



“Drafting a Letter” for People Dealing with Harassment or Bullying

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ABSTRACT

As an early ombuds, the author discovered that drafting a structured letter about being mistreated often helped constituents—with respect to both process and outcomes. This article describes the origins of “drafting a letter” with its uses, benefits, and sources of power. Drafting such a letter provides a tripartite structure (see the Appendix) for a mistreated person to present evidence—from diaries, calendars, communications, videos, photos, phone records, etc. This structure helps in considering many options for action, for example, just thinking things through, gathering more evidence, informal discussions, mediation, or a formal complaint. Or the writer may send the letter privately to the perceived offender; such letters may work to stop specific misbehavior. If the behavior then does not stop, a safe-guarded copy of the letter can be used as evidence that the writer tried to stop it. And—very importantly—just drafting a letter may help with pain, anger, and grief.

KEYWORDS

organizational ombuds, harassment, bullying, mistreatment, drafting a complaint letter, sources of power

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In 1973, I became an early type of organizational ombuds at (Rowe, 2021a; Rowe, 2023a). In my first years at MIT, I met with many visitors to my office who felt disrespected, harassed, and bullied, and who often described mistreatment behind closed doors. (Like many organizational ombuds, I use the neutral term “visitor” to refer to a person who comes to meet with an ombud.) Visitors described racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, ableist, and ageist behavior, abuse based on religion, mistreatment based on more than one aspect of social identity, and just plain meanness. Many complainants believed that no supervisor would listen. These visitors felt any action they took would lead to loss of important relationships and other bad consequences, including retaliation. Many visitors were upset and depressed, believing that they had no power except to leave the university. This was seven years before the EEOC Guidelines of 1980 on sexual harassment (U.S. EEOC, 2010). What could I offer to these visitors? I describe here an option, initially developed from sexual harassment cases, that can work for all harassment and bullying—and may help in dealing with any perceived injury.

Late in 1973, the MIT president and chancellor formulated a statement against all harassment (Rowe, 2021a). However, there were few guidelines or procedures to help an offended person—or me—except for a formal grievance process that few people elected to use. Most people with concerns felt no one would believe them—that they lacked conclusive proof of mistreatment. Without conclusive proof, they thought mistreatment could not be stopped.

I tried to think how to deal with this “evidence question” in a way that would be helpful to my visitors—and be fair, under the circumstances, for all parties—and be effective in stopping mistreatment. I wanted complainants to be able to use the facts they had in a way that made sense to them and to be able to say what they wanted as a specific remedy. I also wanted to learn more about racism and sexism and other mistreatment for reports back to my organization, to foster a systems approach to addressing harassment (Rowe, 1996).

As it turned out, I stumbled on a method that often is helpful in more than one way: drafting a letter to the perceived offender about the mistreatment. The first article I wrote about this technique, in 1973, was just called “Drafting a Letter” (Rowe, 2021a); I rewrote the guidelines many times as I struggled to develop options for visitors to my office who were dealing with concerns about mistreatment. Early versions of the guidelines were widely copied around North America, including half a million copies distributed in schools (Rowe, 2021a). The present version is now widely used and is available to all, under a Creative Commons license, in the Appendix. Many consultants and support groups now offer similar guidelines.

At the beginning, I was mainly hoping to make inroads on the “evidence problem,” by helping visitors to collect their facts in a structured way that might help others to understand what had happened—and that also would help them to think through any possible remedies. However, to my surprise, I soon learned that asking someone to stop harassment might in fact be effective in stopping specific mistreatment, depending on how the request is made. And other benefits then quickly appeared.

First, just drafting a letter is generally safe, as an initial step for frightened people who have been harassed or bullied and who wish to maintain control over the matter. It can be a path for “at least doing something rather than nothing” and helping the writer to feel less frightened. Collecting the evidence in the structure of a letter may help with the acute pain of being mistreated. Thinking through the extent of harm—and possible remedies—helps in thinking about all the different options for action. Many letter writers have found that drafting the letter, while very painful at the time, helped them to be able to sleep at night.



It frequently happens that drafting a structured letter illuminates formal or informal options for the writer that they had not yet seriously considered, such as filing a grievance, asking for harassment training in their unit, asking for a transfer, or appealing to an affinity group for help. Occasionally, drafting the letter helps letter writers to understand ways in which they might have misunderstood or contributed to the situation they were in, and occasionally they decide to change their own behavior as part of a strategy to change the situation.

Sending such a letter privately, to the offender, works surprisingly frequently to stop abuse, especially if it is obvious that the writer can prove that the letter was received. Sometimes this option serves to get the writer a specific remedy that matters to them. Sometimes it serves as a platform to help communications between the people involved. If abuse continues, a copy of the letter can later be used as evidence, to illuminate the nature of the offense and demonstrate that the letter writer has tried to get the behavior to stop.

