

How to Write a Prayer Letter

Connect with your supporters and involve them in your life and ministry by following the steps in this guide.

Is this your first prayer letter? Whether you're going on a short-term trip, a one-year internship, or entering full-time ministry, the essentials of prayer letters are the same.

In the next few pages, we'll show you how to create a prayer letter template, write updates that will help build relationships, and decide who to include on your mailing list.

Step 1: Overcoming the Blank Page

Blank pages and empty templates are intimidating. Where do you start?

Every prayer letter needs to include certain details, so we'll start by setting up a template that covers the easy, necessary information, which will help focus your readers' attention on the story you'll be telling.

Step 2: What to Write

Now that you have a layout to work with, it's time to tell a story.

People are praying for and financially supporting your ministry either because they care for you, or because they care about the ministry you're doing – and often they care about both.

Your prayer letter should involve your readers vicariously in your life and ministry, and help maintain and build your relationship at a distance.

The best way to do this is to tell a story in each letter that you send.

Step 3: Build Your Mailing List

Once you have your letter written, who should you send it to?

This sounds like a simple question, but it's worth some thought, particularly if you're a full-time missionary.

Your prayer letters are your supply line, for both prayer and finances, so you want to have a healthy, growing list. On the other hand, it costs money to send prayer letters, so you can't (and shouldn't) just add everyone you meet to your list.

Step 4: Send Your Letters

Many missionaries send letters themselves. Others rely on friends, family, or churches to print and mail letters for them.

A better option is to use a prayer letter service. These are usually small businesses run by Christians who are dedicated to helping missionaries communicate with supporters by taking on what can be a challenging, time-consuming task.

Larger prayer letter services, including prayerletters.com, use economies of scale to buy production-quality printers and mailing equipment, while still focusing on the particular mailing needs of missionaries. This helps your letters stand out, while still looking personal and avoiding a "corporate," bulk-mail feel.

Step 1: Overcoming the Blank Page

If you're writing your first prayer letter and aren't sure where to start, give yourself some quick wins by setting up a layout.

Choose Your Software

On Windows, Microsoft Publisher is a great choice, if you have access to it. Microsoft Word is also extremely common.

On Mac, Pages is a great choice, and readily available.

On Linux, OpenOffice is probably your best bet (or one of its clones).

If you have, or want to have, any background in design or publishing, Adobe's Creative Suite (Windows or Mac) is excellent, and is available on a subscription basis. Be aware that it has a learning curve, but is tremendously powerful once you've figured it out. InDesign and Photoshop are the tools you'll use most.

There are many other options available. The key thing is to choose a program that will help you write your letters, rather than get in your way. To that end, it's worth taking a few days to learn as much as you can about the program you choose (all of the programs listed here have extensive online training available, either for free or for minimal cost). But you needn't do that right away.

Start with a Template

Nearly every word processor and page layout tool has built-in templates nowadays, and they're great places to start, particularly if you don't consider yourself a designer.

Additionally, a web search for "[your software] newsletter templates" will give you many more options. Add the word "free" if you want (though spending a few dollars for a design you like can be well worth it, and you'll often get better choices).

Browse through your options, and pick one that stands out to you. Don't spend much time on this step – preferably not more than ten minutes. You can always change it later, and this is an easy place to lose track of time.

In most cases, you'll want either a one-page or a two-page template. Four pages is too long for most prayer letters, but you can often take a four-page template and cut out the middle two pages if you like the front and back.

Add Essential Information

Your template most likely includes a header and footer. That's where you'll put all of the contact details and ministry info that will be the same for every letter. If the template has a sidebar, you can also spill over into that area.

1. Your Name

Put this in the header. You'll generally use your full name (including spouse, if you're married). If you have kids, a common choice is "The Smiths" (no apostrophe) or "The Smith Family".

2. Your Ministry Location

This also goes in the header. It can be on the same line as your name (e.g. The Smiths in Honduras) or separate (Serving with [ministry] in Honduras).

These first two items may seem utterly obvious, but they're extremely helpful for churches, which may want to post your letter on a bulletin board or pass it around to Sunday School classes.

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3. A Recent Photo of Yourself

One of the best ways to keep your relationship with readers from becoming stale and impersonal is to include a recent photo with every letter.

You needn't change it every time, but if your photo is older than six months (and certainly if it's older than a year), it's time to get an updated shot.

The photo needn't be a professional studio portrait, though if you have one, it's fine to use it.

Include the photo in the header or in a sidebar. If it's part of your story (e.g. a ministry-in-action photo), it can go there instead.

4. Your Sending Agency or Church

Some of your supporters may be more connected to your ministry than to you personally. Your ministry also provides accountability and oversight, which will help your readers be more comfortable, particularly when challenges come up.

If your sending agency has a recognizable logo, consider including it, though it isn't necessary.

Place this in either the header or the footer.

5. Contact Information

Include your mailing address, E-Mail address, and phone number. If you're married, include a separate E-Mail address and phone number for your spouse, if applicable.

You're not likely to be overrun with people using this information to contact you, but some will, and you should always encourage two-way communication.

