

HFWA receives many phone calls from foster parents asking for advice on how to advocate for their needs or the needs of the children in their homes. For example, a foster parent called recently (we'll call her Susie) and described the numerous phone calls she has made to the social worker regarding her request to take her child on a trip to a neighbor island for a family gathering. She had yet to get a return call. Susie knows she shouldn't make the trip without the social worker's knowledge. Also, she isn't sure if maybe the court needs to be involved, since the child would miss two visits with the birth parents. But now it is less than a month before the trip and she doesn't know what to do to get a response.

Our first question is, "Have you put the request or information in writing?" Advocates know that if a question or statement isn't written down, it wasn't said. Now this may sound a bit extreme, but it is an important concept to understand and believe if you are really interested in making sure your requests are documented. And, quite frankly, it often makes it easier for the social worker to have something in writing that clearly spells out what you want, rather than having to keep track via her notes on phone messages and conversations.

It is true that not everything needs to be in writing. But, if you have been unsuccessful in getting a response after a number of phone calls, why would you keep making more phone calls? You've probably heard the joke about the definition of insanity—when you keep doing the same thing over and over but expect a different result. It may be time to change your strategy.

"Ok," you say, "maybe you have a point about the importance of putting information in writing, but I'm not all that good at writing, so how do I do this?" Well, that's what the rest of this article will help you with.

## **12 Rules for Writing Great Letters**

You want your letters to create a good first impression. This article, adapted from 12 Rules for Writing Great Letters, found at [www.wrightslaw.com](http://www.wrightslaw.com), will help you accomplish your objectives. Because that website focuses on special education, there is heavy emphasis on advocating with school system. But the same strategies apply to working with DHS, DOH, or any other agency.

### **1. Before you write a letter, answer these questions.**

Why am I writing? What am I trying to accomplish? What do I want? What are my goals?

Get three blank sheets of paper.

On the first sheet write "WHY? Why am I writing this letter?"

On the second sheet write "WHAT? What are my goals in writing this letter?"

On the third sheet write "Other Thoughts."

Brainstorm. Write down your thoughts. Make lists. Don't worry about writing in sentences or prioritizing. Your goal is to dump your thoughts from your brain onto these sheets of paper. Write down any additional ideas and thoughts on the third sheet of paper. You will write down your important thoughts in less than ten minutes. Do not allow yourself to obsess about details. You are interested in the Big Picture.

### **2. First Letters are Always Drafts**

You write letters to:

- (1) make a request
- (2) clarify an event
- (3) decline a request
- (4) express appreciation
- (5) create a paper trail

Some letters have more than one purpose. Because letters you write to the agency, the court, or the school are so important, you need to do it right.

### **3. Allow for "cooling off" and revision time.**

After you write the first draft, put your letter away for a few days. **DO NOT SEND IT!** Firing off a letter is one of the most common mistakes parents make. You must give "cooling off" and revision time. A "cooling-off period" allows you to look at your letter more objectively. If you send a letter without allowing for "cooling off" and revision time, you'll probably damage your credibility and your position. Sometimes, this damage is impossible to repair.

### **4. You are always negotiating for services.**

As you are learning, you negotiate with the school for special education services or with DHS for foster care services. Whether you are negotiating with the school for special services or with a car dealer for a car, the principles are the same. You never begin negotiations by telling the other side what your "bottom line" is.

In negotiations, parents often make the mistake of being too open. Parents think they have to share everything with the agency - immediately. They hope that by sharing everything, they'll be rewarded with the help their child needs. This doesn't happen.

You need to share the results of all evaluations and any other new information with the agency, as soon as you receive it. However, you do not need to share your wish list or your bottom line.

### **5. Never threaten. Never telegraph your punches!**

If you make threats (i.e., "we're going to call our lawyer"), you may experience temporary relief but you'll pay a high price later. As a negotiator, one of the most powerful forces you have on your side is the "Fear of the Unknown." When you threaten, you are telling the other side what you plan to do. If you tell them what you plan to do, you have told them how to protect themselves. At that moment, you lose your advantage - which is the wonderful, powerful Fear of the Unknown. Never telegraph your punches - you will destroy their power and effectiveness.