How did all this come about; how did the technique develop? I offer three heavily disguised cases that marked important points in my learning about helping people who have been offended. The cases describe the dilemmas that I faced along with my visitors, how I discovered that drafting a letter might be helpful—and the likely sources of power of such a letter. As I write, nearly fifty years later, drafting a letter remains a powerful first step for beginning to deal with bullying and harassment and other forms of mistreatment. The present version of this guide, *“If You Have Been Harassed or Bullied: Some Ideas to Consider,”* appears as a Creative Commons appendix at the end of this essay.

AN EARLY CASE: “TELL HIM TO STOP IT”

In my ombuds work at MIT I often received calls about harassment from bystanders, as well as from those harassed and bullied. In my first month, a woman from Harvard—referred to me by a friend of a college classmate—called and asked if she could come over and talk. She was hesitant and spoke slowly. She did not wish to be seen coming to see me. She quickly assented to my suggestion of meeting after hours at the MIT chapel, a serene and sacred place. She met me in that beautiful little building—the moat around it was dry in the winter, so the chapel was darker than it is when there is water reflecting up into the room itself. The room was empty, cold, and austere, but it seemed serene and safe, as we sat in high-backed rush chairs.

The chairs, as it happened, were rather uncomfortable. And the story I was to hear was very discomfoting.

My visitor spoke very softly, and she was very serious. “Would you be willing to see a friend of mine who works at MIT—someone I have known all my life?” I nodded. “Could you see her at five o’clock?” she whispered. Of course, I would see her. I suggested that the friend could come just after 5 p.m. the following day to my office. The go-between from Harvard left immediately, and I sat thinking for long minutes about what to do—in this very beautiful chapel, in a university about which, as a very new employee, I knew very little.

The following day, a quiet woman came at 5 p.m., and hesitantly came into my office. She was much older than I, perhaps in her late sixties. She sat hunched, a small, sad person folding and refolding her hands, crying soundlessly. I sat quietly across from her. She did not speak. This was very early in my sojourn at MIT; I was not sure what to think—I was silent. Several minutes went by. My visitor moved a little, and then said, very softly, “He did it again yesterday. My neighbor in Somerville said I had to come tell you.” I waited.



I made an interrogatory murmur. I had a terrible moment when I thought, “Perhaps I am supposed to know about the problem? Should I have asked the bystander go-between about the problem?” I waited. “He did it again?” I asked uncertainly.

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me what he did this time?”

“He exposed himself again. And I know that there is nothing I can do. I need to leave.” She spoke so softly that I could hardly understand the words.

“What ought I to ask now?” I thought. I did not know the name of my visitor. It had seemed intrusive to ask. I did not know where she worked at or with whom. Was there any way that I could help this very reserved person to talk with me, and would she want me to ask questions? I spoke slowly, hoping not to intrude yet further on her feelings. “Might you tell me when this began?” I moved a box of tissues near to her.

My visitor cleared her throat. “Years ago.” She named a date that was almost a decade earlier. She added some details. She said that she knew that no one would believe her. In that moment, to my deep dismay, I understood her concern about whether she would be believed. Even *I*, another woman—who thought myself a feminist—was having trouble with assessing credibility. My miserable uncertainty helped me understand how difficult a “he said/she said” case can be—for a victim and for those who listen.

My stomach turned over and I sat back. Inconsistent ideas tangled through my mind in crosscurrents and recursive knots. Might my visitor be seeing things that were not there, or might the man be someone that she was interested in? An angry voice inside me responded, “What is wrong with you, Mary! That is what know-nothings say when a woman speaks up about abuse.” Then I thought, “This must be a case of serious, long-term abuse; she seems a reserved and dignified woman; how could this happen?”

“But how can you think *that*, Mary? inquired the other voice in my head. “Maybe he does not even exist?” Then I wondered if my visitor might be trying to get a coworker in trouble. This thought set off a very angry response in my mind. “What kind of a feminist are you, to doubt a woman who seems so credible?” I felt weary, and stiffeningly angry, to think that a woman would have had to put up with the behavior she described.

What on earth should I do in the face of this dilemma? I took a breath. I asked who the offending person was. I asked permission to ask for help—from a person who would not likely call the Police, and who would protect her privacy—and said gently that I would do my best. I then called a colleague. He was a very experienced doctor in our Medical Department whom I knew and trusted. “Don’t worry, Mary,” he said, “I will take care of it.”

“But what will you do? We do not know that he even exists. If he does exist, I mean, what about his civil rights? And suppose he did do it; how will we ever know? What can we do about this intolerable situation?”

“I will deal with it and call you back.”