All of this will usually be in the footer.

6. Giving Information

Include a mailing address for checks, and a web site for online gifts (if available).

Place this in the footer or at the bottom of a sidebar, and don't draw attention to it. People who need it will find it, and for the most part, you shouldn't be focusing on finances in your prayer letters.

Create Placeholders

Finally, there are some elements that should be in each letter, but which will be different each time. Create boxes for them so that writing your letter has some "fill-in-the-blank" elements.

1. Date

This will generally just be the month and the year. There's usually no need to include the day.

2. Praises and Prayer Requests

This can be either one section or two, depending on your preferences.

3. Main Story

This is where you'll write the actual update. Include space for one or two pictures.

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4. Family Update (Optional)

Many missionaries include a “Kids Corner” as a recurring element in their prayer letters. If you have young kids, this probably isn’t optional.

Create space for a picture and a brief family update, typically one paragraph.

At times, you’ll want to dedicate more of the letter to family updates, in which case you can use the main story section of the letter as well.

That’s it! With a template ready to go, you can focus on writing your prayer letter without figuring out a new layout each time.

Step 2: What to Write

Your prayer letter should involve your readers vicariously in your life and ministry, and help maintain and build your relationship at a distance.

Most of the people reading your letters have no idea what it's like to be a missionary, except through your updates and those of other missionaries they know and support. They are involved in ministry through you, and want to know what it's like.

Therefore, each of your updates should focus on one highlight of something that has happened since your last letter. You can list a few others, but it's better to talk about one ministry experience in depth than it is to write a paragraph each about three or four activities.

Many times, you won't have any trouble thinking about a topic for your letters – it'll be more an issue of choosing just one. If you're facing writer's block, however, we've put together a list of prayer letter topics to provide some inspiration below ("Overcoming Writer's Block" on the next page).

Tell a Story

Think of your letter as a story rather than a report. Consider what makes for a good (true!) story, and include those elements in your writing.

You may not consider yourself to be a natural story-teller. That's okay – with practice, you'll get better at it over time, and writing a story is easier than telling a story, since you have the opportunity to make changes.

Include a Picture

Always include one or more pictures in your letters. Not everyone will read the letter, but everyone will look at at least one picture, along with the caption underneath. A carefully chosen photo will draw people's attention and make them more likely to read your update for more details.

Pictures also engage us more fully than text alone. It's one thing to read about Sarah's conversion story, but it's much better to be able to see Sarah while we're reading about her.

Ask for Prayer and Praise

In addition to telling your story, you should ask for your readers to engage in ministry with you through prayer and praise. Give them specific areas where they can thank God for things that are happening in your ministry, as well as areas where you would appreciate prayer.

We don't recommend asking for financial involvement in your prayer letters, other than a brief "How to Give" section in the footer of your template. Instead, keep your prayer letters focused on building your relationships and telling about ministry, and send a special financial appeal – using a different layout – once or twice per year.

Include a Personal/Family Update

After your main story, or in a sidebar, most letters should include an update on how you and your family (if applicable) are doing. Write about both the ups and downs.

A personal update reminds people that you're human, not some holier-than-thou super-Christian. For your friends and family who are on the list, it's also an important part of maintaining your relationship with them, and will encourage them to reach out to you, both in good times and bad, and provide updates of their own.

Think "Epistle," not "Compendium"

Keep your letters short. They should be a single piece of paper, either single-sided or double-sided.

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Longer letters will generally be skimmed, and may not be read at all, except for your most devoted supporters with extensive free time.

Edit as much as necessary to get your letters down to this size. If you feel like you have too much to cover, break it out into several letters, particularly if you're not yet sending monthly letters.

An exception to this rule would be an annual report to donors. In this case, we recommend one ledger sheet folded into four pages. Write a cover story on the front, use the two inner sheets to highlight your ministry activities over the course of the year, and use the back page, for information and financial summaries.

Overcoming Writer's Block

Are you suffering from writer's block? Are you in need of some inspiration for a topic for your next letter? See if any of these questions spark an idea:

- Who have you been meeting with lately? What's happening in their life?
- What conferences are coming up? Will you be going solo, with your team, or bringing some local people with you? What do you hope will be the short-term and long-term effects of this conference?
- Are you planning any other travel, either for vacation or ministry support? What goals and prayer requests do you have for this trip? If it's just after such a trip, what were some highlights?
- Have you recently been to a conference or gone on a trip? If so, what were the highlights? Include pictures!
- How does "a day in the life of _____" look? The focus can be yourself, a local Christian (either a specific person or in general), a local non-Christian (ditto), etc.
- Who or what can your supporters pray for? If you've mentioned someone or something in a recent letter (or even a not-so-recent letter), do you have an update for your supporters?
- What are other members of your team writing about? Avoid copying someone else's letter verbatim, especially if there's overlap on your mailing lists, but it's a good source of ideas.
- Have you talked about your ministry's vision or mission lately? Why do you do what you do? Did something happen recently that epitomizes why you are where you are?
- How does your ministry vision or mission play itself out in your daily life? How does it affect your point of view as you're walking/driving around town?

