

New Testament Letter Structure

Standard Structure of Ancient Letters:

Written communications today follow some fairly common and standard formats:

- *Personal letters* usually begin something like “Dear Mary” and end with “Love, John.” We write the date near the top right, sometimes write a P.S. after the signature, fold the letter, put it in an envelope, and write the recipient’s address and the return address on the outside.
- *Business memos* or E-mail messages often have a header with four parts (To: / From: / Date: / Re: or From: / Sent: / To: / Subject:).

Most letters written in the *ancient world* also followed a standardized format, but one which is slightly different from today. The *letters in the NT* written by and/or attributed to Paul and the other Apostles usually follow the standard expectations of their day. Although there are some variations in individual letters (esp. in the body and conclusion), the basic structure of ancient letters can be outlined as follows:

I) Letter Beginning	II) Letter Body	III) Letter Conclusion
1. Sender(s): From whom	1. Initial Exhortation	1. Practical Matters
2. Recipient(s): To whom	2. Thesis Statement	2. Individual Greetings
3. Formal Greeting	3. Theological Discussion	3. Personal Postscript
4. Thanksgiving (or Blessing)	4. Ethical Admonition	4. Doxology or Prayer

Special Features of the Pauline Letters:

- In most of these letters, Paul is *not the only author*, but one or more *co-authors* are mentioned (who is usually listed? which letters mention Paul alone? why?)
- These letters are *not addressed to all the people* in the respective cities, but only to small groups of *Christian* believers (exactly how does Paul refer to them?)
- Paul’s standard “Formal Greeting” *combines* a variation of the usual *Greek* greeting (*chaire* - “Grace”) and the common *Jewish* greeting (*shalom* - “Peace”)
- All the letters written by or attributed to Paul contain the standard three main sections, but not all Pauline letters contain all subsections exactly as listed above:
 - sometimes a subsection is *omitted*, (e.g., in the opening of Gal; at the end of 1 Thess)
 - sometimes the *order* of subsections is changed (esp. the endings of many of Paul’s letters)
 - some letters have *more than one* section of the same type (e.g., two “thanksgivings” in 1 & 2 Thess)
 - theological, ethical, and practical concerns are often *intertwined* (esp. in long letters), so verse divisions in “Body” sections below are only suggestions.

Combined & Edited Letters:

Another common practice in the ancient world was to collect and republish the letters of famous people like Paul. In this process, shorter letters were sometimes combined or other editorial changes made. For example, what is normally called the “*Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*” (2 Cor) might be a compilation of what were originally between two and five separate letters. Some scholars use letters A-G to distinguish all the different letters Paul *may* have written to the Christians in Corinth, even though the NT contains only two canonical letters:

- **Cor A** = a previous letter, now missing (mentioned in 1 Cor 5:9)
- **Cor B** = most of 1 Cor (Paul responds to oral and written reports from Corinth; see 1 Cor 1:11; 7:1; 16:17)
- **Cor C** = 2 Cor 2:14 – 6:13; 7:2-4 (Paul defends his apostleship against various unnamed opponents)
- **Cor D** = 2 Cor 10:1 – 13:10 (the so-called “Letter of Tears”? - as mentioned in 2 Cor 2:3-4; 7:5, 12)
- **Cor E** = 2 Cor 1:1 – 2:13; 7:5-16; 13:11-13 (a “Letter of Reconciliation”)
- **Cor F** = 2 Cor 8 (instructions for how to organize the collection for the poor in Jerusalem)
- **Cor G** = 2 Cor 9 (more instructions for the Jerusalem collection)

Similarly, many scholars think that Paul’s Letter to the Philippians (Phil) is a later compilation of three originally separate letters:

- **Phil A** = Phil 4:10-20 (a short “Note of Thanksgiving” for monetary gifts Paul received from the Philippians)
- **Phil B** = Phil 1:1 – 3:1; [4:2-9?]; 4:21-23 (a “Letter of Friendship” with thanks, news, and exhortations)
- **Phil C** = Phil 3:2 – 4:1 [or to 4:3 or 4:9?] (a stern warning against the “dogs” who require the circumcision of Gentiles)