At noon the next day my phone rang. It was the doctor. “I called the man in, immediately.”

So, the man exists. “What did he say?” I asked.



“I asked him if he had been exposing himself at work. He said he had. We talked at some length. I asked him how long he had done it. He said for years, since the first week he came to work, many years ago.”

“What did you tell him? What will happen now?”

“I told him to stop it.”

“You told him to stop it? But doesn’t he need help?”

“Mary,” asked the doctor, “What do you think should happen here?” “Well,” I stuttered.... “The man should not be doing this. As I told you, absolutely all my visitor wanted was for the behavior to stop.”

“Exactly,” said the doctor. “I told him to stop it. And I will follow up.”

(This was seven years before the 1980 EEOC Guidelines on sexual harassment. Nowadays, of course, with the myriad mistreatment cases that still occur every year, additional options could and would be offered by an organizational ombuds and organizations usually offer many resources.)

I pondered this story. It was the classic situation where the only evidence was the word of the visitor—and she did not want to raise the issue to authorities, in part just for this reason. I had myself experienced the very painful dilemma of whether I could or should believe the story. I had had the good luck to have called a doctor who refused to “medicalize” unacceptable behavior, who believed in speaking firmly about unacceptable behavior, and who believed in the power of moral authority and oversight to stop at least some kinds of unacceptable behavior. The doctor did not excuse the behavior because of a possible sickness. The present solution was exactly what the woman had asked for. And the doctor had made plans to follow up with the man. The woman had affirmed to me that she would call me once a week to check in. (And as it happened, the woman said the behavior did not recur.) Was this a perfect solution? However...in a perfect world ...would there be better solutions?

“Tell him to stop it...” the words sank deep into my reflections and repeated themselves and echoed. “Tell him to stop it.” How often would this work? Who would give the order? I still did not know what to do when the next dilemma appeared. Call again to my colleague in Medical for every case? And we still had not dealt with the evidence question.

THE NEXT CASE: “I DID TRY TO SAY ‘NO!’”

Alas, the next time this subject came up I knew for sure that there was more to learn. This occurred the very next week. And, as it happened, this story or something like it happened repeatedly in my first months. The “evidence question” was (as it still is, with respect to daily cases of perceived mistreatment) a very serious problem.

I found that I had to think things through, slowly and carefully every time, no matter what the concern was, with every single visitor who came to my office, no matter if I had heard a given issue before. No serious issue happens in a vacuum, by itself; one is always dealing with a new, nearly unique context. And, as well, each person is different. But it was especially troubling to me that my employer and I seemed not, at the time, to have *any* good solutions for people with harassment concerns. I grew to believe that the only good solution for an organization is to *prevent* harassment.



Here was the next case. I got a call Friday afternoon asking if I could possibly stay quite late to talk with someone that evening after work. And would I be willing to pull down the shade on the door?

I said I would stay.

Well after 6 p.m., a woman came to knock on my door and slipped in quickly—a secretary had come to see me about her boss. She had been, she said, uncomfortable about working for this supervisor. He would bend closely over her when she sat at the typewriter, she said. He stood too close to her when she was filing and sometimes dropped things so she would have to bend over to pick things up in front of him. He seemed to find little ways to touch her. He would pick up a lock of her hair when she was on the phone. He would read over her shoulder when she opened the mail. He would somehow contrive, she said, “almost to fold around her,” when he opened the door for her.

She came to see me, this Friday evening, because he had invited her for the weekend to his nearby home. She had refused, and asked a polite question about his wife, hoping to discourage him. He had persisted and told her that his wife would be away and that they could have a wonderful weekend together, in fact starting immediately. Very flustered, she had said something about “never accepting invitations without being able to plan ahead.”

“No matter,” he replied, “You can use my wife’s diaphragm.”

She got out of it, she said, by shaking her head and continuing to work silently at her desk until the boss finally left. She was really scared. She asked a friend whom she saw in the women’s bathroom to call me to ask for the late appointment, and then had come to see me. She could see no possible options except quitting. “No one will believe me.”

We discussed every person I could think of that she might go to. For example, I could support her in writing a formal complaint. Or help set an appointment for her and her friend to see the department head. In every case she was sure that she would not be believed. If she complained, she would not only have to leave but would be shamed as well. She did not think she could talk it over with her pastor and certainly not with her family. She felt absolutely trapped.

“But I have an idea about another option.” I was thinking out loud. “It could be true, you might be right, if you make a complaint, that people might wonder whom to believe. People might wonder . . . has he *really* done and said the things you describe? But there is a way that you could prove that you *thought* he had done and said these things. And, that you tried, in a private and professional way, to get him to stop.” She looked up.

