

The Art of Writing Letters

by Pamela Wright, MA, MSW

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You write letters to request information, request action, provide information or describe an event, decline a request, and express appreciation.

In this article, you will learn about two approaches to letter writing, the **Blame Approach** and the **Story-Telling Approach**. You will learn the difference between business letters and therapeutic letters - and why you should **never send therapeutic letters to the school**.

Because you want your letters to create a good first impression, read our companion article, [12 Rules for Writing Great Letters](#).

We strongly recommend that you read the [original Letter to the Stranger](#) by Pete Wright and Janie Bowman. You will meet the panicked parents who wrote an angry letter to the school. After a cooling-off period, the parents wrote a very different letter. The original [Letter to the Stranger](#) teaches you how strong emotions affect people -- especially parents. You will also meet "the Stranger" and learn how he reacted to these two letters.

Letter Writing and the Need to DO SOMETHING!

When parents fire off a letter to the school, they are usually in the middle of a crisis that involves their child. At that moment, they want to **DO SOMETHING**. They may be trying to right a wrong or protect their child from harm. Sometimes, parents write angry letters after a series of bad experiences or incidents that have occurred over a period months or years.

Before you send a strongly worded letter to the school, it is important for you to keep several things in mind. **First**, after you send a letter to the school, it is out of your hands forever. **You can never change it!**

Second, your letter will be read by strangers. Schools are bureaucracies. In many cases, important decisions will be made by administrators who are a level or two above your contact person. These administrators don't know you or your child. They don't know the "history" behind your letter.

Third, no one will wade through a long letter to a nugget of gold. This means that you have to capture the reader's interest and attention within the first few sentences. If you don't capture the reader's interest quickly, the reader will skim a page or two and put your letter away.

Fourth, your letter is a personal statement about you and your situation. What are you saying about yourself if you give in to the urge to **DO SOMETHING** and write an angry, threatening, or demanding letter? The decision-making strangers who make decisions in the school bureaucracy don't know or care that this was the last straw or that the letter is the culmination of many negative experiences. A letter gives you an opportunity to make an impression and tell your side of the story. You need to think about the impression you want to make on the stranger. Do you want the stranger to see you as an angry, negative complainer? Or, do you want the stranger to see you as a rational, thoughtful parent who is expressing valid concerns?

Two Approaches to Writing Letters: The Blame Approach v. the Story Telling Approach

The Blame Approach

At the beginning of this section on Tactics, you read about Marc's situation. You saw the parents' original angry letter and their subsequent Letter to the Stranger. Let's look at letters written by two fathers. The first letter was written by a father after he attended an IEP meeting for his daughter.

Dear Dr. Smith:

You asked that I advise you about my objections to the IEP that your "professional" staff of educators wrote for my daughter. Despite my own lack of training, I found that the IEP developed by your staff was absolutely preposterous. Let me share a few observations with you.

Your staff **FAILED** to include anyone on the IEP team who thoroughly understands my daughter's background, including her current teachers.

Your staff **FAILED** to perform any observation on my daughter before developing the IEP.

Your staff **FAILED** to develop an appropriate IEP because they failed to include information from the new testing, and relied on outdated testing completed nearly a year ago.

Your staff **FAILED** to develop an IEP that targeted her specific needs and unique abilities.

Your staff **FAILED** to develop an IEP that includes objective criteria to measure progress or lack of progress.

Your staff **FAILED** to develop an IEP that included any evaluation procedures to measure progress, as related to the annual goals and objectives that your staff wrote.

(This list continues for several pages.)

Given their years of training and experience, I would expect your staff to be capable of writing a simple IEP. Although I have no training whatsoever in how to write IEPs, even I can see how inadequate this document is.

As I examine the IEP developed by your staff, I can only conclude that they are incompetent and inept. This IEP proves that your staff are incapable of teaching my daughter who is smarter than your entire team.

Sincerely,

Bob Bombastic

What is your first reaction to this letter? Do you understand why Bob wrote the letter? What does he want the school to do? Do you understand his position? Do you agree with him? Or, did you have a different response?

When Bob wrote this letter, he was steamed. He knew he had to give the school system "legal notice" about

his objections to their proposed IEP. Because he felt defensive, he included every conceivable objection to the IEP in his letter – from serious to trivial. Earlier, Bob had been accused of not advising the school system specifically about his objections to their IEP. Bob was going to let that happen again.

Unfortunately, when a stranger (like you) reads Bob's letter, the stranger doesn't know about this history. Bob's letter creates a feeling of sympathy for the people who receive the letter. Why is this?

Most of us have seen people arguing in public. You've probably seen couples arguing or a parent disciplining a child. What was your reaction? If you're like most people, you felt uncomfortable. Maybe you had an even stronger emotional reaction. You didn't like it. You felt sympathy toward the child or adult who was being confronted or humiliated.

People have the same reactions when they read letters.

The Story-Telling Approach

Let's take a look at another letter. This letter was written by another father who just got back from an IEP meeting:

Dear Dr. Smith:

First, let me thank you for allowing me to participate in the development of my daughter's IEP. I appreciate your willingness to meet with me so that I could share my concerns about her and what she needs in her education.