Structural Charts of NT Letters: The Seven Undisputed Letters of Paul (incl. 2 Thess, for comparison to 1 Thess):

*Carefully considering exactly which verses of each letter belong to each of these standard sections (or which are missing) can lead to some important observations about the nature and message of that letter. **Abbreviations:** CJ = "Christ Jesus"; JC = "Jesus Christ"; Square Brackets [] indicate verses that do not quite fit the typical section descriptions.*

Letter:	1 Thess	[2 Thess]	1 Cor	Phil	Phlm	2 Cor	Gal	Rom
I) Letter Beginning: Sender(s): From whom	1:1a - Paul, <i>Silvanus</i> , & Timothy	1:1a - Paul, <i>Silvanus</i> , & Timothy	1:1 - Paul an apostle, and our brother <i>Sosthenes</i>	1:1a - Paul & Timothy, servants of CJ	1a - Paul <i>prisoner</i> of CJ & Timothy our brother	1:1a - Paul apostle of CJ & Timothy our brother	1:1-2a - Paul an apostle of God & <i>all those with me</i>	1:1-6 - Paul a servant of JC, called to be an apostle...
Recipient(s): To whom	1:1b - to the Church of the Thessalonians in God Father & Lord JC	1:1b - to the Church of the Thessalonians in God Father & Lord JC	1:2 - Church of God in Corinth <i>and all who call on Jesus!</i>	1:1b - to all saints in CJ in Philippi, <i>with bishops & deacons</i>	1b-2 - to Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, & house church	1:1b - Church of God in Corinth <i>and all saints in Achaia</i>	1:2b - to Churches of Galatia	1:7a - to all God's beloved in Rome, called to be saints
Formulaic Greeting	1:1c - Grace to you and peace	1:2 - Grace to you and peace from God Father and Lord JC	1:3 - Grace to you and peace from God Father and Lord JC	1:2 - Grace to you and peace from God Father and Lord JC	3 - Grace to you and peace from God Father and Lord JC	1:2 - Grace to you and peace from God Father and Lord JC	1:3-5 - Grace & peace from JC, <i>who gave himself for our sins...</i>	1:7b - Grace to you and peace from God Father and Lord JC
Thanksgiving (or Blessing)	1:2-10 - faith, love, & hope; & 2:13-16 - for accepting God's word	1:3-4 - faith & love growing; & 2:13-15 - God chose you for salvation	1:4-9 - grace, riches, wisdom, spiritual gifts given to strengthen you	1:3-11 - you share in the Gospel, in righteousness and love	4-7 - love, faith, sharing, joy & encouragement	1:3-11 - <i>Blessed</i> be the God of JC, Father of mercy & God who consoles	X [1:6-10 - " <i>I am amazed...</i> "]	1:8-15 - faith & spiritual encouragement
II) Letter Body: Initial Exhortation	2:1-12 - follow Paul's example; 2:17--3:13 - Paul's relation to Xns in Thessalonica	[1:5-12] - God's judgment at the revelation of Jesus	1:10-17 - appeal for unity, not division in the community	1:12-30 - spread of the Gospel;	8-10 - appeal on behalf of Onesimus	1:12--2:13; 7:5-16 - on reconciliation	[1:11--2:14 - Paul's life history]	X