“Suppose,” I said, “You were to write him a letter, laying out every single detail you remember about what he has done, just as a list of plain facts. Tell him in plain words how this is harmful. Suppose you then, in writing, ask him to stop this behavior. You could lay the letter on his desk—and keep a copy. You will then be able to prove at least that you *thought* he had done these things and had asked him to stop it. You can, so to speak, create more evidence.”

She was desperate. She could see no other path, and she decided to choose this option rather than quitting. She agonized over every phrase and word and sentence, “just the facts” of every date and event and circumstance that she could remember, of what had happened in the office. She spent two days and most of two nights that weekend, very upset, writing a detailed list of facts.



She and I had agreed that we would meet in a church in Harvard Square on Sunday evening. I was to read the almost final draft. We met and talked—I mainly just read what proved to be a truly excellent letter. Perhaps I asked a few questions. I mainly remember my dismay and anger, and my trying to be calm and supportive (and trying to understand what it means to be a designated neutral). My visitor—a very competent professional secretary—called me, early the next day, just before work, to say that she went on to spend most of Sunday night adding factual details, using her exceptional skills on that letter.

Monday afternoon at 5:30 p.m. she came to tell me that she had put the letter on the boss's desk before he came in. His desk was piled high with papers and books. She had cleared a little space on the desk, so the letter was obvious. "He must have read it!" But, she said, he had not mentioned it. She called me again on Tuesday. And Wednesday. On Thursday. And Friday. He did not mention it.

For two weeks I called, or she called, every day. Then twice a week. Then once a week. She told me that he never mentioned the letter. He never touched her again. She had asked him in the letter "to treat her completely professionally." She said he became a little formal and distant. But she had her job back and—slowly—her sense of herself as a professional. She would, she told me, try to look out for every woman in the administrative wing of her department.

I had expected that this letter was going to have to be used as evidence. Instead, the behavior had *stopped*, at least with her.

I have kept thinking, ever since, about the sources of power of such a letter (Rowe, n.d.). There would seem to be many possibilities in this case. Moral authority, expertise in crafting an iteration of facts, the possibility that a talented subordinate would leave, the clear indication of the letter writer's commitment to her request, and the fear of further use of the evidence—all are serious sources of power.

In 1973, in the context of many conversations with targets of mistreatment, I found myself asking visitors, if they wanted to try "telling the person to stop it," knowing that this method might also help them subsequently to present the facts of the situation, if needed, in a formal complaint.

We now have many options to offer to people who have been harassed, bullied, and mistreated. One frequently hopes that a complainant might be willing, with support, to make a formal complaint. And there are additional methods that may work when complainants are very afraid—for example, generic options that address the *issues* rather than the apparent *offender* (Rowe, 2023b). However, drafting a letter as a first step can help the writer to prepare for every other option that can be offered.

I have always recommended a civil professional letter. The letters start with a chronology of "just facts." This first section includes no opinions, judgments, or feelings about the facts. The letter may, in this way, be quite different from the writer's usual writing. Many of us have been taught to start a letter with an introductory sentence that lays out the gist of a letter. In this case I recommend against that plan, suggesting instead that the letter begin with a simple phrase, such as: "Here are the facts as I see them, about our work together." "Here are the facts as I see them about what happened on Wednesday morning." My point here is not to signal any emotion or judgment in the opening sentence and the opening section—until the facts have been set forth.

Effective letters then usually add a second section describing the feelings, and the harm experienced by the writer, again presented in a civil tone. The letter may end with a third section that asks for a realistic solution or remedy that would be satisfactory to the letter writer.



For some years, in those cases when the letter writer decided after discussion to send the letter privately to the offender, almost all the letters succeeded, in the sense of accomplishing the goals of the writer. To my surprise, in my first few years, no letter writer ever had to use the letter later, as evidence in a grievance—although such letters have since been used in grievances and lawsuits. I had come up with this option in the expectation that writing a letter, and proving that it was delivered, would help to provide evidence for the letter writer. But moral authority, the implicit specter of further action, and other sources of power appeared to be more effective than I had expected.

However, I had much to learn about drafting such a letter. I learned to alert the visitors to my office that drafting a letter might be hard. The first issues were the exhaustion and pain, for some writers, of reliving their experiences. The *process* of drafting the letter would often be difficult and bring deep anger, grief, and many tears. Many people had tried for days or months or years to forget what was happening to them, trying to get on with their lives. Now they were recollecting the facts, as they understood them. The letter writer would often struggle to think through what had happened, look at diaries or notes or letters to family members, and then begin to recall details and events that had been bravely ignored, or half forgotten, or pushed underneath the demands of work and of survival. And they might want to write many drafts to separate their statements of harm from the recitation of facts. (When a visitor brought me a draft, I would usually check if the writer had in fact separated facts, from feelings and proposed remedies. And we often met several times in this process as the visitor worked to decide what to include and then finally, what to do. I often listened at several or even many successive appointments to give visitors the chance to think through their decisions.)