At the IEP meeting last week, your staff was very kind in answering my questions. Their kindness was especially appreciated since I had not met most of the people at the IEP meeting before. I was very sorry that neither of my daughter's teachers could make the meeting. I understood that one teacher was on a field trip and the other teacher had a doctor's appointment.

I had concerns that we did not have enough time to develop an IEP for Carrie. Although 25 minutes was allotted for the IEP meeting, we started more than 10 minutes late. I understand that several earlier IEP meetings ran late. I know that things get very rushed at the end of the year, which makes scheduling these meetings especially difficult.

I was also concerned that we did not have time to discuss the recent testing done on Carrie. You may recall that I had additional testing completed on her two months ago. After I received the test results, I provided you with a copy of the new testing. At that time, I shared concerns with you that Carrie had not made any progress during the two years she's been receiving special education services.

Unfortunately, the results of this testing were not included in the new IEP. The psychologist thought the new test results may have been mislaid. Perhaps this is why the school team gave me an IEP to sign that placed Carrie back into the same program. You will recall that I expressed serious concerns about her IEP and its lack of objective measures and evaluation procedures.

I'm sure you can understand why I did not sign the IEP presented to me at this meeting. Given the rushed atmosphere and general confusion at that time, I thought it would be better to

schedule another IEP meeting later, so that we can discuss these issues in depth. I thought the IEP team needed to have a chance to review the new testing before trying to write an IEP. I'm including another copy of the evaluation with this letter.

Please check with your staff and send me some times so that we can get together for a productive meeting. If you have any questions, please call or write.

Sincerely,

Jim Manners

What is your first reaction to Jim's letter? Do you know why Jim wrote the letter? Do you know what he is asking for? What does Jim want? Do you understand his position?

When you read Jim's letter, did you realize that his letter dealt with the same facts as Bob's letter? Both letters describe the same IEP meeting for a child. Both letters mention several serious violations made by the school when they developed the child's IEP. In both cases, the parent was presented with an IEP that pre-determined the child's program and placement. The parents had little or no real input into the IEP and were expected to sign it. In both cases, the child was tested by an independent evaluator. In both cases, the new test results (which showed minimal progress in the existing program) weren't included in the child's IEP. In both cases, the child's teachers did not attend the IEP meeting.

Your goal is to write diplomatic "Mr. Manners" letters. List the problems but keep your tone pleasant and businesslike. The facts in these letters are important. Jim lays out his facts without blaming or name-calling. If Jim needs to go further – to a mediator, a hearing officer, or a judge, he'll be in good shape.

If Bob has to take his case to an outside decision-maker, he'll be in trouble. Bob's letter is filled with angry, blaming statements. He didn't include any information to help the stranger understand the background. The tone of his letter will alienate any neutral decision-maker – mediator, hearing officer, or judge.

The "Sympathy Factor"

If you're tempted to write an angry letter to the school, realize that you may trigger the Sympathy Factor. This sympathy will not be for you or your child. When people read angry, sarcastic or threatening letters, they have a sympathetic response to the person who receives the letter. This is what happened with Bob's letter.

"Why?" you ask.

At some point in our lives, most of us have received an angry letter. Your letter may have come from a jilted lover, an ex-spouse, an angry relative, a creditor, or the IRS. When you read your letter, you felt threatened, guilty, ashamed, and angry. Later, you filed these negative emotions away in your emotional memory bank.

If you read an angry letter, it will evoke a feeling of sympathy for the recipient. Based on your own experiences, you will think that the recipient didn't deserve to be attacked. Instead, you'll think: "Well, maybe the person made a mistake - but we all make mistakes. After all, no one's perfect." From the perspective of the stranger, the fact that someone makes a mistake doesn't give you an excuse to attack.

First Impressions are Lasting Impressions

In writing letters to the school, you must understand that your letter will be read by people who don't know you. Remember, you are dealing with a bureaucracy – which means that teachers, guidance counselors, and assistant principals probably don't have the authority to make important decisions. You are writing your letter to strangers in the system who do have power.

In your letter, you are introducing yourself to strangers who are also decision-makers. After reading your letter, these strangers will form an impression of you. If their first reaction is negative, they won't be able to accept positive information about you later. You'll have a hard time "rehabilitating" yourself in their eyes.

This is what happened to Bob. After Bob fired off his letter, the school went into a defensive mode. From their perspective, if they gave Bob **anything** he asked for, they would be admitting that he was right – and that they FAILED to educate his child. The school had a different perspective. They didn't agree with the father's analysis - that they FAILED to provide his daughter with an appropriate education. What happened?

The school wrote a pleasant non-committal letter back to Bob. In this letter, they explained that they disagreed with him but were willing to meet with him to resolve their differences. They offered several meeting times. The tone of their letter was pleasant and businesslike. When Bob didn't respond, they filed his letter away. Nothing changed about his daughter's education.

Later, Bob requested a Due Process Hearing. The school district submitted this and several similar letters as exhibits in their case. Why? The school wanted the Hearing Officer to see Bob from their perspective and conclude that he was a jerk. The underlying message was that although Bob was a "difficult parent," they were prepared to provide his daughter with an excellent education. They succeeded!

There is a moral to this story. If the first impression you create is negative, you increase the odds that you will lose the battle and the war. Strangers who read your negative letter will write you off as a "loose cannon." They'll probably feel sorry for your child: "That poor kid. No wonder he has so many problems. Can you imagine how hard it must be to live with such a crazy parent!"

