



CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION A MANUAL FOR IMPROVING WRITTEN CORRESPONDENCE

INTRODUCTION

This manual is intended to serve as a guide for all CTDOT employees who write *AND* review outgoing correspondence and is part of an overall effort to improve the way in which the agency engages and communicates with external customers. It provides rules, guidelines and examples of best practices for correcting the shortcomings in the quality and tone of written correspondence at CTDOT.

All CTDOT employees should reference this document when composing letters and emails meant for external customers, who can be defined as entities outside of CTDOT to whom the agency provides services in some capacity. This includes a concerned resident, a rest stop vendor or a local government official with a bridge project in his or her municipality. According to CTDOT's New Employee Orientation Manual, a successful encounter between a customer and the agency "always leaves the customer feeling valued and appreciated". While CTDOT's administrative support staff are essentially the agency's frontline Customer Service Representatives, all agency employees should strive to achieve a "successful encounter" when interacting with external customers.

When an external customer takes the time and care to write to CTDOT to resolve an issue or have a question answered, the agency should respond in kind with a response that is cordial in tone, concise in language and accurate and understandable in content. Members of the general public likely reached out to CTDOT because they need help with navigating the complex and often confusing bureaucracy of state government. What may seem routine to an employee of CTDOT may on the other hand be a mystery to an external customer; therefore, customers want to know there is someone at the other end of their correspondence who is addressing and taking their concerns seriously.

While there is no standard process in place at CTDOT for handling written correspondence, agency employees – when writing emails and letters - should follow the guidelines laid out in this document to ensure they include the five qualities of effective professional correspondence: Courtesy; Clearness; Conciseness; Completeness; Correctness.

ELEMENTS OF GOOD WRITTEN CORRESPONDENCE

The BEST written responses are clear, concise and cordial throughout and always directly address the matter at hand. The elements of effective written correspondence can be divided into three paragraphs as follows:

- 1) [Introduction]: The first paragraph of a letter should be brief and to the point while will setting the tone for the rest of your correspondence. The lead-off sentence opens with a cordial greeting, states the main purpose of your letter, and then transitions into the second paragraph where you will provide more supporting details.

Ex. "Thank you for your letter/email dated...inquiring about the Connecticut Department of Transportation's winter snow/ice fleet and operations. We appreciate hearing from you, and welcome the opportunity to provide you with more information on the storm-time routes and schedules of the agency's plow fleet." (**Note:** Beginning your letter/email with "This is to..." is grammatically incorrect. Instead, for example, open with "I am writing on behalf of the Commissioner in response to your inquiry/letter dated..., etc.")

- 2) [Body]: The second paragraph directly addresses and answers the external customers question, concern or need and then gives an explanation for the answer provided with supporting details and facts. The body of the letter is well organized, concise and keeps to the topic at hand. Regardless of the knowledge-level of the recipient, bear in mind that he or she is looking for a response that includes relevant information, presented in a clear, easy-to-understand style. Answer all questions in order to pre-empt further questions and follow-up.

- 3) [Conclusion]: The last paragraph should bring the letter or email to a polite, positive and businesslike close by thanking the reader for his or her time and consideration. While you shouldn't weigh down the conclusion with a boring repetition of information that the reader already knows you shouldn't leave the reader dangling in mid-air either. For instance, if you have made a particularly important point in the body of the correspondence that you would like the reader to remember, you should rephrase that point as a reminder and place it at the end of your letter/email.

Ex. "Once again, thank you for taking the time to contact the Department about this important issue. Your comments help us to better serve the residents of Connecticut."

****Please Refer To Guidelines On The Next Page***

GUIDELINES FOR WRITTEN CORRESPONDENCE*

When writing letters and emails, remember that the most effective correspondence is clear and concise, uses short sentences and simple words. It keeps to the facts, maintains a cordial tone and is easy to read and understand. Please refer to the following guidelines – using them like a checklist - to ensure that these objectives are met when writing to external customers.

Determine Type of Letter /Audience

- 1)General Public;
- 2)Elected/Government Officials;
- 3)Standard business (e.g. attorney, vendor, etc.)

Know Appropriate Response Level

If the recipient is a government official, it would be most appropriate for the Commissioner or relevant bureau chief to respond. For non-standard letters, ask “Who is signing this?” and work from there.