I also learned some good news. To my relief, people would often report that the painful turmoil and bafflement—and tides of anger—would settle out and recede once the draft was finished. I came to believe that writing a letter was in fact one way that people could gain some control over the grim feelings that upset them. Many men and women told me that, after collecting facts and writing a chronology, distraction on the job diminished sharply. And some said their sleep and health had improved.

Effects like these are now commonly reported, in extensive research about the effects of writing about emotionally important matters (e.g., Esterling et al. 1999; Pennebaker 1993). Fifty years ago, it was a welcome surprise to me to learn that there might be a way to lessen the pain and grief and distraction that workplace mistreatment can cause.

Another welcome surprise was that writing a draft (or many drafts) of such a letter is often helpful in yet another way, to people who feel mistreated. Drafting a chronology with care and integrity, and then discussing it with a trusted advisor, provides painfully needed support to complainants. It provides a space where complainants have a chance to think about what *they* need, and even possibly to ask for an idiosyncratic remedy that might not be likely in a formal process.

In sum, in drafting a letter, the facts have been collected, and various options for next steps can then be reviewed. For example, drafting the letter can help prepare the writer to consider informal or formal mediation or discussing the issue together with other injured parties, or making a formal complaint. And, very importantly, drafting the letter may make clear when the letter writer thinks the timing is good—or not good—for taking action.

Almost always the complainant would follow-up with me. Hoping they would do this, I used to try to guess which option a given complainant might choose. I learned early on that I usually was not able to predict which option would be chosen. Choosing an option may depend on many factors and interests and letter writers may struggle for a time to know how they feel. I was however relieved when people would come back to me with a final draft—because they now had a



platform for planning ahead. When we then discussed the options of a formal grievance, formal or informal mediation, or a private discussion with the offender, alone or with a colleague—or a personal handoff of the letter, or a decision simply to leave the job, or a decision to wait and see and seek further evidence—it was then easier to discuss the pros and cons of each choice. And, indeed, each of these other choices were common.

However, I still had something else to learn—this time something disconcerting. A common response from a person who received a letter was ... no overt response, no acknowledgement. Recipients often would improve their behavior, but otherwise might not respond to the letter, unless it was delivered in person.

The lack of response could be very unsettling. So, I learned to have a further discussion with any writer who decided in fact to send a letter. I had of course supported letter writers to keep a copy of their letters, for example in a sealed envelope that writers would send to themselves by registered mail and not open. Now I began to ask writers to see if they could make sure that the recipient got the letter. (A letter writer might, for example, put the letter into the recipient's briefcase—or consider handing over the letter in person, having a friend come with them when they handed in the letter—or mailing it by registered mail, which provides a receipt.)

I LEARN AGAIN THAT EVERY CASE IS DIFFERENT

It happened—after a year of helping people use the option of drafting letters—that I met with a graduate student who had been found crying in a women's bathroom. A lab secretary found the student crumpled up, head on her knees, in the corner of an old concrete bathroom that was deep in an old barracks building that was part of a series of such buildings. This kind staff person listened for some minutes to the student who was crying. She went out, came back, went out, came back, listened some more and finally said, "I do not know why you are crying but I know with whom you must talk. It is not right for you to be in such pain—and we have an office that keeps no records."

The secretary insisted. She was worried and would not give up. The graduate student as a result did come to see me, brought in by the woman who had found her crying. The student still was crying—she asked, pushing wet hair aside, "Is it true that you will not tell anyone that I came?"

"If you tell me that someone's life is at risk, I do not think I can make that promise. But I will agree to discuss all other options before I break your confidence, or anyone else's. I will not act without your permission in any ordinary circumstance. In addition, you do not need to tell me who you are, unless you wish to do so."

There was a long silence. I did not wish to intrude; I thought I had better say nothing more. The crying continued. I got her a cup of tea and then went back just to sit in the office with my visitor. She did not speak. I went back out to get myself a cup of tea.

Little by little, the story came out. She had worked for a very quiet, reserved professor for several years—she was within a year of finishing her PhD. Suddenly the man had told her that he had "fallen in love with her" and wanted her to go to his vacation home with him. The professor was not married. She expected that he might insist that she go—and said that she was stuck with two awful alternatives.

"My whole career depends on his reference. I do not want to hurt his feelings and I cannot alienate him. He is a brilliant advisor, but I certainly do not want to sleep with him. How could he have "fallen in love with me?" Anyway—I am not sure that he would even know how he feels.