This is **not** the outcome you want.

Example

Let's look at a problem and decide how you can document the problem.

Background. The principal wrote a letter advising that he is suspending your child for three days next week for the offense of being late to class. Earlier, you attended a meeting at the school to develop an IEP. After the principal wrote the letter, the school didn't get around to sending the letter until the day of your meeting. When you went to the IEP meeting, no one mentioned the letter. You didn't know that there **was** a letter. A day later, you receive this letter about suspending your child from school. You're angry that no one mentioned the letter or the suspension during the meeting.

Don't say it!

Instead, write a letter:

Dear School:

On *so and so DATE*, we attended an IEP meeting for our son at the school. Later, on *so and so DATE*,

we received a letter from you. In this letter, you advised us that you are suspending our son from school for three days. This letter was postmarked the same day we attended the IEP meeting and was dated three days earlier.

It seems that either the letter was misdated or you decided not to discuss the suspension with us when we went to school for our meeting.

We were quite confused and are not sure what sense to make of this.

Sincerely,

Mr. and Mrs. Frank

That's all. You don't need to write anything else. You didn't make judgments. What happens next? When a Stranger reads your letter, he or she will think "Good Grief! What jerks!"

You don't belabor the absurdities about how the situation was handled. **You** don't make judgments. Instead, **you lay out facts** by providing enough information that Strangers will be able to "fill in the blanks" with their personal experiences and imagination.

The **Story Telling Approach** is far more powerful and effective than the **Blame Approach**. If you don't judge or attack overtly, you minimize the risk of evoking the Sympathy Response.

"Therapeutic Letters"

Writing letters can be therapeutic. The writing process can help you get things off your chest and deal with frustrations. You can tell THEM whatever you WANT!

NEVER send "therapeutic letters!"

There's a big difference between "therapeutic letters" and business letters. In a business letter, you are writing to make a point, clarify an event, make a request, and create a paper trail. Therapeutic letters can form the basis of a journal or diary. People who go through difficult times often find that a journal or diary helps them during the crisis.

Two approaches to letters, the Blame Approach and the Story-Telling Approach. The Sympathy Factor, importance of first impressions. Difference between business letters and therapeutic letters, you never send therapeutic letters.

12 Rules for Writing Effective Letters

Read [12 Rules for Writing Effective Letters](#). If you follow these Rules, you make it more likely that you will get the relief you want.

1. Before you write a letter, answer WHY and WHAT.
2. First letters are always drafts.
3. Allow time for "cooling off" and revisions.

4. You are always negotiating for services.
5. Never threaten. Never telegraph your punches.
6. Assume that you won't be able to resolve your dispute, that the dispute will escalate, that a special education due process hearing will be held, and that you won't be able to testify or tell your side of the story.
7. Make your problem unique.
8. You ARE writing letters to a Stranger. You are NOT writing letters to the school.
9. You ARE writing business letters. When you write business letters, you DO use tactics and strategy (your brain). You DON'T ventilate anger or frustration (your emotions).
10. NEVER make judgments.
11. You are telling a story. Write your letter chronologically. Don't broach the main issue in the first paragraph of the letter.
12. Write letters that are clear and easy to understand. Make your letters clear, short, alive, and right.

Using Letters to Open the Door to Better Services

Do you want to open the door to better services for your child, or do you want to shoot yourself in the foot and damage your child in the process because your letter backfired?

Now that you have read our primer on writing letters, continue your learning process. In Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy (FETA) read Chapter 22 "Creating Paper Trails," Chapter 23 "How to Write Good Evidence Letters," and Chapter 24 "Writing the 'Letter to the Stranger,'" and the Sample Letters at the end of Chapters 23 and 24. With a little practice, you will become the expert on writing effective and powerful letters.

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Additional Resources

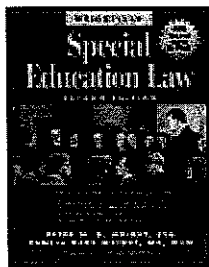
LetterExpert, a web site in Great Britain, offers a unique reference point on writing letters about everything to anybody. Whether you want to complain, send a fan letter, create a love letter, report a crime or deliver some news, this site will help you. Go to:

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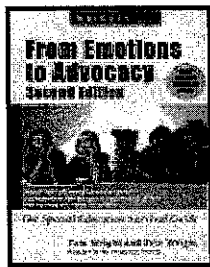
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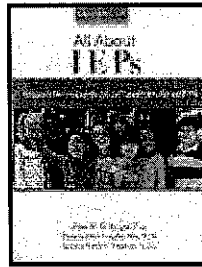
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Paper Trails, Letter Writing & Documentation

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When you advocate for a child, you use logs, calendars, and journals to create paper trails. You write letters to clarify events and what you were told. When you train yourself to write things down, you are taking steps to protect your child's interests.

If you have a dispute with the school, your logs and letters are independent evidence that support your memory. Documents that support your position will help you resolve disputes early.

When you write letters, think about what you want your letter to accomplish. Edit your letters so they make a good impression. When you write a letter, think about the decision-making Stranger who has the power to make things right.

Wrightslaw: From Emotion to Advocacy, 2nd Edition and Wrightslaw: No Child Left Behind include dozens of letters that you can tailor to your circumstances.

