

LETTER writing is an important aspect of any writing course. This is because letter writing is a very important activity in our daily lives, be it for business or personal purposes.

In the Malaysian secondary school system, students are taught to write two types of letters – formal letters and informal letters although the latter is a dying art in this age of e-mails and text messages.

Informal letters are easier to write in terms of format, language and tone. These letters are sometimes called social or friendly letters. Examples of informal letters include letters to family members and friends.

Let's look at some important aspects of an informal letter.

In the accepted format, candidates must

- indent paragraphs
- use proper punctuation
- use capitalisation where necessary

For example, the month of the date (10 January 2009), the salutation (Dear Maria)

Under normal circumstances, it is perfectly acceptable to use informal language (e.g. stuff, jam-packed) and contractions (I'll, won't) in an informal letter, but this is usually not acceptable in the local examination system.

1. Some useful expressions on how to begin an informal letter

- Thank you for your letter which I received yesterday.
- I was pleasantly surprised to hear from you.
- It was wonderful to hear from you after so long.
- Thank you for your letter. I was pleased to hear that you are in good health.
- It was really nice hearing from you. I am glad that you like your new school.
- I hope this letter finds you in the pink (of health).
- Thank you for the lovely birthday card.

2. Some useful expressions on how to end an informal letter

- I promise to write to you soon.
- I hope you will reply soon.
- Give my best wishes to your parents.
- I am looking forward to seeing you.
- I look forward to hearing from you.
- Do write and tell me how you are progressing.
- Do write soon.

Let us take a look at a sample question. The question below is similar to the question in the previous week's article in terms of content points. Only the text-type differs.

Dear Raihan,

It was a lovely surprise to hear from you after such a long time. I know I lost a good friend when you moved to another town but I understand you had no choice as your father had to take up the new posting.

In your letter you asked me for some advice on what you should do to become a successful student. If you want to be successful, you must set goals. People who set goals accomplish more than those who do not. Write these goals on a piece of paper and put it up on the wall near your study table. This way, you will be reminded of your goals every day. Moreover, you must be motivated. When you are motivated you will have a strong desire to do well and to achieve your goals. I have put up some inspiring motivational posters on the walls in my room. In addition, you must pay attention in class. Listen actively and focus on what the teacher is teaching. If you have disruptive classmates, sit in front of the classroom, away from them. Always ask questions if you do not understand. Seek clarifications from your teachers or your friends if you are shy to approach the former.

Another important tip to being a successful student is to be organised. You can use a planner or notebook to write down all your assignments when they are given. This way you will not forget your homework, dates of tests or projects. Remember, if you are organised, you will be well- prepared and you will have less stress. You must also complete your homework on time. Homework helps reinforce what you have learnt. It helps you understand and remember the information your teachers have conveyed in their lessons.

To be a successful student you must prepare well for exams. A successful student is one who prepares for exams well in advance, and not at the eleventh hour. You must have diverse interests if you want to be an outstanding student. You should take part in co-curricular activities in order to become a well-rounded person. These activities help develop leadership skills and teamwork besides instilling values like cooperation and tolerance. Discipline is an important aspect of our lives. No matter where you go or what you do, you will be subjected to rules and regulations. Hence, it is crucial that you obey the school rules. Besides, you must respect everyone. You must respect your parents, your teachers, the school staff and also your friends. You must respect other people's feelings and opinions.

There are also several things you must avoid if you want to be a successful student. You must avoid wasting time. These days many teenagers spend hours chatting online on social networks such as Facebook or playing computer games. These are a waste of time and will not benefit you in any way. Remember, 'Time and tide wait for no man'. Also, avoid skipping school. Some students feel that school is a waste of time as they can learn better from their tuition teachers. This is not true. Your teachers are experienced and well qualified. They are also experienced examiners and they know how to impart knowledge effectively

I have to stop here. I hope the above tips will come in handy. Till I hear from you, take care.

Dear Raihan,

It was lovely to hear from you after such a long time.

In your letter you asked me for some advice on how to become a successful student. If you want to be successful, you must set goals. Moreover, you must be motivated. Motivation makes you work hard. This will help you to achieve your goals. In addition, you must pay attention in class. Focus on what the teacher is teaching. You must always ask questions if you do not understand. You can ask your teachers to explain things to you.

To be a successful student you must be organised. Use a notebook to write down all your homework. This way you will not forget to do your homework. You must also complete your homework on time. Homework helps you to understand and remember what the teachers have taught. Besides, you must prepare well for exams. You must not study at the eleventh hour. You should also take part in co-curricular activities. These activities help you become a better person. You learn leadership skills and values like cooperation and tolerance. Discipline is important in our lives. Hence, it is important that you obey the school rules. Lastly, you must respect everyone. You must respect your parents, your teachers, the school staff and also your friends.

There are also several things you must avoid if you want to be a successful student. You must avoid wasting time. Do not waste time on Facebook. Also, do not play computer games all the time. It will not help you in any way. Avoid skipping school. If you skip school, you will miss out on important lessons and you will find it difficult to catch up with your other classmates.

I have to stop here. I hope you find the above tips useful. Till I hear from you, take care.

The sample above is meant to show weak students how they can get marks for format and content. Most of the sentences are simple sentences and the elaborations are simple.

Remember when you write an informal letter:

Do not use slang words

- Do not use words which are in a language other than English. This means you cannot write Dear Abah, or Dear Amma even if that is how you address your parents.
- Do not sign off with Love and Kisses. Keep that for your personal letters.