Really, no one that I know would believe this could happen—he is a total workaholic with no feelings at all—he does not seem like someone who would fall in love, and he does not seem like a Don Juan. He does not even know me very well—I am religiously very conservative, and I do not know if he would be comfortable with the person I really am. I never would have guessed that he thought about relationships at all.”

“What can I do? I cannot leave now. My parents were going to travel thousands of miles to see me get my degree. I cannot stay. I cannot leave..... My life is over.”

I offered her options. I could talk with the professor. She could go to the head of the department, or a very approachable graduate dean. She could talk with a religious advisor or medical advisor or family member in planning what to do. She was unwilling—absolutely unwilling—to have any third party involved.

“Do you want just to explain all this to him gently, and ask him to treat you as a professional colleague and no more?”

The student could not believe this would work. “Who am I? I am just a student—he is becoming a superstar.” In the back of my mind, I kept thinking about the power of facts and moral authority. “Would you consider writing him a personal letter?”

She felt desperate and said yes. The personal letter she wrote was very compelling. This young scientist used her skills to collect the facts and record them lucidly and carefully—just as she would have recorded data in the bound lab books that held her research data. The letter was kind—and very clear. In the back of my mind, I still kept thinking about her being able to use the letter as evidence if it did not work. But I hoped this letter would work, as had the others.

After we discussed the point that her professor might “make no response,” and that she might therefore be concerned about whether he had in fact gotten the letter, the student decided to give it to the professor, in his private office. The student and I discussed every outcome that we could imagine. We talked about her being asked to leave the lab. (She then would indeed go the graduate dean and department head.) We talked about the professor getting up silently to walk out. (She would wait a little and then leave quietly, hoping never to have to mention the matter again.) We talked about other possible outcomes—all that I could imagine. We made an appointment for the following day.

I was to learn of another “possible outcome” that we had not discussed.

At the end of the following day, the graduate student returned, stunned, sad, and possibly a little relieved. She reported that her professor had dropped to his knees and asked her to marry him. They had talked—he very sadly, she very gently. Somehow, they worked it out for her to finish her work in a nearby lab. I stood in the back of the room at our end-of-the-year “Hooping Ceremony” to see her graduate and watched from afar as her parents hugged her. I have always hoped that both she and the professor each found someone with whom to spend their lives.

WHAT ARE THE SOURCES OF POWER OF SENDING OR DELIVERING THE LETTER?

Recipients sometimes understand concerns better from a letter than from listening; a well-organized letter is clearly using the *power of information* and sometimes the *power of expertise* if the letter writer is skilled. Recipients are likely to realize that the letter might be used as evidence; the letter thus invokes *the power of possible sanctions*. The letter indicates some degree of *commitment* by the letter writer—that the writer is serious and will not give up. It likely invokes



aspects of *relationship power*, depending on the relationship between the two people. A detailed, civil, private letter often appears to carry *moral authority*. The sources of power (Rowe, n.d.) are timeless although of course dependent on context.

A well-constructed letter may curtail future options for the recipient. The letter recipient may fear various outcomes of the situation. For example, if the recipient ignores the letter and continues their behavior, they may provoke a stronger protest by the letter writer, such as quitting. Or the recipient may fear that letter writer might take the letter to family members of the recipient or to the authorities. A recipient that knows they have transgressed may wish immediately to make amends—so they do not have to report their own behavior or have it reported under today’s “zero tolerance” policies. The letter may convince the recipient that their best option may be to offer a serious apology and to change their behavior. The letter may offer a way for the recipient to save face, if the proposed remedy is a reasonable one, and even, conceivably, to rebuild a relationship. Before sending the letter, the writer needs to consider all likely outcomes in the given context. A recipient might believe that the letter—even a detailed letter—was ill-founded. There could be cases where recipients would disagree with the recitation of facts and write back “to set the record straight,” ask for HR to be involved. Sending a letter could also lead to covert or overt retaliation in an organization with few rules and weak or unjust enforcement of rules.

LEARNING FROM MANY HUNDREDS OF CASES

Many people who have been harassed know right away what they wish to do next. However, people who are dealing with harassment and bullying often find it helpful to organize their evidence and discuss it confidentially and off the record with others whom they trust. Targets of harassment or bullying (and sometimes bystanders) find the technique helps in thinking things through. Drafting a tripartite, structured letter can help in collecting facts, in communicating all the losses or harm, and in thinking through possible remedies. Just drafting a letter is a strong, safe, first step in which the letter writer keeps complete control over the matter. *Drafting* a letter does not necessarily mean *sending* the letter.

So, when might a letter writer choose to *send* the letter, as distinguished from the other options for using a draft? This question is a serious one. I believe it is very important for the drafter to be able to take their time in writing and discussing each section confidentially and off the record with someone they trust. It can be painful and even confusing to “collect all the facts” and then separate facts from feelings and the proposed remedies. Some drafters might want to write a dozen drafts.

