

Chapter Eleven - Lodging a complaint

There are at least two kinds of complaint letters. In one case, you are hoping for a change in a decision that caused you some difficulty or discomfort. You are appealing to the company or organization, outlining a case for a different outcome. In the second case, you hope your letter will inspire the group to change its policies or operating procedures so that future customers will have a better experience than yours. Some people like to write angry letters just to let off steam, but this chapter will not address that kind of writing challenge. It is generally more rewarding to write commendations than personal attacks.



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The Appeal - Looking for a Hero

This kind of complaint letter requires persuasion.

You are telling a story, identifying a problem, and building a case for a change in the action or decision that inspired you to write the letter. You must be clear, forceful, convincing and diplomatic. You must be careful about tone. This is not a chance to let off steam or express anger. You hope to win over the manager to empathize with your situation and make an adjustment to take care of you.

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Before you write the letter, you must spend some time identifying the manager most likely to have the power to help you. Many companies and organizations have layer upon layer of customer service personnel who have little authority to make changes. They are often trained to say, “There is nothing we can do. I am very sorry for your difficulties, but the policy is the policy is the policy.” Usually, there are managers at higher levels who can make changes and grant exceptions, but their identity and contact information is usually shielded from public view. There is no sense sending a great letter or email to a lower level employee who will almost always tell you there is no hope.

Let me provide a personal example, concealing the identity of the bank with which I was experiencing difficulty. Living in Russia for six months during 2017, I had three months of excellent online access to my accounts.

All of a sudden I was blocked when I signed into my account. In fact, I could not access any of this bank’s pages. Their IT department had evidently decided that all IP addresses in Russia were dangerous. An error message flashed up on my screen with an 800 number to call. When I spoke with the customer service personnel at this number, they had no idea what the error message meant and could not help me.

Since access to my accounts was crucial, I asked for a supervisor. I finally found someone who promised to expedite my problem to the IT department which should get back to me within 48 hours. Four days later, no one had fixed the problem or written me. I knew it was time to find a person in the organization who would be more helpful. I spent twenty minutes with a supervisor who kept saying there was nothing he could do.

I finally told him I needed to speak with someone in the office of the bank’s CEO and asked for contact information. When pressed, he disclosed a special group in the CEO’s office assigned to cases like mine.

He gave me their phone number, and the woman who answered was the answer I had been looking for. When I described my experience and sent her a lengthy email, she went to war for me with the IT department and was able to restore access.

Because they were seemingly blocking all of Russia, I had to provide my public IP address, and they had to exclude me from the blocked list. Unfortunately, IP addresses are usually dynamically assigned and can change every 2-3 days. Each time this happened, I had to send the new IP address to her and wait for her to contact the IT department.

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She is what is known as a “customer service hero.” She had the power and the authority to deal with a department of the bank that was normally isolated from and unresponsive to customer pressures. She took very good care of me until I moved to Bucharest, Romania being a country where the IT department seemed to have no concerns, and I was able to gain access to my accounts without any difficulty.

The point of this long story in a book about writing relates to audience. There is no sense sending a complaint letter to a person with no authority. The same is true for online “feedback” pages. There is little chance that your letter will accomplish anything for you. You must find a human being who will treat your letter with empathy, compassion and authority.

If possible, speak with the manager on the phone before you write your letter or email. Create a personal connection. Be warm and very polite. Do not vent. Do not express anger. Express concern. Speak of discomfort or pain, but do not blame or attack. Mention all the good experiences you have had in the past. Try to build good will. If you can establish a warm human connection, your letter or email is much more likely to get the attention it deserves.

Telling your story

Unlike the stories you learned to write in Chapter Seven, you will describe what happened quite matter-of-factly. This is a time for dispassionate, calm writing, describing the events without embellishment or drama. You will

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begin your letter with a paragraph that clearly states your problem and your claim. If you have been a long term loyal customer, you will add a paragraph briefly summarizing that history. You will then describe the events.

At the end you will provide a rationale for some kind of change or relief. You may offer several suggestions for remedies at this point.

In 2016 I was planning to fly from the USA to Moscow with my two cats. I was buying two tickets from United that included three flights. The third flight was on a code sharing partner. While United would allow me to bring two cats in two bags if I had a seat for each, the partner had a policy that I could only bring two cats if they fit in the same bag and weighed no more than 8 kg. When I called their customer service, they kept repeating the policy and said it did not matter if I had two seats. One cat would have to fly below in the baggage hold even if I bought two seats. After many calls, I tried email. They continued to repeat the policy and even cited international regulations to justify their decision.