Thesis Statement	?	?	1:18 - message of the cross: foolish or powerful?	[2:1-2 - be united in mind & love]	[11 - word-play: useless/useful]	?	2:15-21 - justification thru the faith of CJ	1:16-17 - gospel is the power of God for salvation thru faith
Theological Discussion	4:13--5:11 - death, resurrection & the parousia	2:1-12 - events before the coming of JC	1:19--4:21 - true wisdom in JC; [5:1--15:58 also very theological]	2:1--3:1 - unity & humility in CJ; [3:2--4:1 - against circumcision]	11-16 - freedom & brotherhood	[2:14--7:4 - Paul's role as apostle]	3:1--5:12 - the Law and Faith; Abraham; Hagar vs. Sarah	1:18--11:36 - law, sin, faith; Adam, Abraham, Jesus; baptism, death, life
Ethical Admonition	4:1-12 - live acc. to God's will	3:6-15 - warning against being idle	5:1--15:58 - about the Corinthians' problems & questions	4:2-9 - Euodia & Syntyche; Rejoice always	17-21 - repaying debts; obedience	[10:1--13:10 - warnings against false apostles]	5:13--6:10 - lots of warnings; bear others' burdens	12:1--15:21 - life in the body of Christ; mutual love
III) Letter Conclusion: Practical Matters	5:12-22, 25, 27 - respect church authorities, pray, etc.	3:1-5 - request for prayers	16:1-14 - the collection, travel plans, warnings	4:10-20 - thanks for gifts sent through Epaphroditus	22 - prepare a guest room	[8:1-24; 9:1-15 - help the poor] 13:1-10 - Paul's third visit	X	15:22-33 - travel plans; 16:17-20 - be careful of evil
Individual Greetings	5:26 - Greet all brothers & sisters	X	16:15-18 - commends Stephanas...; 19-20 - from Asia greetings	4:21-22 - greet saints in CJ; saints greet you, esp. Caesar's house	23 - greetings from lots of folks (cf. Col 4:10)	13:11-12 - greet one another with holy kiss; all the saints greet you	X	16:1-16, 21-23 - <i>lots of greetings to Rome & from Corinth</i>
Personal Postscript	X	3:17-18 - Paul marks every letter this way	16:21-24 - a curse on those who don't love the Lord	X	19 - I, Paul, write this with my own hand, I will repay	X	6:11-17 - warnings re. circumcision & cross	X [16:22 - by scribe Tertius]
Prayer and/or Doxology	[3:11-13] 5:23-24 - May God sanctify you; & 5:28 - Grace of JC with you.	[2:16-17] 3:5, 16, 18 - May the Lord give you love peace & grace	16:23-24 - grace of Lord Jesus & my love be with you in Christ	4:20 - to God be glory; 4:23 - grace of the Lord JC be with your spirit	25 - grace of Lord JC be with your spirit.	13:13 - grace of Lord JC, love of God, & communion of HS be with all	6:18 - grace of Lord JC be with your spirit. Amen.	[11:33-36] [15:13] 16:25-27 - to God be glory