Before sending a letter, writers should consider all the options for sending or delivering it. In most cases this needs to be done privately—with no notification to the employer—who may be under legal obligation to start a formal investigation if informed. In addition, when a letter is sent, it then belongs to the recipient. For these reasons, the letter writer might wish to discuss all the foreseeable outcomes, with trusted, knowledgeable, and confidential resources, before choosing this option. As mentioned earlier, the sources of power of a complaint letter should be carefully evaluated—in context.

Over the years since 1973, I have heard innumerable stories of using and teaching this option for people dealing with all kinds of perceived injuries. In teaching, I called this method a “Perceived Injurious Experience Letter,” a term derived from a now-famous article about “Naming, Blaming, and Claiming,” published in 1980, and happily providing a theoretical basis for the structure of my suggested “letter.” (Felstiner et al., 1980).



APPENDIX
IF YOU HAVE BEEN HARASSED OR BULLIED: SOME IDEAS TO CONSIDER
MARY P. ROWE, MIT

Preparing to deal with harassment and bullying may depend on how much time you have. These guidelines offer ideas for three situations: when you must act immediately, when you have a few days, and when you can deal with these issues over a period of time.

I. Is it an emergency? If you or anybody else is in immediate danger, seek emergency help. In asking for such help, report injuries and threats and if you believe someone *poses* a threat, report that also.

If you can, say *who* was involved, *what* happened, *when* the harassment or bullying happened, *where* it happened, *how* it happened, and *who else*, if anyone, was there. If you can, also seek a person you trust to support you. If it is not an emergency, but you feel unsafe, please think immediately about who can help you move to safety and with whom you can talk—so you are not dealing with this alone.

II. If you have a bit of time, plan ahead before you act. It may seem as if there is very little you can do. But you may have more power and options than you think; the ideas here may help you find strength and options. It may be useful to collect the facts and write what happened. For many people it helps to do this by drafting an imaginary letter to the offender in a structured way. For many people it is helpful to have or begin to keep a diary (described in **section III** below).

Drafting an imaginary letter to the offender can help you to develop, consider, and prepare for many options. (It costs no money, you stay in control of the facts and protect your privacy, it helps with stress, you can take the time you need, you can consult with people you trust, and you can decide later how, if at all, you wish to use the draft.)

If you have not been able to think clearly, or sleep, writing several drafts of a letter may make it easier to deal with rage and grief. And drafting a letter to the offender may open the door for you to think of dealing with the offense in different ways. (As a few examples, you might approach the offender directly, in person or on paper with the facts. You might listen to others to see if they have been harassed or bullied by the same person; if others have been abused, this may change the situation. You might: seek informal third-party intervention or formal mediation; make an anonymous report; file a formal grievance in your organization; or go to law enforcement authorities. You might decide to ask relevant people for protection. You might also ask for organizational commitment and training in your workplace or community, to foster respect and require respectful behavior.) If you ultimately decide to postpone or forgo action, you may feel much less stressed if you have “drafted a letter.” You will have collected the evidence together in a way that will be useful if you change your mind. You may be able to work and sleep better, after having drafted a letter.

If you have been hurt, if you are very angry, if you are at all afraid, you may find that you need to write several or many drafts. Please seek support, confidentially and off the record, from people you trust if you are very upset. Do not worry if your first drafts are messy and confused. Do not feel you must struggle with the tone of early drafts—no one else will see them.



In fact, the more upset you are, the more worthwhile it can be to write many drafts of a letter. Reviewing and rewriting may help you to recall, and organize, the facts about the harassment or bullying and its effects.

How to draft a letter: The letter should fit your particular situation exactly. The final draft would usually have three parts, described below—facts, feelings, and your proposed remedy. Here is why: Writing in this form can produce a letter in which the recipient cannot *logically or reasonably* disagree with any sentence. Separating the three sections can help to make the letter credible. And thinking through each of these sections separately may help you decide what to do next.

In the first section, begin without emotion. You might start with, "These are the facts as I perceive them about (what happened)." No feelings, judgments or opinions belong in this section. (This section may be very hard to write even after many drafts. If you later decide to send the letter, ask a trustworthy person to review whether the first section includes just facts.)

In serious cases, it often may help for the factual section to include *all* the facts, with all relevant details. It must be scrupulously accurate to be effective. The first section should be in plain language and down to earth. If you are not certain whether a statement is factual, and want to include it, then say, "I believe (this happened)." "I think (this was the case)." This wording can be helpful because a recipient cannot reasonably disagree with a statement about what you believe happened.

