

Complaining in writing, politely and firmly

French B1 (intermediate) · Lesson

Quick answer: A formal French complaint letter uses *vous*, opens with *Madame, Monsieur,*, states the facts in the *passé composé* and *imparfait*, makes one clear request with a deadline, and ends with *Je vous prie d'agréer... l'expression de mes salutations distinguées*.

Level: French B1 (CEFR intermediate) · **Standards:** CEFR B1, Writing

What does a formal complaint letter contain?

A *lettre de réclamation* is a short, factual and polite letter sent to a company when a product or a service has failed. The tone stays formal: use *vous*, skip jokes, and state what happened, what it cost you and what you expect.

Awa Diallo, Lyon	Service clients
Lyon, le 4 avril	
Objet : réclamation, commande n° 4821	
Madame, Monsieur,	
Les faits : date, produit, problème	
La demande + le délai	
Formule de politesse	
Signature	

The layout of a formal complaint letter, from sender to signature.

Order of the blocks

1. Your address, then the company's address.
2. Place and date: Lyon, le 4 avril.
3. The subject line: *Objet : réclamation, commande n° 4821*.
4. The greeting: *Madame, Monsieur,*
5. Facts, request, deadline.
6. The closing formula, then your signature.

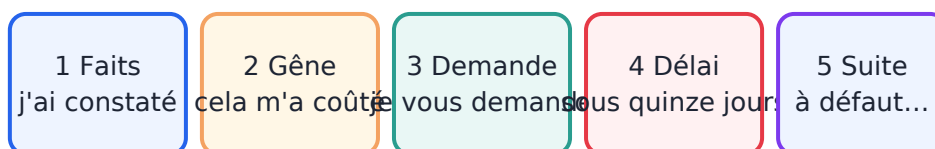
How do you describe the facts?

Use the passé composé for events and the imparfait for the background: Le 12 mars, j'ai commandé un lave-linge. La livraison était prévue le 20 mars, mais le colis est arrivé le 2 avril avec la porte cassée. — On March 12 I ordered a washing machine. Delivery was planned for March 20, but the parcel arrived on April 2 with a broken door.

Function	French	English
Purpose	Je me permets de vous écrire au sujet de...	I am writing to you about...
Fact	J'ai constaté que...	I noticed that...
Reminder	Malgré mes deux relances, je n'ai reçu aucune réponse.	Despite my two reminders, I got no reply.
Request	Je vous demande de me rembourser.	I ask you to refund me.
Deadline	dans un délai de quinze jours	within fifteen days
Consequence	À défaut, je saisisrai le médiateur.	Failing that, I will go to the mediator.

How do you ask without being rude?

Soften the request with the conditional or with souhaiter que + subjunctive: Je souhaiterais obtenir un échange. / Je souhaite que vous me remboursiez. After demander de and prier de, use an infinitive: Je vous prie de remplacer l'appareil.



One sentence per step keeps the letter short.

Five steps for the body of the letter.

Watch out, English speakers

Never write Cher Monsieur to an unknown reader: use Madame, Monsieur,. Do not translate "Sincerely" as Sincèrement. And demander que needs a subjunctive, so Je vous demande de rembourser is the safe pattern.

How do you end the letter?

The classic closing is one long sentence: Je vous prie d'agréer, Madame, Monsieur, l'expression de mes salutations distinguées. Add a short line before it if you wish: Dans l'attente de votre réponse,. The greeting is repeated inside the closing.

Good to know in France

For a serious dispute, people send a lettre recommandée avec accusé de réception, which proves the date the company received it. New goods carry a legal guarantee of conformity of at least two years, and companies must give consumers access to a free mediator.

Zoé's tip

Write your request as one sentence with a date, such as avant le 30 avril. A letter with a clear deadline is much harder to ignore.

Key points to remember

- Open with Madame, Monsieur, and never with Cher when the reader is unknown.
- The subject line starts with Objet : and names the order number.
- Facts use the passé composé for events and the imparfait for the background.
- A request is softened by je souhaiterais or je vous prie de + infinitive.
- A deadline such as dans un délai de quinze jours makes the letter effective.

Complaining in Writing, Politely and Firmly: frequently asked questions

How do you start a complaint letter in French?

Start with your details, the date and the subject line Objet :, then greet the reader with Madame, Monsieur,. The first sentence gives the purpose, for example Je me permets de vous écrire au sujet de ma commande.

Which tenses are used to describe the problem?

Use the passé composé for what happened and the imparfait for the situation around it. For instance, La livraison était prévue le 20 mars, mais le colis est arrivé le 2 avril.

How do you ask for a refund politely?

Say Je vous demande de me rembourser or the softer Je souhaiterais obtenir un remboursement. Add a deadline and the amount to be clear.

How do you end a formal letter in French?

Use Je vous prie d'agréer, Madame, Monsieur, l'expression de mes salutations distinguées. The titles in the greeting come back in the closing.

What is a lettre recommandée avec accusé de réception?

It is registered mail with proof of delivery. People use it in serious disputes because it proves when the company received the complaint.