Writing a Letter to a Person Who Has Harassed or Offended You

If someone has offended you, you may wish to go back directly to that person. You will find it easier to go back to the offender, in person or on paper, if you first write a draft of how you see this matter. Then you can decide whether to send the letter, go back in person, or choose some other option to deal with the situation now that you have collected your thoughts on paper.

Writing this draft or letter may take a little time. If you have been hurt, if you feel very angry, if you are at all afraid, you may find you need to write several drafts. Do not be worried if your first draft is a messy stream of consciousness, and do not worry about the tone of your early drafts. In fact the more upset you are, the more worthwhile it is actually to write a letter. It will help to “get the anger outside yourself” and help in the process of deciding what option to choose in dealing with the situation. And your last draft will be more effective if early drafts have helped you deal with your feelings.

Sometimes a person who has been offended will worry whether a direct approach to the offender will cause that person to retaliate. This is an important question to consider, but in North American society a well prepared, direct approach to an offender may actually be the option least likely to result in retaliation. Remember that most people in this culture would rather hear about a problem directly, and not from a third party. Also, you should keep a copy of the letter you send; this is likely to help in dealing with the problem if there should be retaliation or if the offense recurs.

A letter can be used by anyone who feels unreasonably offended, intimidated or harassed. It is particularly useful where people’s backgrounds are different. For example energetic managers may offend older people, with allusions to age, without really understanding the offense. Ethnic slurs, anti-Semitism, anti-gay jokes, poking fun at the handicapped, racist behavior and sexual harassment are all problems where a letter may help.

We do not recommend a “form” letter. Sometimes a brief note is better among friends. Whatever the case, the letter should fit the particular situation exactly. We do recommend three parts to a note or letter. The first is an objective statement of “the facts as I perceive them.” No feelings, judgments or opinions belong in this section. It must be scrupulously accurate, to be effective (and fair). The first section should not use euphemisms. It should be very matter of fact. If you are not sure whether a statement is factual, then say “I believe (this happened)” or “I think (this was the case).”

The second section is for opinions and feelings. “This is how the facts as I know them make me feel.” This is the appropriate place for a statement of damages, if any: “I feel I can no longer work with you;” “I was not able to work effectively for two weeks...”; “I felt terrible about what you did...”.
Finally the writer should state clearly what she or he thinks should happen next, and, if appropriate, ask for a specific remedy. “I ask that our relationship be on a purely professional basis from now on.” “I want a chance to go over my work with you again and to reconsider my evaluation (grade).” “Since I was unable to go on this sales trip because of your behavior, I want immediate assignment to the next trip.”

Many people ask if a letter really should be the first or the only attempt to deal with offensive behavior, and of course the answer is, “This depends on the people and the problem.”

It is particularly useful with sexual harassment, with offenders who believe that “no” means “maybe” or “yes”. A letter may work well in situations where an offender seems to have no idea of the pain being caused. Writing a letter may be particularly helpful when an offended person fears to come forward because she or he lacks conclusive proof of the offense, or where the offended person wishes to avoid the situation of “his word against mine.” Letters are useful beyond the hope of stopping offensive behavior; they provide good evidence for management or a court to take action if necessary. Letters are especially effective in dealing with very powerful people where a junior person otherwise has little leverage or fears retaliation. Writing a letter usually provides hope of ending harassment when the offended person wishes to avoid public exposure. Finally, writing a letter years after the offense may be an effective way of dealing with one’s feelings long after the “statute of limitations” has run out.

Once the letter is written, actually sending the letter to an offender should be carefully weighed against other alternatives. Should a letter go instead to a supervisor? Should you now go talk with a trusted colleague or counselor? Or with a support group or spouse? Writing a letter does not commit you to send it. However, it may be a good way to deal with feelings and organize your thoughts in the process of deciding your best option. And be sure to keep the letter; it may make you feel good about yourself for years.

This handout is an edited version of “Writing a Letter to a Person Who Has Harassed or Offended You” by Mary P. Rowe, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.