Brainstorming

Hopefully one of the ideas above will help you come up with a topic for your next prayer letter. If not, try having your own brainstorming session, working off of one or more of the following questions:

- What might I write a prayer letter about, at some other time of year?
- What might someone else write a prayer letter about, if they were ministering here?
- What might I write a prayer letter about, if I were ministering somewhere else?
- What might someone I know (name a specific person) write a prayer letter about, if they were in my shoes?
- What would I never, ever write a prayer letter about?

Get some thoughts written down, no matter how crazy they seem, and keep going until you have between 10 and 20. As in any brainstorming session, don't judge any idea's merit until you're done. The purpose is solely to get ideas on the table, en masse.

Once you have a list of ideas, then see how you can take one or more of them and shape it into a letter, to ensure that you maintain regular communication with your supporters. Save some of the others for future letters.

Step 3: Build Your Mailing List

Your prayer letters are your supply line, for both prayer and finances, so you want to have a healthy, growing list.

When you're in the field, your prayer letters are your primary means for building relationships with existing and potential supporters. Therefore, it's important to include a wide mix of people on your mailing list.

This is the pool of people who will be most likely to help you meet any financial needs that come up. As people transition off your support team for various reasons, having prospective supporters on your list can be the difference between staying in the field and having to return to full-time support-raising.

Current Donors

Every donor should be on your mailing list unless they specifically ask you to remove them from all communications (it can happen, but it's fairly rare).

For most people, the cost of sending a year's worth of prayer letters to a donor is well under 1% of that person's annual giving. Since prayer letters are how you keep up that relationship, it's unwise to try and lower costs in this area.

Lapsed Donors

Lapsed donors are people who used to give regularly, but for one reason or another have stopped doing so.

In most cases, you should keep these people on your list for several years. They may be still interested in your ministry, but currently lack the means to give, and you show your appreciation for their past involvement by keeping them on your list.

These people will often give end-of-year gifts if you send out a special appeal, provided you've continued to send them updates throughout the year. If you maintain your relationship with them, they may also start giving on a regular basis again. Both of these scenarios help your ministry, and it also helps them be involved in ministry.

If you've completely lost contact with someone (i.e. they still receive your letters, but never reply by mail, phone, E-Mail, or financial gifts), it makes sense to remove them from your list after 3-5 years.

Prayer Partners

If someone has committed to pray regularly for your ministry, they should absolutely be on your prayer letter list. You should also consider having a special prayer chain E-Mail list just for them, and send out weekly or biweekly short E-Mail updates with specific prayer requests for the coming week or two.

Churches

Churches should get both a printed copy and a PDF version of your prayer letter by E-Mail, to allow for easier distribution to Sunday School classes, the missions committee, and the prayer team.

Ask the church secretary or the missions committee if it would be helpful for you to send several printed copies of your letter in one envelope to distribute or post on bulletin boards (if appropriate for your location).

Potential Supporters

This group is easy to overlook, but they can make the difference between staying in the field or having to come back early to raise more funds.

Potential supporters are people you meet, often through referrals or church visits, who don't commit right

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away to supporting you financially or through regular prayer. Some of these people may sign up for your list just to be polite. Many others are genuinely interested, but aren't yet comfortable enough with your ministry to commit.

Your prayer letters are especially important for these people, because they're where you communicate your passion for what you're doing, and show the type of ministry that they can be supporting through their prayers and gifts.

Aim to have at least three potential supporters on your mailing list for every donor. This will give you a large pool of people who could join your ministry over time as you build a relationship with them, and a 3:1 ratio keeps your prayer letter costs easy to manage.

Contact each supporter at least twice during the year. One of those (typically in November or December) can be an appeal to make a one-time gift to meet special needs, or to start making a monthly gift.

The second contact should be a personal, short E-Mail asking for a quick reply. It should not be in November or December, when many people are getting bombarded by donation requests. You're basically checking for a pulse to make sure they're still interested in your ministry. If someone repeatedly fails to reply to these attempts, they're probably not actually interested in your ministry, and can be removed from your list.

An easy way to do this is to confirm that their mailing address is still correct, so that they can just send a quick "Yes" reply immediately.

Family and Friends

Finally, include your immediate family and close friends on your prayer letter list. Add more family members and friends based on their interest. They may or may not be financial or prayer supporters (or even Christians), but they're people who care about you and what you're doing, and it's a good and easy way to keep up your relationship while you're away.

If you have young kids, this is even more important, as you'll frequently include pictures of your kids in your letters. Be sure all grandparents are on your list in this case!

What's Next?

Now that you've created a template, written your letter, and created your mailing list, it's time to send your letters!

This is where a prayer letter service comes in. If you've ever sent a mailing by hand, you know that it's not much fun, especially after the first few letters. A prayer letter service specializes in printing and mailing letters for you, so you can stay focused on people rather than printers, paper, and envelopes.

We hope that you'll try us out. If you have any questions about prayer letters or prayer letter services, please contact us at service@prayerletters.com. We're also typically available by live chat during business hours.