Since United is bound by the same regulations, I took the time to read them and found, as I suspected, that there was nothing in that document preventing my bringing two cats if I bought two seats. It is likely the customer service staff had never read those regulations and were citing them to discourage me. I then wrote an email pointing this out and asked them to send my appeal to a higher level. They sent an email back promising to do this. After two weeks, no supervisor had contacted me. I repeated my request but there was still silence.

At this point, I took the trouble to find the email address of the company's CEO. This is a challenging task, since few CEOs publish their email for the public to see. Once you know their name, you can sometimes find their email on a list of conference participants. If you cannot find it, you may have to invent it. There are standard formats many organizations use for email addresses. Once you know their root address — company.com — you can try 4-5 guesses.

james.smith@company.com
jsmith@company.com
jamesmsmith@company.com
j.smith@company.com

In this case, I successfully tried james.smith@company.com and

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jsmith@company.com. The next morning I received a telephone call from the top supervisor for customer relations who had been asked to contact me by the CEO. He was most gracious, and more importantly, he agreed to make an exception for me to fly with two cats in the cabin since I was buying two seats.

My email with names removed . . .

Dear CEO:

Re: Breakdown in Customer Service

I am writing to you because your customer service folks have failed to keep their promise and have not given my request the attention it deserves.

I will be moving to Russia sometime in the next few months with two cats whose combined weight with bag is 9 kg. I plan to buy two seats from Denver to Moscow on United Airlines connecting through XXX and continuing on your airline to Moscow. United only allows one cat per seat but will allow me to bring two if I buy two seats.

Your airline has no clear policy on two seats and two cats, but your customer service people keep repeating the two cats in one bag policy and have claimed that the regulations in “the 2016 Live Animal Regulations (LAR) Manual” would outlaw what United obviously permits. When I appealed this stance to a higher authority, I was promised in July by XXX that my request would be forwarded:

“Yes, we will raise the issue to our Superiors in XXX regarding your claim.”

Since that time, no “Superior” has contacted me and given me a thoughtful response to my request. Instead I have had a succession of messages that keep repeating the two cats in one bag rule as if they have not read my messages.

As a former superintendent of schools and the publisher of two online journals, I am feeling very frustrated by the poor communication.

I think my request is reasonable and offers your airline extra compensation in the form of a second seat.

I have pasted the email exchanges at the end of this message so you can see for yourself how my request was handled.

I hope you will give my request serious consideration.

Very sincerely,

It should be noted that such appeals do not always work. In contacting two other CEOs of two different airlines, neither replied to my email. You win some and you lose some. Not all CEOs actually read their corporate emails and personal assistants sometimes think it is their duty to screen such requests.

When Chicago Airport security personnel forcefully removed a passenger from a United Airlines flight in 2017, the company added insult

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to injury when public statements by the company and their CEO showed a lack of understanding and concern. It is not unusual for huge corporations to stonewall customers instead of handling their concerns and complaints with empathy and a sense of fair play. This should not prevent you from writing such letters, because there are good CEOs, good service managers and a reasonable chance of success.

For the sake of improvement

Almost all organizations make mistakes of some kinds. Some of these are isolated stumbles. Some are patterns and policies that need correction. From time to time you may witness the second kind of problem and decide it is worth sharing some suggestions with the company or organization.

The format of this complaint letter is similar to the first kind, except that you are not asking for a personal remedy.

You begin with a paragraph stating the issue, you add a paragraph about your history with the organization, and then you describe the events and the pattern that you think needs correction. You finish by stating what you hope will be done to correct the issue you witnessed.

Commendations

Sometimes the best letters to write are those commending great service, great performance and great attitudes. As a former superintendent and principal, complaint letters that reached my office heavily outnumbered commendations — which is pretty sad considering the excellent performance I witnessed on a daily basis.

Knowing that commendation letters are quite rare dramatically multiplies their power and their impact. In writing such letters you are allowed to dramatize and elaborate. You can lay it on thick. If you write such a letter, you will bring great joy to the person you are praising. They may get only two or three of such letters each year.