

## **DRAFTING—AND PERHAPS SENDING—A PRIVATE LETTER TO A PERSON WHO HAS HARASSED OR OFFENDED YOU**

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—or 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 the 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 perhaps the best possible preparation for all the major options open to you for dealing with the offense: approaching the offender directly, in person or on paper, seeking informal third party intervention, formal mediation, formal grievance or legal suit, and efforts to deal with the individual offense “generically.” It will also make it a little more comfortable to postpone or forgo action if you decide for any reason that you should or must do this, because you will have collected the evidence together in case you change your mind. If you are not at all sure what you want to do with respect to the offense, you may find it is suddenly much easier to decide after you write a number of drafts of a letter. And it costs nothing in terms of privacy or money.

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 you need to write several drafts. Do not be worried if your first draft is a messy stream-of-consciousness, and do not worry about the tone of your early drafts. In fact the more upset you are, the more worthwhile it is actually to write drafts of a letter. People who have used this method suggest that writing may help to “get the anger outside yourself,” and that it helps one to remember the facts. In addition, in case you send the letter, your last (polite, civil, factual) 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 problem if there should be retaliation or if the offense recurs. Letters like this help to build evidence. You may not be able to prove that the 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, anti-Semitism, anti-gay jokes, poking fun at the disabled, racist behavior and sexual harassment are all problems where a letter may help. Letters have been effectively used 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).

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 of "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 audio tape or video tape). In serious cases it will help for this 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, and of course the answer is that this 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 write a letter, and then not send it. (You could also consider forgetting the 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 beyond the hope of stopping offensive behavior; they provide more evidence for management or a court to take action if necessary, in part because they provide evidence of the "unwelcomeness" of the behavior that offended you. 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 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.” Should you instead send a formal complaint letter to a supervisor? Should you now go talk with a trusted colleague or personal or legal counsellor? Or with a women's group or a spouse? Sending a letter is an option that is likely to protect your privacy, to avoid retaliation, to get the harassment stopped, and to provide you with more evidence if needed. But it 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 other people, since they may decide to act on the matter. If you have decided 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 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.