**EXAMPLE of Fear of the Unknown.** You went to the doctor to get the results of your annual physical, including your lab work. As your doctor, I come in and tell you that:

*The results of your blood work are very concerning. However, I'm behind schedule right now. We need to admit you to the hospital as soon as bed space is available - probably tomorrow or the next day. I don't have time to discuss the results with you right now. I'm behind schedule and have other patients waiting. I'll be in to talk with you after you are admitted.*

**Fear. Panic.** What happens now? You'll imagine the worst-case scenario. Now, let's change the facts. You are at the doctor's office to get the results of your physical. As your doctor, I come in and tell you that:

*Some of your blood work is not clear. It's probably only ABC and if it is ABC, we have nothing to worry about. The worst-case scenario is that you have XYZ. XYZ is inconvenient but it's certainly not life threatening. Nine times out of ten, people have ABC. However, it's still important for us to rule out XYZ. Unfortunately, we can't run the additional tests here. We just aren't equipped to do it. So, we need to send you to the hospital where they have more sophisticated equipment. We can schedule your admission tomorrow or the next day.*

**Can you feel the difference?** When you know what you're facing, is your fear as intense? No. If you don't fill in answers - if you don't telegraph your punches - then the fear of the unknown will

force the other side to attribute more power to you. Because they'll be in the "fear of the unknown," they'll wonder what you're going to do – and they'll imagine a worst-case scenario.

#### **6. Assume that you won't be able to resolve your dispute.**

A special education due process hearing will be held - and you will not be able to testify or tell your side of the story. These are important assumptions. These assumptions are one of the keys to successful letter writing. Assume things will get worse. Assume that success in securing services for your child depends on how well you describe the events that cause you to write to the school. A letter you write today may sit in your child's file for months or years. If things blow up later, these letters can be the most compelling evidence in your favor.

#### **7. Make your problem unique.**

If you are writing a letter about a specific problem (i.e., a teacher's refusal to follow an IEP), present your situation as unique. You want the person who reads your letter to see your problem as different. You want them to think "Wow! We've never had this problem before!"

By presenting your problem as unique, you're trying to avoid "We ALWAYS handle ABC situations this way. We can't make exceptions for you." If you present your situation as unique, it won't be listed in the Bureaucrat's Big Book of Rules and Procedures. Remember: bureaucracies are inflexible and rule-bound. By presenting your situation as unique, you can sometimes get people in the system to see things differently. If they see things differently, they may be able to handle things differently.

#### **8. You ARE writing letters to a Stranger.**

You are NOT writing letters to the school or DHS. You are really writing a "Letter to the Stranger." Why? You have to assume that someone outside your school or DHS system will decide this issue. This person will have no personal interest in you or your child. This person won't care what "program" your child is enrolled in.

When you write letters, keep this Stranger in your mind's eye. Who is this Stranger? What does he look like? How does he think? The Stranger is an older person who has worked hard all his life. He's conservative, fair, and open minded. He knows that life is often difficult and unfair. He doesn't have much patience with complainers. He's more sympathetic to people who have a plan to solve problems. He dresses casually. When he sits down to read your letter, he sips a cup of tea and lights his pipe.

The Stranger doesn't know you, your child, or your situation. Your letter gives you the chance to sell the Stranger on the justice of your cause. You can describe the problem and tell the Stranger what should be done to make things right.

**Judges are Strangers.** Most judges aren't knowledgeable about special education or children with disabilities. When you write letters, you are also trying to educate and inform this person.

#### **9. You write business letters to the school or DHS.**

When you write business letters, you use tactics and strategy (your brain). You do not demand, threaten, ventilate anger or frustration (your emotions). If you are writing an important letter to the school, you want it to be smooth, polished, and professional. Begin your letter chronologically and develop it chronologically. A letter might begin like this:

*Dear Mr. So and So:*

*We received a letter from you dated February 1, and were very perplexed by the content. To put my letter into the proper context, let me go back to the beginning . . .*

Do not attack or express anger. Resist the urge to take cheap shots.

### **10. NEVER make judgments.**

"What a jerk you were! You didn't have enough guts to be straight-up with us!" NO! NEVER be judgmental. You want the Stranger to be interested, not anxious. Provide information logically, then let the Stranger draw conclusions. You want your Stranger to conclude "What a jerk!"

### **11. You are telling a story.**

Write your letter chronologically. Don't broach the main issue in the first paragraph of your letter. Tell your story chronologically, weaving in your facts. Your objective is to write a letter that is interesting, and easy to follow.