Articles

Advice About the 10-Day Notice Letter to the School. Pete Wright answers questions about what should be included in a 10-day notice letter; includes links to "Letters to the Stranger" used in his cases.

Art of Writing Letters. Learn how to use tactics and strategies when you write letters to the school. Learn about the Blame Approach and the Story-Telling Approach to letter writing; the sympathy factor; first impressions; pitfalls; and the powerful decision-making Stranger.

Advocating Through Letter Writing: Summer School Short Course. Summer School is a refresher course in effective advocacy techniques that will include a series of activities (and maybe a quiz or two) to help you prepare for the next school year. This summer, we'll learn how to advocate effectively through letter writing.

12 Rules for Writing Great Letters. If you have a problem with the school or concerns about your child's program, you must document your concerns in writing. This article includes twelve rules for writing letters, along with editing tips.

Advocating Through Letter Writing (PDF). A booklet containing information and tips for parents on advocating for your child through letter writing.

Advocacy Rule #1: Write Things Down When They Happen. **You can't wait until the last minute to prepare documentation.** Documenting events and conversations later is never as effective or accurate as writing things down, in detail, at the time they occur. Here are some tips for parents, teachers, and paraprofessionals.

Using Low-Tech Tools to Create Paper Trails. Good records are important to effective advocacy. Learn how to use logs, calendars and journals to create paper trails; how to document phone calls and meetings.

The Paper Chase: Managing Your Child's Documents. If you have kids with special education needs, you can be overwhelmed by the paperwork in no time. In this article by Massachusetts attorney Bob Crabtree, you

will learn what documents are important and how to organize your child's documents. Learn how to use a log and create documents to prevent problems and get better services for your child.

Preventing Burnout in People Who Help Us. Advice about how to use "thank you" letters to help people avoid burnout by advocate and educational consultant Meredith Warshaw.

Using Story-Telling in Letters to Persuade. See how a father used the story-telling approach of letter writing when he asked the school district to help his son. Do you see Joe through his father's eyes? Do you understand why the parents removed Joe from the public school program? What do you think should be done to help Joe?

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Letters to the Stranger

Writing the "Letter to the Stranger". This is the "Letter to the Stranger" by Janie Bowman and Pete Wright that was originally posted on the ADD Forum. Learn how to make requests that make decision-makers want to help. Meet the pipe-smoking stranger who is looking over your shoulder when you put pen to paper.

Sample "Letters to the Stranger"

Letter to the Stranger: James Brody. This is the letter that James Brody's parents wrote to request a due process hearing. Do you see how the parents told the story of James' education? Pay attention to the use of test scores in the letter. What is your reaction to this letter? After you read the letter, read the decision in James' case.

Letter to the Stranger: Joe James. In this Letter to the Stranger, Joe's father describes Joe and Joe's problems learning to read. Pay attention to your emotional reaction as you read this letter. Do you see Joe through his father's eyes? What is happening to this happy child? What do you believe should be done to help Joe?

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12 Rules for Writing GREAT Letters

by Pamela Wright, MA, MSW

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You write letters to request information, request action, provide information or describe an event, decline a request, and express appreciation.

When you write letters to the school, you want to express concerns and educate your reader about your child's problems.

You want your letters to create a good first impression. This article, **12 Rules for Writing Great Letters**, will help you accomplish your objectives. **12 Rules** is the companion article to [The Art of Writing Letters](#).

1. Before you write a letter, you need answer these questions.

Why? Why am I writing? What am I trying to accomplish?

What? What do I want? What are my goals?

Get three blank sheets of paper.

On the first sheet write "**WHY? Why am I writing this letter?**"

On the second sheet write "**WHAT? What are my goals in writing this letter?**"

On the third sheet write "**Other Thoughts.**"

Brainstorm. Write down your thoughts. Make lists.

Don't worry about writing in sentence or prioritizing. Your goal is to dump your thoughts from your brain onto these sheets of paper. Write down any additional ideas and thoughts on the third sheet of paper. You will write down your important thoughts in less than ten minutes. Do not allow yourself to obsess about details. You are interested in the Big Picture.

2. Your First Letter is Always a Draft

You write letters to:

- (1) make a request
- (2) clarify an event
- (3) decline a request
- (4) express appreciation
- (5) create a paper trail

Some letters have more than one purpose. Because letters you write to schools are so important, you need to do it right.

If you anticipate resistance, you may begin by telling a story to get the reader's interest. Let's see how Kathryn's mother used the story telling method to begin an important letter to the school:

I'd like to share a story about Kathryn with you. This year, when Kathryn turned four, we had a birthday party for her. She looked very grown-up in her pink dress. More than a dozen friends from pre-school and dance class came to her party. You can imagine what this was like.

The children were laughing, singing, shouting, and creating a huge ruckus. We had a big chocolate birthday cake. The children were covered with icing.

As we watched our daughter with her friends, we felt so proud of her. She was laughing, shouting, giggling with her friends. Only we knew how hard she worked for this day.

Kathryn is hard of hearing. With hearing aids, she can hear at almost the same level as normal children. But if Kathryn had gone into the public school program with hearing impaired children, she wouldn't be able to have a birthday party with friends who laugh, and sing, and shout.

