

# OMBUDS OFFICE

Harvard Medical School  
Harvard Dental School  
Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health



## Writing a Letter of Complaint

A letter will have the most value if it conveys your complaint in a manner which will allow the person reading it to “hear” your words. The suggestions offered here will help you organize your thoughts and feelings in a logical and rational manner and will make your letter more likely to gain the attention of the reader, if you choose to send it.

Begin with an initial draft that describes the situation without regard to form, but addresses the experience that offended you. It may appear as a stream-of-consciousness. Once accomplished, put it away for a while before serving and make revisions. Though it will probably take some time and require several drafts, doing this can help you begin to shape the letter in the most readable form.

**PARAGRAPH 1 — FACTS:** Describe the incident by stating the facts. This should include what happened, when, where, how, etc. Do this as accurately as possible and without any emotional content. If you are not sure of a fact use terms such as “I believe...”, or “it appeared to me that...”. Remember this is the factual part of your letter.

**PARAGRAPH 2 — FEELINGS:** State how the incident made you feel. If it will add to your point, describe the meaning or significance the incident had or has continued to have for you. “The facts stated above made me feel... because I interpreted the event or events to mean...” Do not make any accusations.

**PARAGRAPH 3 — FUTURE:** Focus on what you would like to have happen now. If you have any particular remedies in mind, state them in this part of the letter. Here is where you might want to say, “I would like the offensive behavior to stop.”

This structure will help you deal with your feelings and organize your thoughts. Writing a letter does not obligate you to send it. Once it is written you can still consider other alternatives which might be available to you. Having analyzed your situation, you may now want to do nothing more, or be ready to speak directly to the offending person, or share your letter with the offender’s supervisor or use it as a starting point for discussion with an advisor or counselor. You may decide to send the letter. If you choose to send it, the letter may serve to stop offensive behavior. If it does not, then it may be used as evidence for more formal methods of intervention. Regardless of what you choose to do with the letter, you may feel better for having written it.



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© Melissa Brodrick, Ombudsperson, [melissa\\_brodrick@hms.harvard.edu](mailto:melissa_brodrick@hms.harvard.edu)

164 Longwood Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02115

617-432-4040 (Ombuds) 617-432-4041 (office)