

Writing polite formal letters and emails

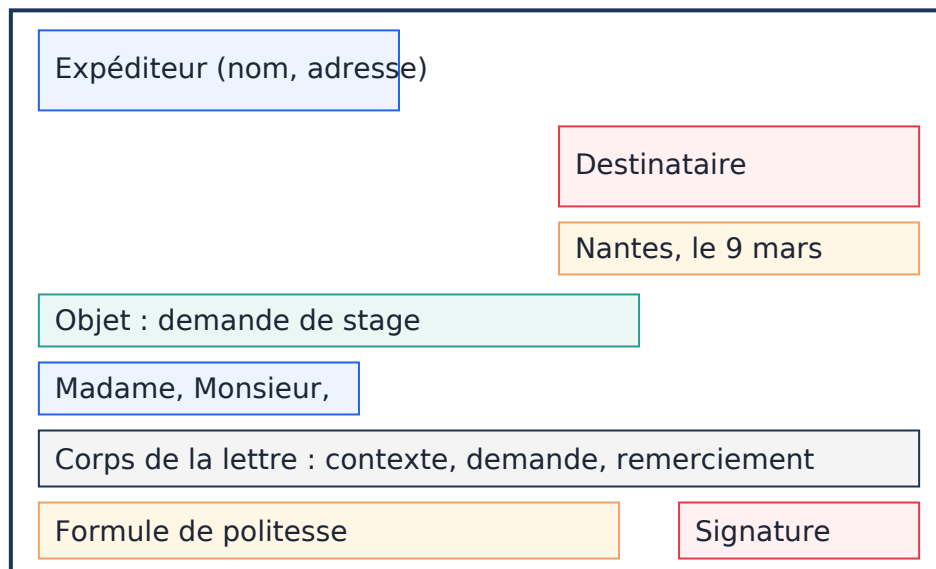
French 4 (high school) · Lesson

Quick answer: A formal French letter follows a fixed order: sender, recipient, place and date, subject line, greeting, body, closing formula and signature. Address the reader with *vous*, open with *Madame, Monsieur*, and repeat that title inside the closing sentence. Soften every request with the conditional, as in *Pourriez-vous m'indiquer...*

Level: French 4 (high school, ACTFL Intermediate Mid) · **Standards:** ACTFL Intermediate Mid, WL 1.2 Interpretive, WL 1.3 Presentational, WL 4.1 Language Comparisons, WL 2.1 Cultural Practices

How is a formal French letter laid out?

Every block has its own place. The sender's name and address go at the top left. The recipient's block sits lower, on the right. Then come the place and date, the subject line, the greeting, the body, the closing formula and the signature.



The blocks of a formal letter, from sender to signature.

Which greeting and closing go together?

The closing is one long, polite sentence. It echoes the title of the greeting, so the two must match.

Situation	Greeting	Closing
Unknown reader	Madame, Monsieur,	Je vous prie d'agréer, Madame, Monsieur, l'expression de mes salutations distinguées.

Situation	Greeting	Closing
Known title	Madame la Directrice,	Veuillez agréer, Madame la Directrice, mes salutations respectueuses.
Very official	Monsieur le Maire,	Je vous prie d'agréer, Monsieur le Maire, l'expression de ma haute considération.
Everyday email	Bonjour Madame,	Cordialement,

Common mistake

English speakers translate “Dear Sir” word for word and sign off with a short “Sincerely.” In French, never start with Cher for a stranger, and never shorten the closing of a printed letter to one word.

How do you ask politely or complain?

A good formal text has three moves: say why you are writing, state the request or the problem with facts, then thank the reader. Keep sentences short, avoid slang and contractions such as t'as, and never use exclamation marks. The same logic applies to an email, only the opening and the closing are lighter.

Courriel courant

Bonjour Madame, ... Cordialement,

Lettre classique

Madame, Monsieur, ... mes salutations distinguées.

Lettre solennelle

Monsieur le Maire, ... ma haute considération.

Three levels of formality, from lightest to most solemn.

Polite request patterns

- Je voudrais / J'aimerais + infinitive: Je voudrais m'inscrire au stage de voile. — I would like to sign up for the sailing course.
- Pourriez-vous + infinitive: Pourriez-vous m'indiquer les horaires ? — Could you tell me the schedule?
- Je vous serais reconnaissant(e) de bien vouloir + infinitive.

Complaint, step by step

J'ai constaté que la boucle du casque était cassée. — I noticed the buckle was broken.

Je regrette de n'avoir reçu aucune réponse. — I regret not having received any reply.

Je vous demande de bien vouloir me rembourser. — I ask you kindly to refund me.

Culture note

In France, a printed letter to an administration still ends with a long formula, and the sentence sounds old-fashioned to English ears. It signals respect, and French readers notice when it is missing.

Zoé's tip

Write the greeting first, then copy its title into the closing sentence. If you opened with Madame la Directrice, that exact title returns at the end.

Key points to remember

- The sender's block goes top left; the recipient's block sits lower on the right.
- The subject line starts with **Objet :** and names the topic in a few words.
- The closing formula is a full sentence that repeats the title used in the greeting.
- Requests use the conditional (je voudrais, pourriez-vous) or je vous serais reconnaissant(e) de bien vouloir + infinitive.
- Emails may end with Cordialement,; printed letters keep the long formula.

Writing Polite Formal Letters and Emails: frequently asked questions

How do you start a formal letter in French when you do not know the name?

Write Madame, Monsieur, followed by a comma on its own line. Do not add "Dear." You continue the body on a new line, starting with a capital letter.

Should I use tu or vous in a formal email?

Always use vous with a stranger, an official or a teacher. Switch to tu only if the other person writes to you with tu first.

What does "Objet :" mean?

It introduces the subject line, as in an English email. Keep it short and factual, for example **Objet :** demande de renseignements.

Is Cordialement enough to end an email?

Yes, for everyday work or school emails. For a complaint to an official, a first contact or a job

application, prefer the full formula with Je vous prie d'agréer...

Why is the conditional used in requests?

The conditional softens a demand and makes it a courteous question. Je veux sounds like an order; je voudrais sounds respectful.