In the public school program, the children don't learn how to sing or shout or speak. Their classroom is very quiet. If we had allowed her to attend the public school program, Kathryn would have learned to communicate through sign language and lip reading.

All of Kathryn's friends communicate by oral speech, not sign language. Kathryn would not be able to speak, listen, giggle with her friends.

Do you see how Kathryn's mother begins her letter "I'd like to share a story with you . . ."

Gradually, the letter shifts as the mother makes her case. She leads the reader into agreeing that placing Kathryn in a class where children don't speak or listen is not appropriate.

3. Allow for "cooling off" and revision time.

After you write the first draft, put your letter away for a few days. **DO NOT SEND IT!**

Firing off a letter is one of the most common mistakes parents make. You must give "cooling off" and revision time. Later, parents say "But they said I had to respond right away . . ."

Ninety-nine percent of letters from the school system DO NOT require you to respond immediately.

A "cooling-off period" allows you to look at your letter more objectively. If you send a letter without allowing for "cooling off" and revision time, you'll probably damage your credibility and your position. Sometimes, this damage is impossible to repair.

4. You negotiate with the school for special education services.

As you are learning, you negotiate with the school for special education services. If you are negotiating with

the school for special services or with a car dealer for a car, the principles are the same. You never begin negotiations by telling the other side what your "bottom line" is.

In negotiations with schools, parents often make the mistake of being too open. Parents think they have to share **everything** with the school - **immediately**. They hope that by sharing everything, they'll be rewarded with the help their child needs. This doesn't happen.

You need to share the results of all evaluations and any other new information with the school, as soon as you receive it. However, you do not need to share your wish list or your bottom line.

5. Never threaten. Never telegraph your punches!

You'll remember that in the first chapter of this Tactics section, the parents wrote two letters. In their first letter, they made several threats. In their second letter, they made no threats, and told their story in a compelling way. If you make threats (i.e., "we're going to call our lawyer"), you may experience temporary relief but you'll pay a high price later.

Fear of the Unknown

As a negotiator, one of the most powerful forces you have on your side is the "Fear of the Unknown." When you threaten, you are telling the other side what you plan to do. If you tell them what you plan to do, you have told them how to protect themselves. At that moment, you lose your advantage - which is the wonderful, powerful **Fear of the Unknown**. Never telegraph your punches - you will destroy their power and effectiveness.

You went to the doctor to get the results of your annual physical, including your lab work. As your doctor, I come in and tell you that:

The results of your blood work are very concerning. However, I'm behind schedule right now. We need to admit you to the hospital as soon as bed space is available - probably tomorrow or the next day. I don't have time to discuss the results with you right now. I'm behind schedule and have other patients waiting. I'll be in to talk with you after you are admitted.

Fear. Panic. What happens now? You'll imagine the worst case scenario.

Power of Information

Now, let's change the facts. You are at the doctor's office to get the results of your physical. As your doctor, I come in and tell you that:

Some of your blood work is not clear. It's probably only ABC and if it is ABC, we have nothing to worry about. The worst case scenario is that you have XYZ. XZY is inconvenient but it's certainly not life threatening. Nine times out of ten, people have ABC. However, it's still important for us to rule out XYZ.

Unfortunately, we can't run the additional tests here. We just aren't equipped to do it. So, we need to send you to the hospital where they have more sophisticated equipment. We can schedule your admission tomorrow or the next day. This is not so important that we have to do it today.

Can you **feel** the difference?

When you know what you're facing, is your fear as intense? No.

If you don't fill in answers – if you don't telegraph your punches - then the fear of the unknown will force the other side to attribute more power to you. Because they'll be in the "fear of the unknown," they'll wonder what you're going to do – and they'll imagine a worst case scenario.

6. Make several (unpleasant but necessary) assumptions.

Assume that you will not be able to resolve your dispute. Assume that you will have to request a special education due process hearing. Assume that you will not be able to testify at the hearing, or tell your side of the story.

These are important assumptions. These assumptions are the keys to successful letter writing. Assume things will get worse. Assume that success in securing an appropriate program and services for your child depends on how well you describe the events that caused you to write to the school.

The letters you write now may sit in your child's file for months or years. If things blow up later, these letters can be the most compelling evidence in your favor. Bob's letter at the beginning of this chapter shows how letters can work against you

7. Make your problem unique.

If you are writing a letter about a specific problem (i.e., a teacher's refusal to follow an IEP), present your situation as unique. You want the person who reads your letter to see your problem as different. You want them to think "Wow! We've never had this problem before!"

By presenting your problem as unique, you're trying to avoid "We ALWAYS handle ABC situations this way. We ALWAYS have handled ABC situations this way. We ALWAYS will handle ABC situations this way. We can't make exceptions for you."

If you present your situation as unique, it won't be listed in the Bureaucrat's Big Book of Rules and Procedures. Remember: bureaucracies are inflexible and rule-bound. By presenting your situation as unique, you can sometimes get people in the system to see things differently. If they see things differently, they may be able to handle things differently.

8. You ARE writing letters to a Stranger who has the power to resolve the problem. (You are NOT writing letters to the school alone.)

When you write a letter to the school, you are really writing a "Letter to the Stranger." Why?

