaction with anyone. Sit down in a space that is calming with little distraction. Prepare your head space in such a way that will allow you to be informative, not critical.

Step 2 – Identify the goal of your communication.

If your goal is to improve something, then focus on what you want to improve and how it will be of benefit to all. By taking the time to think about the desired outcome, you can better prepare your thoughts and say what needs to be said.

Step 3 – List the critical information you want to communicate.

Write each point simply. Distill the information down as much as you can and still make your point. Look for and remove any redundancies. However, do not present bullet points in the letter. A list may come across as overbearing. Craft sentences around the points that include relevant information and useful examples.

Step 4 – Curtail your tone:

In Canada most communication is subtle and indirect with a desire to avoid conflict. Keep your tone neutral and polite. Try statements such as *'I would like to offer you some information you may not be aware of'* or *'information you may find useful'*. Continue by saying "*I have noticed that you have been doing X this way, you may not*

have known but we normally do it this way . . . . I hope this example will be useful . . . . ‘. This is where you may then add specific illustrations with corrective feedback. Also avoid platitudes such as ‘don’t take this personally’ or ‘I do not mean to be critical’. As soon as you say these that is what the person’s attention is drawn to.

Step 5 – Pause before you send:

Always walk away for a few minutes, changing your environment. When you return re-read the letter out-loud when possible and even run it by another person for their response (you can leave off the name of the person to whom the letter is directed). Keep in mind your goal is to be informative, helpful and to solve a problem, not to create one. Ask yourself if you have offered solutions, not only pointed out a problem.

A Final Tip: *Remember to be respectful throughout. Address the letter to the person somewhat formally by saying ‘Dear’ ‘To’, ‘Hi’ or ‘Greetings’ (depending on your relationship and personal style) and then the person’s name. Close your letter by saying you are available to further discuss any of the items or happy to answer any questions. Sign off using a salutation such as ‘Sincerely’, ‘Respectfully’ or ‘Yours Truly’.*

You can be critical of another person but that does not mean you have to focus on negativity. Keeping your goal to solve a problem in mind can be a useful approach to take.