Match the Response to the Reader

Getting a clear picture of your reader before you start to write and keeping him or her in mind as you write will help to focus the content of your response and get your message across with clarity and brevity. Once you establish the audience, use this to put yourself in the position of the recipient and match the language of the correspondence accordingly. Don't bog down the text of the letter/email by using technical jargon or acronyms that the recipient is unlikely to understand. In other words, don't write like a bureaucrat but rather put your response in “layman's terms” by writing in plain English. In order to get a better picture of your reader ask:

- Who is the recipient?
- What do they already know about the subject? Will they understand technical terms?
- Have I cut industry jargon and technical terms that my reader is not likely to understand?

Determine Your Aim/Purpose

Before you begin writing, clearly establish what you want to achieve from the correspondence so that the purpose is clear. For example, the aim of correspondence might be to answer a question, explain an action taken and/or give information. Read the correspondence from the recipient's point of view to determine if the purpose is focused and the content is clear. Doing so will ensure that your letter is, above all, understandable to the reader and not open to any misinterpretation. In order to determine your central aim, ask yourself:

- Why exactly am I writing and what do I want to achieve with this response?
- What does the customer want? Why has he or she written/contacted the agency?

Getting – and Keeping - to the Point

Once you have set down the purpose of your letter or email, you will be able to keep your response focused on the information that supports your central aim. You should treat clarity of communication as a primary goal by making the content of your correspondence as concise as possible. Check each sentence to see if it is relevant to your central aim and cut any needless, redundant words and information. Make every word count. Be as concise as possible, use familiar words, short sentences and paragraphs, and keep your subject matter simple while still informative. Above all, DON'T OVERSHARE; present the most relevant information for your readers' needs; then having said what you need to say—stop.

- What does the customer need to know? What specific information has the customer requested?
- Is my response to the point without coming off as abrupt or rude?
- Have I kept the letter focused on my aim/purpose for writing?
- Have I offered a clear, concise explanation that is understandable to the reader?

Set the Right Tone/Manner

Even though the customer is NOT always right – and perhaps even rude/irate -- he or she is STILL the customer. The tone you adopt will affect the reader's response and is the key to achieving a successful customer encounter; therefore, all correspondence should begin, continue and end with a courteous and respectful tone. Keep your response sincere and always remain civil and cordial even if the subject matter is stern and/or sensitive by emphasizing the positive aspects of the situation. This applies even when what you have to tell the reader is entirely negative. Whenever possible, avoid words with a negative connotation such as argument, careless, disagreeable, failure, neglect, unfair, etc. Avoid using condescending language or adopting a patronizing manner (e.g. "As I'm sure you're aware..." or "As you must know...").

- Have I used positive words and phrases to stress the key points?
- Have I been as positive as possible while still being clear?
- Have I been sympathetic to the reader's situation?
- Have I expressed appreciation for the reader's time and effort to reach out to CTDOT?

Ensure Accuracy and Quality of Content

Letters to external customers are public statements made by a representative of CTDOT and anything written in a response letter can be quoted directly as a position being taken by the agency. So make sure you do your due diligence. Establish the facts by first determining the information you will need to achieve your central aim. If the subject matter is complex, ensure that the response and supporting facts you include are accurate by asking the appropriate CTDOT personnel to review and approve the content. REMEMBER that it is better to ask a question than make a mistake. All of the information you provide should be directly relevant to the aim of your correspondence, e.g. answering a customer's specific question. You want the content of your correspondence to be concise while still informative enough so you don't leave customers dangling. In all, the quality of the content in your correspondence should give the reader the impression that effort and thought went into the response.

- What does my reader want or need to know to understand my response?
- What supporting details do I need to present without oversharing?
- Have the appropriate CTDOT personnel approved the content when it deals with more complex, technical subject matter?
- Have I answered all important questions and included only the information necessary to answer or address the reader's concern, needs or inquiry?

Quick Checklist for Overall Quality Control

- Did I state the purpose of my correspondence clearly in the opening paragraph?
- Does my first paragraph set the right tone for the rest of the correspondence?
- Is the body of my letter/email clear and concise with enough information to support the agency's response?
- Have I accomplished my main purpose/aim?
- Have I acknowledged and directly addressed the recipient's question, concern or needs in a simple and direct manner?
- Have you answered all questions to pre-empt further questions and unnecessary follow-up?
- Is the content of my letter/email accurate? Have the more complex, technical aspects of the content been approved by the right CTDOT personnel?
- Have I read the final draft of the letter/email through the recipient's eyes before sending it?
- Does the tone remain positive, civil and cordial throughout the correspondence?
- Is the letter/email edited for spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and complete sentences?
- Did I use "Spellcheck" correctly (e.g. did I miss any homonyms)?