

# Writing a firm and polite formal letter

French B2 (upper intermediate) · Lesson

**Quick answer:** A French formal letter (une lettre formelle) uses a fixed layout, vous from start to finish and polite formulas such as je vous serais reconnaissant de bien vouloir. State the facts, make one clear request or protest, set a deadline, and end with je vous prie d'agréer... to match the greeting.

**Level:** French B2 (CEFR upper intermediate) · **Standards:** CEFR B2, Writing

## What makes a French letter formal?

A formal letter (une lettre formelle) follows a fixed layout, uses vous throughout, and chooses polite, precise wording. At B2 you write about 250 words to ask for something or to protest, and the examiner reads your tone as closely as your grammar.

|                                                                                                                                      |                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Expéditeur<br>nom, adresse                                                                                                           | Destinataire<br>service, adresse |
| Lieu, le 5 mars                                                                                                                      |                                  |
| Objet : demande de remboursement                                                                                                     |                                  |
| Madame, Monsieur,                                                                                                                    |                                  |
| 1. Je vous écris au sujet de... (contexte)<br>2. Je vous demande de bien vouloir... (demande)<br>3. À défaut, je... (délai et suite) |                                  |
| Formule de politesse + signature                                                                                                     |                                  |

The blocks of a formal letter, top to bottom.

## Which phrases open, request and close the letter?

| Purpose    | Formula                                                       |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| Open       | Je me permets de vous écrire au sujet de...                   |
| Refer back | Suite à notre entretien du 12 mars...                         |
| Request    | Je vous serais reconnaissant(e) de bien vouloir m'indiquer... |
| Protest    | Je tiens à vous faire part de mon mécontentement.             |

| Purpose        | Formula                                                                               |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Set a deadline | dans un délai de quinze jours, dans les meilleurs délais                              |
| Close          | Je vous prie d'agréer, Madame, Monsieur, l'expression de mes salutations distinguées. |

### Politeness grammar

Use the conditional to soften a request: Je souhaiterais obtenir... rather than Je veux.... Use bien vouloir with an infinitive: Veuillez agréer... and Je vous prie de bien vouloir me répondre. Prefer nouns to spoken verbs: l'absence de réponse sounds firmer than vous n'avez pas répondu.

|                                                            |                                                               |                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Familier</b><br>Salut !<br>Je veux...<br>Réponds vite ! | <b>Courant</b><br>Bonjour,<br>Je voudrais...<br>Répondez-moi. | <b>Soutenu</b><br>Madame, Monsieur,<br>Je souhaiterais...<br>Veuillez me répondre. |
|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Three registers for the same message.

## How do you argue without sounding angry?

Give facts, dates and amounts first, then the request, then the consequence. A firm tone comes from precision, never from insults: Malgré mes deux relances, la caution n'a toujours pas été remboursée. — Despite my two reminders, the deposit has still not been returned.

### From spoken to written

Rendez-moi mon argent ! becomes Je vous prie de bien vouloir procéder au remboursement de la somme de 640 €. — Please arrange a refund of the sum of €640.

### Common mistakes of English speakers

Do not end with a literal "Sincerely": Sincèrement is too casual. Do not write Cher Madame; the formal greeting without a name is Madame, Monsieur,. Also, Je vous demande de venir is blunt; prefer Je vous serais reconnaissant(e) de bien vouloir passer.

### Deposit and registered mail

In France, a landlord must return a rental deposit within one month if the exit inventory matches the entry inventory, and within two months otherwise. A tenant who waits longer often sends a lettre recommandée avec accusé de réception, which gives proof of the date.

**Zoé's tip**

Reread your letter as if you were the person receiving it. If a sentence sounds like something you would say in a café, replace it with a calmer, longer formula.

**Key points to remember**

- A formal letter uses vous throughout and a fixed layout.
- Without a name, the greeting is Madame, Monsieur,.
- The conditional and bien vouloir soften every request.
- A deadline such as dans un délai de quinze jours makes a protest effective.
- The closing formula repeats the title used in the greeting.

## Writing a firm and polite formal letter: frequently asked questions

**How do you start a formal letter in French when you don't know the name?**

Write Madame, Monsieur, followed by a comma, on its own line. If you know the title, use Monsieur le Directeur, or Madame la Maire,.

**What is the standard closing formula?**

Use Je vous prie d'agréer, Madame, Monsieur, l'expression de mes salutations distinguées. The title in the formula must match the greeting you chose.

**Should a B2 letter use tu or vous?**

Always vous in a formal letter. Switching to tu, even once, is counted as a serious register mistake.

**What does objet mean at the top of a letter?**

The objet line states the purpose in a few words, for example Objet : demande de remboursement. It lets the reader sort the letter at a glance.

**How long should the DELF B2 formal letter be?**

The writing task expects about 250 words. Use three short paragraphs: context, request or protest with arguments, and a deadline with a polite closing.