You have to assume that someone outside the school system will decide this issue. This person will have no personal knowledge about or interest in you and your child. This person doesn't know or care what "program" your child is enrolled in.

The person may be the school board attorney who advises the school district to settle the case. The person is more likely to be a hearing officer, Administrative law judge, or a Judge in state or federal court.

When you write letters, keep this Stranger in your mind's eye. Who is this Stranger? What does he look like? How does he think?

Visualize the Stranger as an older person who has worked hard all his life. He is conservative, fair, and moderately open minded. He knows that life is often difficult and unfair. He doesn't have patience with whiners or complainers. He's far more sympathetic to people who have a plan to solve their problems. He dresses casually. When he sits down to read your letter, he may sip a cup of tea and light his pipe.

The Stranger doesn't know you, your child, or your situation. Your letter gives you an opportunity to persuade the the Stranger to see the justice of your cause. When you describe the problem, you are also telling the Stranger what can be done to make things right.

Judges are Strangers. Most judges are not knowledgeable about special education issues or children with disabilities. When you write letters, you are also trying to educate and inform this decison-maker.

9. Write letters to the school as business letters.

When you write business letters, you state facts that support your position or request (your brain). You do not demand, threaten, ventilate anger or frustration (your emotions).

If you are writing an important letter to the school, you want it to be smooth, polished, and professional. Begin your letter chronologically and develop it chronologically. To see how this is done, go back and read the original "Letter to the Stranger" at the beginning of this section. The letter began like this:

Dear Mr. So and So:

We received a letter from you dated February 1, and were very perplexed by the content.

To put my letter into the proper context, let me go back to the beginning . . .

Do not attack or express overt anger. Resist the urge to take cheap shots. If you don't resist, they will come back to haunt you.

10. NEVER make judgments.

"What a jerk you were! You didn't have enough guts to be straight-up with us!"

NO!

NEVER be judgmental. You want the Stranger to be interested, not defensive or anxious. Provide factual information, then let the Stranger draw conclusions. You want the Stranger to conclude "What a jerk!" on his own.

11. Write your letter chronologically.

When you tell a story, you tell the story chronologically. Your objective is to write a letter than is interesting, and easy to follow.

Remember, when you write a letter to the school, this is your chance to "present your case" and tell your

story. The Stranger won't know the background or history unless you provide this information. You can provide background information very naturally and easily by starting at the beginning and writing the letter chronologically.

For example: "On DATE, our son entered your program because . . .

You can move the clock earlier if this helps you tell the story. "We realized that our daughter had serious problems when she was unable to communicate by her third birthday."

Where should you begin? Begin where you want. You know when the story "began." Continue to tell your story. "When she started school . . ."

When you tell the story, **use your facts**. Select your facts carefully and keep your opinions to a minimum. As you tell the story, you are planting seeds in the memories of all Strangers who will read your letter later.

There is another reason to write your letter chronologically. If you jump from issue to issue, the reader will get confused, then frustrated. Readers have negative reactions to people who write letters that are hard to follow. The Stranger is likely to get annoyed and angry **with you** if he can't figure out your point. If the Stranger gets frustrated, he will quit reading – and he'll blame you for this frustration. You don't want this to happen.

12. Write letters that are clear and easy to understand.

Letters provide you with an opportunity to **make your case** and **create a positive impression**. The impression you make depends on how you present and express yourself.

We don't like to think that our writing skills need improving. Unless you are a professional writer or editor, you will need to improve your writing skills in four areas: **clarity, brevity, interest, and accuracy**.

ALWAYS read your letters aloud. This is a valuable tip from professional editors.

ALWAYS have at least one outside person read your letters. Your "reader" should be someone who will tell you the truth, especially when you did not make things clear or you need to tone the letter down.

Ask your "reader" to pretend that he or she is a Stranger. You want your reader to tell you if answered the three questions we listed at the beginning of this chapter:

- Why are you writing?
- What is the point you want to make?
- What do you want?

The answers to these three questions must be clear. After your "Stranger" has read the draft of your letter, ask the person to answer these questions. If your reader cannot answer these questions, you haven't expressed yourself clearly.

Remember: your letter is to the Stranger, not to the special ed director or the principal. If you find yourself explaining your real point to the reader, stop. Write the explanation. Incorporate this into your letter.

Letter Writing Tips

Make It Clear

It's incredibly easy to get side-tracked when writing letters, especially if you're feeling upset or emotional. Remember: You are writing to make a point, clarify an event, make a request, and create a paper trail. Refer back to the sheets of paper you used during the brainstorming stage. Have you answered these three questions?

- Why are you writing?
- What is the point you want to make?
- What do you want?

Talk out loud. Avoid vague words, jargon, and long rambling sentences. Use short words when possible. If you naturally use long words to express yourself, try substituting short words that mean the same thing. Long rambling letters put people off because they are hard to read. You don't want this to happen. You want the reader, your Stranger, to **enjoy reading your letter**.

Make It Short

Say what you have to say. Be succinct. Most people don't have the time to read long letters. If you repeat yourself, you're wasting the reader's time and your letter will generate a negative response. Keep your message short and to the point.

There is one exception to this rule. If you are writing a letter to request a due process hearing, then the letter needs to be a comprehensive "Letter to the Stranger." This letter should tell story, from the beginning, using visual imagery.

