



## MODERN, INCLUSIVE WAYS TO START A FORMAL LETTER WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW THE RECIPIENT'S NAME

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**Abstract.** This thesis examines modern and inclusive ways to start a formal letter when the recipient's name is unknown. The issue is analyzed from the perspective of professional communication, politeness, audience awareness and inclusive language. Traditional openings such as "Dear Sir or Madam" and "To Whom It May Concern" are still recognized, but they may sound distant, outdated or insufficiently inclusive in many contemporary contexts.

**Keywords:** formal letter, inclusive language, salutation, professional communication, business correspondence.

### INTRODUCTION

The opening of a formal letter performs a more important function than simply beginning the text. It immediately frames the relationship between writer and recipient, establishes the degree of formality and signals whether the writer understands the norms of professional communication. When the recipient's name is known, the salutation is usually straightforward: "Dear Ms. Johnson," "Dear Dr. Ahmed," or "Dear Professor Brown." The situation becomes more complex when the writer does not know the recipient's name. In such cases, the opening must remain respectful, clear and appropriate without making assumptions about gender, status or identity.

### MAIN PART

A modern formal salutation should meet three basic requirements: it should be respectful, relevant and inclusive. Respect means that the phrase should not sound careless, overly casual or abrupt. Relevance means that the salutation should correspond to the real communication situation. Inclusiveness means that the opening should avoid unnecessary gender assumptions and should not exclude people whose identity or role does not fit traditional formulas. These principles are consistent with modern approaches to professional writing, where clarity, reader awareness and appropriate tone are considered essential features of effective communication [2].

One of the best strategies is to address the recipient by function or department. If the letter concerns employment, "Dear Hiring Committee" or "Dear Recruitment Team" is usually stronger than "Dear Sir or Madam." It identifies the likely reader and shows that the writer understands the purpose of the correspondence. If the letter is sent to a university, "Dear



Admissions Committee,” “Dear Graduate Admissions Office,” or “Dear Scholarship Committee” may be appropriate. For business inquiries, “Dear Customer Support Team,” “Dear Sales Department,” or “Dear Procurement Team” can be used. These forms are formal, neutral and precise. They do not require the writer to know a personal name, but they still address a real institutional audience.

Another effective option is to use role-based openings. For example, “Dear Program Coordinator,” “Dear Human Resources Manager,” “Dear Editorial Board,” or “Dear Selection Committee” can be suitable when the recipient’s position is known but the name is not. This approach is useful because it avoids both excessive generality and personal misidentification. It is better to write “Dear Human Resources Manager” than to guess a name or gender incorrectly. In professional communication, a wrong assumption may weaken the credibility of the letter before the main message begins.


In some contexts, “Dear Team” may also be acceptable. It is concise, neutral and friendly, but it should be used carefully. “Dear Team” works well when the letter is addressed to a group within an organization, especially in customer service, project communication or internal business correspondence. However, it may be too informal for legal letters, academic applications or official government correspondence. The writer must always consider the level of formality expected by the institution. As Swales explains in genre analysis, professional texts follow recognizable conventions shaped by the communicative purpose and discourse community [3]. A salutation that is appropriate in one genre may be weak in another.

The phrase “To Whom It May Concern” deserves separate attention. It is not grammatically wrong, and it may still be used in recommendation letters, certificates, reference letters or documents intended for an unknown future reader. For example, if a university issues a general confirmation letter, “To Whom It May Concern” may be appropriate. But in job applications, business proposals or complaint letters, it often sounds distant and outdated. A more targeted phrase usually creates a better impression. For example, “Dear Hiring Committee” is more effective than “To Whom It May Concern” because it shows that the writer knows who should handle the matter.

“Dear Sir or Madam” is also still found in formal writing, but it is less suitable for inclusive communication. The phrase assumes that the recipient is either male or female and that gender is relevant to the salutation. In many modern workplaces, this is unnecessary. A gender-neutral opening is safer and more professional when the recipient is unknown. Inclusive language does not mean making the letter less formal. On the contrary, it makes the letter more accurate and respectful. Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory explains that language choices help preserve respect and reduce possible social discomfort in interaction [4]. A neutral salutation reduces the risk of inappropriate address.

In academic communication, the best opening often depends on the target institution. If the letter is sent to a journal, “Dear Editor,” “Dear Editorial Board,” or “Dear Managing Editor” may be suitable. If it is addressed to a conference, “Dear Organizing Committee” or





“Dear Conference Committee” is appropriate. If it concerns a university program, “Dear Admissions Committee” or “Dear Program Office” is preferable. Academic correspondence values precision and institutional awareness. A carefully chosen salutation shows that the writer has taken time to understand the recipient’s role.

In customer or public service communication, clarity is especially important. Openings such as “Dear Customer Service Team,” “Dear Support Team,” or “Dear Accounts Department” help direct the message toward the correct function. These phrases are also useful because many organizations use shared inboxes where several employees may read the same message. A name-based salutation is not always possible or necessary. A department-based salutation is more practical and inclusive.

### **CONCLUSION**

Modern formal letter openings should be respectful, accurate and inclusive, especially when the recipient’s name is unknown. Traditional formulas such as “Dear Sir or Madam” and “To Whom It May Concern” remain recognizable, but they are not always the best choice in contemporary professional communication. In many situations, role-based or department-based salutations are more effective: “Dear Hiring Committee,” “Dear Admissions Team,” “Dear Customer Support Team,” “Dear Editorial Board,” or “Dear Program Coordinator.”

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