Structural Charts of NT Letters: The Six Disputed Pauline Letters (and Hebrews for comparison, although it is not in standard letter format)

Letter:	2 Thess	Col	Eph	1 Tim	2 Tim	Titus	[Hebrews]
I) Letter Beginning: Sender(s): From whom	1:1a - Paul, <i>Silvanus</i> , & Timothy	1:1 - Paul, apostle of CJ, and Timothy our brother	1:1a - Paul, apostle of CJ by the will of God	1:1 - Paul, apostle of CJ by command of God and CJ	1:1 - Paul, apostle of CJ by will of God, for life in CJ	1:1-3 - Paul, slave of God & apostle of JC	X
Recipient(s): To whom	1:1b - to Church of Thessalonians in God Father & Lord JC	1:2a - to saints & faithful in Christ in Colossae	1:1b - to saints in Ephesus, faithful in CJ	1:2a - to Timothy, my loyal child in the faith	1:2a - to Timothy, my beloved child	1:4a - to Titus, my loyal child in the faith we share	X
Formulaic Greeting	1:2 - Grace to you & peace from God Father & Lord JC	1:2b - Grace to you & peace from God Father	1:2 - Grace to you & peace from God Father & Lord JC	1:2b - Grace, mercy & peace from God Father & CJ Lord	1:2b - Grace, mercy & peace from God Father & CJ Lord	1:4b - Grace & peace from God Father & CJ Savior	X
Thanksgiving (or Blessing)	1:3-4 - for faith & love growing; & 2:13-15 - God chose you for salvation	1:3-8 - for faith, love, hope; Gospel is bearing fruit	1:3-14 - Blessed be God & Father of our Lord JC; & 1:15-23 - prayer of thanks	X	1:3-7 - for your sincere faith; rekindle God's gifts	X	X
II) Letter Body: Initial Exhortation	[1:5-12] - God's judgment at the revelation of Jesus	1:9-14 - prayer for knowledge, wisdom, strength	[1:15-23 - in prayer form]	1:3-20 - remain in Ephesus to preserve true doctrines	1:8-18 - do not be ashamed of serving the Gospel	1:5-16 - put the churches on Crete in order	X
Thesis Statement	?	[1:15-20 - Hymn to Christ]	[1:20-23 - God's power in Christ]	X	X	X	1:1-4 - God has spoken thru his Son
Theological Discussions	2:1-12 - events before the coming of JC	1:15-2:23 - salvation in Christ, not thru philosophy	2:1-3:21 - life in CJ for the Gentiles	[2:1-6:19 - some theology mixed in]	2:1-3:9 - faith vs. godlessness	X	most of 1:5-11:40 - Jesus, the great high priest, surpasses all
Ethical Admonitions	3:6-15 - warning against being idle	3:1-4:6 - life in Christ; rules for Xn households	4:1-6:20 - unity in the body of Christ; household code	2:1-6:19 - rules for church leaders & community conduct	3:10-4:8 - follow Paul's example of faith & suffering	2:1-3:11 - teach sound doctrine & good works	2:1-4; 3:7-4:16; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; esp. 12:1-13:19
III) Letter Conclusion: Practical Matters	3:6-15 - warn against being idle	4:7-9 - Tychicus & Onesimus sent; 4:16 - exchange letters w/ Laodicea	6:21-22 - sending Tychicus, faithful minister	X	4:9-18 - come soon; bring cloak, books & writings; beware of opponents	3:12-14 - support the missionaries; come soon	13:23 - Timothy has been freed
Individual Greetings	X	4:10-17 - from & to many people (cf. Phlm 23)	6:23 - peace to the whole community	[6:20-21a - final admonition]	4:19-21 - greet Prisca, Aquila, etc.; four others greet him	3:15a - all here greet you; greet those who love us	13:24 - greet all the leaders & saints;
Personal Postscript	3:17-18 - Paul marks every letter this way	4:18a - remember my chains	X	X	X	X	[13:22 - bear with my exhortation]
Prayer or Doxology	3:5, 16, 18 - may Lord give you love peace & grace	4:18b - grace be with you	6:24 - grace to all who have undying love for our Lord JC	6:21b - grace be with you	4:22 - Lord be with your spirit; grace be with you	3:15b - grace be with all of you	13:20-21, 25 - may the God of peace make you complete; grace be with all of you

The “Catholic Epistles” or “General Letters” (and the Letter of Acts 15):

The last seven NT letters (and a brief letter in Acts 15) are slightly different from the Pauline letters in form & structure, yet still follow the general conventions of ancient letters:

- Most of these letters were *not* written to a specific individual or community (except 2 & 3 John), but are addressed to a more “*general*” readership.
- So each is *not* named for the person(s) who *received* the letter, but for the apostle who *wrote* it (or to whom it is attributed, since authorship of some is disputed today).
- Probably *multiple copies* were made and distributed to different Christian communities (like papal encyclicals or holiday letters today are sent to many people at once).
- So they are usually called the “*General Letters*” or “*Catholic Epistles*” (not referring to the Roman Catholic Church, but because the word “catholic” means “universal”).
- **1 John** is not really a letter (no typical beginning or end); **James** lacks a letter ending; most lack an initial “Thanksgiving”; **most** have few “personal greetings” at the end.