The second section is for opinions and feelings, and to describe, if you wish, how the behavior affected you. Consider describing the harm caused by the harassment or bullying, and your judgment about losses or injuries: "I can no longer work with you." "I was badly hurt; I could not work or sleep for weeks." "What you did was outrageous, and profoundly upsetting." "Your actions cost me a week's salary."

The third section is the place to state what you think should happen next, and, as appropriate, to ask for a specific remedy. "Our relationship must be on a purely professional basis from now on." "Since I was unable to go on this trip because of your behavior, I want immediate assignment to the next trip." You might ask for any specific, appropriate remedy.

Just drafting the letter can help you to consider all informal or formal actions you might take. When the drafting is finished, please consider talking with one or two trusted, confidential resources off the record about the pros and cons of all potential actions.

Taking the step to *send* a private letter to an offender should be weighed against other alternatives. As you think about this option, remember that once a private letter is sent, it belongs to the recipient, who then has control over it. The recipient may tell other people and may write you back to "set the record straight." Or ask for third parties to intervene. On the other hand, *reading* a private letter of this type may help recipients to understand how harassment and bullying are harmful—even if they have been told before.

Letters often work; many recipients do change their behavior. In addition, your sending a private letter could be helpful in providing evidence, in a later formal grievance, if the behavior recurs, and especially if you face any retaliation. If you can demonstrate that the letter was delivered, a private letter provides evidence in



addition to your word—both that you were offended *and* that you tried a civil, private way to get the offender to stop. If you decide to send a private letter, keep a copy. It may be useful to send the letter by registered mail (to be able to prove the letter was received) or to ask a friend to be there, if you leave the sealed letter on the offender's desk, in order to demonstrate that you in fact delivered the letter.

Consider next whether you might, now, prefer to take your description of facts, feelings, and harm to a formal grievance procedure or to a manager or law enforcement—especially in response to illegal harassment, and if you believe that the offender should be punished, or if you believe only the authorities will be able to stop the offender.

At the other end of the spectrum, you might wish to draft the letter—and then not send it or take further action. Some people consider forgetting an incident in the spirit of understanding different cultural customs. Some people decide to wait and see if the misbehavior happens again or to anyone else. Some people prefer to try talking with an offender before sending a letter, alone or with an accompanying person. You could talk with the offender after giving the letter to them. Or you might prefer to ask for a third party just to intervene informally. You might work with a local affinity group about harassment as an *issue*, or ask your organization to review its policies, procedures, and training to prevent harassment.

III. If harassment or bullying happens repeatedly, consider keeping a diary.

If you are being abused in any way, keeping a diary helps to preserve your memories—and to document the facts, your thoughts and feelings, and the effects of harassment. Keeping chronological notes in a bound and page-dated logbook or computer calendar can help in preserving evidence. There are also other reasons to write:

If you cannot eat and cannot sleep, if you are feeling upset and angry, bewildered, or in grief, the issues at hand may be very distracting. It may somewhat diminish distress to “keep a log” of what is happening, so your mind does not constantly struggle to understand and remember each event. You can keep notes and then tell yourself, “At least the facts are now safe; I do not need to keep thinking about them all the time.”

If you are unsure about what is happening, or do not know who the offender is, a diary can help you to collect all the facts. Helpful ideas may come as you write—or as you read back over the notes of previous weeks. Sometimes you may find that it is suddenly easier to see things clearly because of the notes.

A diary may illuminate patterns in the events you describe. A log may help you to analyze how and when the harassment or bullying occurs. Keeping a log may help if you are concerned about overreacting—or underreacting. It may also be helpful to have a record of good things that are happening as well as harmful events—and to see when these occur.

A diary helps in preparing for action. Your notes can help you track—and then separate—the facts from your feelings, opinions, and tracking of harm. The notes will be helpful if you decide to talk things over with a confidential support person or managers or other authorities. (Please remember that managers may be required to investigate and act on concerns that are brought to them.)



Private notes are relatively easy to preserve. You can keep your diary at home or in another safe place. You can collect and print relevant emails, photos, etc. (Carefully consider relevant issues about your privacy and that of others. And remember, if you wish to record a conversation, that you should get explicit permission beforehand. Recording without permission is a felony in many jurisdictions.)

If you wish to have a safe back-up copy, but keep your notes private, you can mail a copy of your notes to yourself. If the matter is of great concern, collect the facts in some way that helps to date them—for example in a bound notebook. Or seal a copy twice (one sealed envelope inside another) and send the copy by registered mail to yourself. The envelope or package can then be kept, still sealed. Occasionally one might have reason to follow up with copies of “updates” mailed to oneself.

In conclusion, harassment and bullying can be profoundly painful, and unsettling. Please try hard to find trustworthy resources, friends, and family so you are not alone. Consider collecting the facts, your assessments of harm, and your wish for a remedy in a structured way to help in developing options for action.



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