Make It Alive

Speak directly to the reader. Use the same words and figures of speech you use in your day-to-day speech. Think about the Stranger as a real person. Visualize the Stranger and imagine yourself talking with him about your problems. This is the person you are writing to. You're not firing a letter off to the person who chaired the IEP meeting and didn't have the courage to tell you that the school had just suspended your child, as you see in the example below.

Use words like "you," "we," "us," "our" to make your letter more personal. Everyone who reads the letter will feel that the message is directed at them.

Make it RIGHT

Letters filled with errors are distracting. Readers get so distracted by misspelled words and poor grammar that they miss the point. If you send a letter that's filled with mistakes, your real message is that you are sloppy and careless. If you prepare your letter on a computer, it will be easier to read. The Stranger will thank you for little touches like this.

Your goal is to eliminate all spelling, grammatical, and formatting errors from your letters. **The problem?** We don't notice our own errors! **The solution?** Always have at least one other person proof-read your letters. Try to locate more than one proof-reader. Buy a book about "How to Write Business Letters."

Letter writing is an art. A well written letter is a pleasure to read. It's also **very** hard work.

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About the Authors

Pam Wright is a psychotherapist who has worked with children, adults, and families for more than 30 years. Her training and experience in clinical psychology and clinical social work give her a unique perspective on parent-child-school dynamics, problems, and solutions.

Pam is the co-author of several books including [Wrightslaw: Special Education Law](#), [Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy](#), and [Wrightslaw: No Child Left Behind](#). She has written dozens of articles about raising, educating, and advocating for children with disabilities. Pam designed the [Wrightslaw web site](#) and is the editor of [The Special Ed Advocate newsletter](#).

Pete Wright represented Shannon Carter before the U. S. Supreme Court in [Florence County School District Four v. Shannon Carter](#) where he received a unanimous decision in Shannon's favor.

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Revised: 02/21/07

This page printed from: http://www.wrightslaw.com/advoc/articles/12rules_letters.htm

Table 23-1 / Letter Writing Tips

Image & Presentation

- First impressions are lasting impressions
- Use businesslike letters to create a good impression.
- Type letters or print from your computer.
- Use quality paper. Do not use cute stationery with flowers or little animals.
- Include contact information – phone number, fax number, and/or email.

Set the Right Tone

- Do not demand. Do not apologize. Do not threaten to sue.
- End your letter with courtesy.

Write to the Right Person

- Who can resolve your problem? Write your letter to this person.
- Address your letter to a real person. Use the person's name and job title. No one likes to receive letters addressed "To Whom It May Concern."

Delivery Options

- Deliver important letters by hand. Log in the time and date, identity of the person who received the letter, what the person told you, what they were wearing, what was happening at the time.
- Do not send certified or registered letters to the school.
- Do not mark letters "personal" or "confidential."

How Long?

- In general, keep your letters short, no more than one page.
- Get to the point in the first paragraph.

What To Include

- Tell the reader why you are writing the letter and what you want the reader to do.
- Cite facts that support your position or request. Be sure your facts are correct.

Deadlines

- Set a time limit for a reply. Two weeks is fair. (Do not make demands!)
- Write, call, write. Write a letter. Wait 10 days, then call.

What to Do If They Do Not Respond

- If you do not receive a response, write a second letter, and include a copy of your first letter.
- If you get no response, set a short deadline before going higher. 10 days is reasonable.
- If you receive no response to the second letter, go higher in the chain of command.

"Letter Writing Tips" is from ***Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy***, (page 229). <http://www.wrightslaw.com/store/feta.html>

A Sample Retention Letter

Print this page

Below is an example of how you can use story-telling in letters that document events and describe your concerns. The parents sent this letter after the school proposed to retain their child.

This letter describes the parents' **concerns** about the proposal to retain their child. The tone of the letter is polite and businesslike. The letter does not blame school personnel or criticize. Instead, the parents describe their **concerns** about their child's lack of progress, their **concerns** about the school's proposal to retain her, and propose a solution to the child's problems.

IDEA emphasizes the need to **consider the parent's concerns when developing the IEP:**

Development of the IEP

In developing each child's IEP, the IEP Team ... shall consider ... the strengths of the child ... the concerns of the parents for enhancing the education of their child ... the results of the initial evaluation or most recent evaluation of the child; and ... the academic, developmental, and functional needs of the child." (20 U.S.C. 1414(d)(3)(A); *Wrightslaw: Special Education Law, 2nd Edition*, page 103)

As you read this letter, pay attention to your emotional response. Do you see the parents' perspective? Do you agree with their proposed solution?

A story-telling letter is a way to make your case to people who have power to make decisions and open the door for better services for your child.

Steve & Suzy Parent

2325 Any Street
Penzi, MA 12345
987-654-3210

December 17, 2010

Mr. Jack Tingsly
Principal
JP ELementary School
1212 Maple Lane
Penzi, MA 12345

RE: Emma Parent – Grade Retention Notification

Dear Mr. Tingsly:

I am writing in response to your letter dated November 25, 2010. In your letter you state: *“I am certain that you have discussed concerns regarding Emma’s progress to date”*; *“we are carefully considering the most appropriate grade placement for Emma”*; and *“My final decision regarding placement will not be made until June, when a complete review will be finalized”*.