Letter:	James	1 Peter	2 Peter	1 John	2 John	3 John	Jude	Acts 15:23-29
<i>I) Letter Beginning:</i> Sender(s): From whom	1:1a - James, servant of God & of Lord JC	1:1a - Peter, an apostle of JC	1:1a - <i>Simeon</i> Peter, a servant & apostle of JC	1:1 - “We” 2:1 - “I”	1a - The elder	1a - The elder	1a - Jude, servant of JC, brother of James	23b - The apostles & elders, your brothers
Recipient(s): To whom	1:1b - to twelve tribes in Dispersion	1:1b-2a - to exiles of the Dispersion in Asia Minor	1:1b - to those who received faith thru our God & Savior JC	1:1 - “to you” 2:1 - “My little children”	1b-2 - to the “elect lady” & her children (Xn church)	1b - to beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth	1b - to those called, beloved in God	23c - to brothers in Antioch, Syria, Cilicia of Gentile origin
Formulaic Greeting	1c - “Greetings”	1:2b - grace & peace be yours in abundance	1:2 - grace & peace in knowledge of God & Jesus our Lord	X	3 - grace, mercy & peace from God Father & JC	X	2 - mercy, peace, and love	23d - greetings
Thanksgiving (or Blessing)	X	1:3-12 - for new birth in living hope	X	[1:1-4 - we preach so you may have fellowship & joy]	[4 - joy seeing children walking in truth]	[2-4 - a prayer in joy for hi “children” walking in truth]	X	X
<i>II) Letter Body:</i> Initial Exhortation	1:2-4 - consider trials as joy;	1:13-16 - “be holy, for I am holy”	1:3-15 - Peter’s “testament”	[1:5-10 - walk in light, confess sins]	5 - love one another	5-8 - welcome; support traveling missionaries	3 - appeal to contend for the faith	24-27 - we heard that some have upset you
Thesis Statement	[1:3 - testing of faith produces endurance & maturity]	1:22-25 - you’ve been purified & born anew	1:16-21 - Xn teaching comes thru eyewitnesses & Holy Spirit	1:5-10 - God is light; Jesus cleanses us from sin	6 - love is “walking” acc. to the commandments	X	4 - “ungodly intruders” pervert God’s grace & deny Jesus	28 - decision of HS & us not to burden you beyond necessities
Theological Discussions	[esp. 2:14-26 - faith without works is dead]	1:17-4:19 - you are chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, God’s own people	2:1-22 - punishment for false teachers; 3:3-18a - promise & delay of Lord’s coming	2:1-5:21 <i>mixed</i> : God is love; children of God vs. antichrists	7, 9 - deceivers & anti-christs deny Jesus	X	5-19 - judgment on unbelievers & sinners	X
Ethical Admonitions	1:5-5:12 - many ethics points, esp. on speech & riches	[esp. 2:11-3:12 - “household code” & Christian suffering]	[mixed in throughout, esp. 2:10-22]	2:1-5:21 <i>mixed</i> : love one another; abide in God	8 - be on guard, not to lose reward	11 - imitate good, not evil	20-23 - build faith, pray, love, be merciful	29ab - abstain from idolatry, blood, etc.; you’ll be doing right
<i>III) Letter Conclusion:</i> Practical Matters	5:13-20 - prayers & anointing of sick; forgiveness for sinners	5:1-10 - elders should humbly care for the flock	[3:15-16 - proper understanding of <i>Paul’s</i> letters]	X	10-11 don’t welcome false teachers	9-10 - problems with <i>Diotrephes</i> ; 12- welcome <i>Demetrius</i>	X	X
Individual Greetings	X	5:13-14a - church in “ <i>Babylon</i> ” & “my son <i>Mark</i> ” greet you	X	X	13 - sister church sends greetings	15b - greet the friends by name	X	X
Personal Postscript	X	5:12 - written thru brother <i>Silvanus</i>	3:1-2 - this is my 2nd letter... to remind you	[5:13 - I write to you believers so you know eternal life]	12 - more to write, but hope to visit	13-14 - more to write, but hope to see you soon	X	X
Prayer or Doxology	X	5:11 - to Christ be power forever; 5:14b - peace to all in Christ	3:18b - to Lord/ Savior JC be glory now & eternally	[5:28 - keep away from idols]	X	15a - Peace to you	24-25 - to God, thru Jesus, be glory, majesty, power...	29c - Farewell