Remember, when you write a letter to the school, this is your chance to "*present your case*" and tell your story. The Stranger won't understand the background or history unless you provide this information. You can provide background information very naturally and easily by going back to the beginning and writing a chronological story.

**For example: "On DATE, our son entered your program because . . .** You can move the clock earlier if this helps you tell the story. "*We realized that our daughter's problems were serious when she was unable to communicate with others by her third birthday.*"

Where should you begin? Begin wherever you want. In your mind, you know when things "began." Then, continue to tell your story: "Then this happened . . . When she started school . . ." You are telling a story and you are using your facts. Select your facts carefully and keep your opinions to a bare minimum. As you tell the story, you're planting seeds in the memories of Strangers who read your letter later. Let these Strangers water the seeds using their own imaginations!

There is another reason to write chronologically. If you jump from issue to issue, the reader will get confused, then frustrated. Readers have negative reactions to people who write letters that are hard to follow. The Stranger may get angry at you if he can't figure out your point. If the Stranger gets frustrated, he will quit reading – and he'll blame you for this frustration. You don't want this to happen to you.

### **12. Write letters that are clear and easy to understand.**

Letters provide you with an opportunity to make your case while you create a positive impression. An important part of the impression you make will depend on how you express yourself. We don't like to think that our writing skills need improving. Unless you are a professional writer or editor, you will need to spend time improving your writing skills in four areas: **clarity, brevity, interest, accuracy.**

ALWAYS read your letters aloud. This is a valuable tip from professional editors. ALWAYS have at least one outside person read your letters. Your "reader" should be someone who will tell you the truth, especially when you don't make things clear or you need to tone the letter down. Ask your "reader" to pretend that he or she is a Stranger. You want your reader to tell you if you answered the three questions we listed at the beginning of this chapter:

**What am I trying to accomplish?**

**What do I want?**

**What are my goals?**

The answers to these questions must be clear. After your "Stranger" has read the draft of your letter, ask the person to answer these questions. If the reader cannot answer these questions clearly, it means you haven't expressed yourself clearly. Remember: your letter is to the Stranger, not the special ed supervisor or the social service administrator. If you find yourself explaining your real point to the reader, stop, and write down the explanation. Incorporate this into your letter.

## Letter Writing Tips

### **Make It Clear**

It's incredibly easy to get side-tracked when writing letters. This is especially true if you're feeling upset or emotional. Remember: You're writing to make a point, clarify an event, make a request, and create a paper trail. Refer back to the sheets of paper you used during the brainstorming stage. Have you answered these three questions?

Why are you writing?

What is the point you want to make?

What do you want?

Talk out loud. Avoid vague words, jargon, and long rambling sentences. Use short words when possible. If you naturally use long words to express yourself, try substituting short words that mean the same thing. Long rambling letters put people off because they are hard to read. You don't want this to happen. You want the reader, your Stranger, to enjoy reading your letter.

### **Make It Short**

Say what you have to say. Be succinct. Most people don't have the time to read long letters. If you repeat yourself, you're wasting the reader's time and your letter will generate a negative response. Keep your message short and to the point. There is one exception to this rule. If you are writing a letter to request a due process hearing, then the letter needs to be a comprehensive "Letter to the Stranger." This letter should tell story, from the beginning, using visual imagery.

### **Make It Alive**

Speak directly to the reader. Use the same words and figures of speech you use in your day-to-day speech. Think about the Stranger as a real person. Visualize the Stranger and imagine yourself talking with him about your problems. This is the person you are writing to. You're not firing a letter off to the person who chaired the IEP meeting and didn't have the courage to tell you that the school had just suspended your child, as you see in the example below. Use words like "you," "we," "us," "our" to make your letter more personal. Everyone who reads the letter will feel that the message is directed at them.

### **Make it RIGHT**

Letters filled with errors are distracting. Readers get so distracted by misspelled words and poor grammar that they miss the point. If you send a letter that's filled with mistakes, your real message is that you are sloppy and careless. If you prepare your letter on a computer, it will be easier to read. The Stranger will thank you for little touches like this. Your goal is to eliminate all spelling, grammatical, and formatting errors from your letters. The problem? We don't notice our own errors! The solution? Always have at least one other person proof-read your letters. Try to locate more than one proof-reader. Buy a book about "How to Write Business Letters."

Letter writing is an art. A well written letter is a pleasure to read. It's also very hard work.