At the end of your letter there is a portion that I am to detach and return to you which states: *“I have read this letter and agree to offer my child, as well as the JP Elementary School, my complete cooperation.”*

I appreciate your letter advising me about Emma’s lack of progress in the general curriculum. I am in receipt of Emma’s Term 2 report card which indicates that Emma needs improvement in all areas of the curriculum – most of which are 2-, indicating marginal improvement despite the interventions of her IEP. I asked Emma’s teacher if she was being graded on the general curriculum or her IEP goals, and she informed me that she was grading Emma on her IEP. This demonstrates that Emma is not making satisfactory progress (2-) towards her IEP goals and clearly Emma is not meeting the minimum standards of the curriculum benchmarks set forth by the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 you reference in your letter.

This is especially concerning to me as Emma’s mother given her average intellectual ability; in fact her Verbal Comprehension Index is in the 79th percentile.

I realize, as stated in your letter, Emma’s potential grade retention is due to concerns due to her inability to meet the curriculum frameworks. Ms. Reid, Emma’s teacher, informed me of her recommendation to retain Emma at our last team meeting.

Given the over forty years of research on Dyslexia, my child’s intellectual ability, information provided by our family to the District coupled with all of the evaluations, the only rationale that my child is not progressing appropriately is not due to lack of research, available interventions and/or my child’s potential to learn. It speaks rather to the resources available in the District and/or school and the District’s ability to provide my child with a Free and Appropriate Public Education.

It appears that Emma’s IEP is not designed for educational benefit and/or the services and supports that are being provided to Emma are not sufficient to remediate her deficits while simultaneously allowing Emma to meet the curriculum frameworks. In essence, what you have outlined in your letter clearly indicates that Emma has been denied a Free Appropriate Public Education.

I am unaware of any research that states children with reading disabilities benefit from grade repetition. In fact, according to the Massachusetts School Psychologists Association, there are many consequences with regards to grade repetition which states *...“retained children have more problematic social and emotional function, more conduct problems, lower self-images and negative images about school”*.

In addition, the section that I am to sign and return caused me some concern. It implies that by not signing I am not willing to offer my child and/or the school my cooperation. I assume that by signing and “agreeing” I am willing to accept any decision you make. I cannot do this as I will be abdicating my rights as a parent and as the parent of a minor child, I will be abdicating Emma’s rights and entitlements provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, The Rehabilitation Act of Section 504, and American with Disabilities Act as well as her Civil Rights.

The decision of placement is a “team” decision, not the decision of one person. It is my understanding that one person cannot make a unilateral decision outside of the team process. Although you have not been a

member of Emma's team before, I would welcome you to attend any and all meetings and become a member of Emma's team, if you so desire.

Although I am opposed to retaining Emma in first grade, I welcome the opportunity to meet with the special education team to learn how the District proposes to provide Emma more intensive services to remediate her reading deficits and/or the possibility of an alternative educational setting which would enable Emma to progress and master the general educational curriculum while receiving intensive instruction to close the gap between her and her nondisabled peers. The ABC School located in Palmer, MA (Chapter 766 approved) is one such option with an excellent reputation.

It is my understanding the academic program at ABC is designed to support children with reading difficulties, Grades 1-8. Teaching methods are direct, multi-sensory, and individualized for specific learning styles. Remedial in nature, the program provides grade-appropriate content in each academic area. Remediation is taught using the Orton-Gillingham approach, and all ABC teachers are trained in this area, thus providing valuable continuity for children curriculum-wide.

If you would like, on behalf of the District, I would be happy to apply to the ABC School to help speed up the process so as not to delay Emma from receiving the appropriate services she requires. What is clear, Emma is significantly behind her peers and all the research I have reviewed places a high emphasis on early intensive intervention.

In closing, it is apparent that a meeting should be held without delay as to how the staff at the JP Elementary School can meet my child's needs. I am not willing to wait until June, thus having Emma fall further and further behind.

I look forward to hearing from you as to how we can make Emma's educational experience a beneficial one and await your direction with regards to applying to the ABC School. Also, thank you very much for advising me of Emma's failure to make progress in meeting the State standards; I am confident that either with additional specialized instruction and/or an alternative placement, Emma will finally be able to meet those standards.

Sincerely,

Suzy Parent,

cc:Emma Parent – Special Education File

Letter Written by:

Angela Kouroyen, Special Education Advocate
SPED Solutions, LLC
Email:specialedsolutions@comcast.net

More Resources

[Letter Writing and Documentation](#)

[Using Story Telling Letters to Persuade](#)

12 Rules for Writing Great Letters

The "Letter to the Stranger"

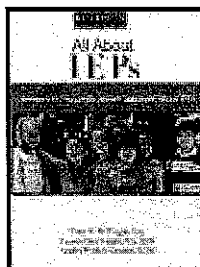
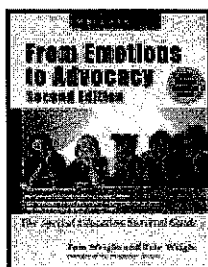
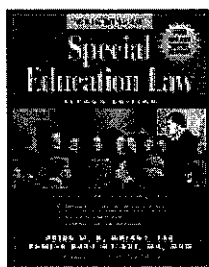
Retention and Social Promotion

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