

ENGL 380: Writing Transmittal Letters

What are transmittal letters?

Transmittal letters (also referred to as “cover letters”) accompany and introduce the content or purpose of another document. They can be very informal (like a handwritten note clipped to a report), very formal (printed on company letterhead), or somewhere in between.¹ Transmittal letters introduce and briefly describe the accompanying document (e.g., what a report is about and why it’s been written), helping to establish a courteous and professional tone.

The basic organization of a memo (or letter) of transmittal looks something like this:²

1. **Tell the reader what you’re sending or submitting and why.**
For example: because it was requested by the recipient, or because you’re seeking feedback or approval, or because you are submitting completed work.
2. **Summarize the main points, purpose, or otherwise describe the content of the document.** If this is information the recipient already has, then this section will probably be brief, and may be combined with #1.
3. **Include any special information that would help readers** understand, navigate, or respond to the document. For example, you might direct their attention to sections that deviate from an agreed-upon plan, or that you have questions about.
4. **Tell the reader what will happen next.** Will you do something? Do you want a response? If you do want the reader to act, specify what you want the reader to do and, if appropriate, give a deadline. Be sure to phrase your request with an appropriate level of politeness for the situation (e.g., you usually don’t want to order your boss to do something).
5. **End with a positive, forward-looking closing** (e.g., Thank you . . . I look forward to . . .).

Frequently, transmittal letters have important secondary purposes, such as building goodwill and showing readers that you are working conscientiously on projects they value. Because readers will likely read (or at least skim) the contents of your transmittal letter before reading the attached document, there is some room for you to shape how they read or interact with the that document.³

When you submit a written or tangible product in the workplace, you will want others to think well of your work. You can try to influence the way readers interpret and respond to your work by *mediating their reception* of it. In a workplace setting, this might mean giving your boss or coworker information that helps explain why the document you’re submitting deviates from

¹ Transmittal letters written for people *internal* to your organization are more likely to be informal and take the form of a memo; letters written for *external* readers (customers, clients) will usually be more formal.

² Adapted from Locker and Kaczmarek’s *Business Communication: Building Critical Skills*, 3rd Edition, pp. 152-153.

³ For example: the employment cover letter, which is a very specialized kind of transmittal letter, might ask the reader to look at the enclosed résumé, or offer further context for appreciating information presented in the résumé itself.

what you had sketched out in an earlier proposal, or it might direct their attention to sections of the document that particularly need their feedback.

How will transmittal letters be used English 380?

In the context of this class, you will write transmittal memos to accompany most graded documents. These memos are an opportunity for you to explain your work to me. For example, you can use your letter of transmittal to:

- tell me about the choices and considerations (content, organization, design, research, principles, obstacles, audience, etc.) that went into the document you finally produced;
- explain how your guide differs from what your doc plan described, or how you resolved a problem;
- ask a question; or
- request feedback on a particular feature or section of your manual.

Below is a basic template to follow when writing your transmittal memos for this class. See Barker (225-229) for a discussion that is specific to software documentation reviews.

September 6, 2010	
To: Prof. Janine Solberg From: Maria N. Jones <i>MNJ</i> Re: Appropriately Descriptive Subject Line	your name, followed by your (signed) initials, and a good subject line
This is your first paragraph – you might want to open by referring to my request of for the document you are about to describe.	
This Section Has a Heading Headings are optional, but can be a good way to make your document more skimmable, and its organization more immediately visible. If your document is very short (a paragraph or two) headings probably aren't necessary.	headings (if any) in bold
If you're presenting a list of items, or information that can be "chunked" consider using a bulleted list (also optional). - Bulleted lists can - Also make your document - Easier to skim.	1.25" left/right margins 1" top/btm margins Times, 11 or 12 pt, single-spaced left-aligned throughout
The final paragraph requests action (if appropriate), and ends with a goodwill and/or forward-looking closing. I look forward to reading your memos this semester ☺	goodwill/forward-looking closing