

Written Warning Letter (First and Final)

Letter · UK · Published 2026-09-08 · Square brackets are placeholders to replace with your own details.

A written warning letter is the document that records a formal disciplinary sanction short of dismissal — naming what the employee did or failed to do, stating the change required and the timescale for it, saying how long the warning stays live on their record, spelling out what happens if the standard is not met, and setting out the right of appeal. This template contains two complete letters: a first written warning and a final written warning.

It is a small document that carries a lot of weight. Months later, a dismissal usually rests on whether the earlier warning did its job — whether the employee was told plainly enough what had to change that a stranger reading the file can judge whether they changed it, and whether the warning was still live on the day the next incident happened. Warnings written as a paragraph of grievance ("your attitude has been unacceptable") give a tribunal nothing to weigh and give the employee nothing to fix.

This template gives you both letter texts with placeholders, the test for choosing between informal action, a first written warning and going straight to a final one, wording for the improvement requirement and the live period, and the specific mistakes that turn a defensible warning into an expensive one.

When to use this letter

Use this letter to confirm the outcome of a disciplinary hearing where the decision is a warning rather than dismissal or no action. It follows the hearing; it never replaces one. The Acas Code expects the employee to have been notified of the case in writing, given the evidence, offered the right to be accompanied, heard at a meeting, and only then told the decision in writing — this letter is that final step, not a shortcut past the earlier ones.

Both letters in this template work for conduct and for performance. Where [Your company] runs a separate capability procedure for genuine performance problems, use that route and its own letters instead; the Acas Code says the basic principles of fairness still apply, adapted. Keep misconduct in the disciplinary procedure and capability in the capability procedure, and say in the letter which one you are using — mixing them is one of the easiest ways to lose a case you should have won.

Send the letter promptly. The Code says employers should not unreasonably delay meetings, decisions or confirmation of those decisions, so set a standard in your policy — [number] working days after the hearing is typical — and hold to it.

Informal action, first written warning, or straight to final?

Choosing the level is the decision the letter records, and getting it wrong in either direction is costly: too light and the pattern never gets addressed, too heavy and the sanction is disproportionate to anything a tribunal will accept.

- Informal action — a private conversation, sometimes called a verbal warning. Right where the issue is minor, isolated and likely to be fixed by being pointed out. Acas guidance says an employer should still keep a confidential written record of informal or verbal warnings, so note the date, what was said,

and what was agreed. No letter from this template is needed, but the note is what makes a later first written warning look like a step in a sequence rather than an ambush.

- First written warning — the usual first formal step once misconduct or poor performance is confirmed at a hearing. Use it where informal action has failed, or where the matter is too serious to be handled by a quiet word but nowhere near dismissal territory.
- Straight to a final written warning — available where the first instance of misconduct or unsatisfactory performance is sufficiently serious. The Acas Code gives the test: actions that have had, or are liable to have, a serious or harmful impact on the organisation. Record in the letter why you skipped the first stage; a final warning with no explanation of the jump is the version that gets overturned on appeal.
- Final written warning following an earlier one — where the employee has repeated the misconduct, committed different misconduct, or failed to improve within the period set by a live first written warning.
- Not a warning at all — where the allegation is not upheld. Say so in writing and close the matter. Where the conduct is gross misconduct, a warning is the wrong document altogether; use the dismissal letter template and the process behind it.

What to check before you send it

- The hearing has happened and the decision was made after it, not before. The letter confirms a decision reached on the evidence and the employee's response, and it should read that way.
- The employee was told in writing what the allegation was and what the possible consequences were, given the evidence, and offered the right to be accompanied — the statutory right applies where the meeting could result in a formal warning.
- The sanction is consistent with how [Your company] has treated comparable cases. Acas guidance lists what the organisation has done in similar cases before as one of the three things the outcome should be based on.
- Live warnings already on file were taken into account and expired ones were disregarded. Reaching back to a warning that lapsed eight months ago to justify a final warning is a common and fatal error.
- The live period and the appeal deadline in the letter match the numbers in your disciplinary policy. Improvising them letter by letter creates the inconsistency the other side will point at.
- The improvement required is written so that someone who was not there could judge, at the review date, whether it happened.
- Nothing in the reason turns on a protected characteristic, a disability-related absence, pregnancy, or a protected disclosure. If it might, stop and take advice before sending.

Letter one — first written warning

Private and confidential — [employee name]. [Handed over in person on [date] / sent by email to [address] / posted to [home address]].

[Date]

Dear [first name],

Outcome of disciplinary hearing — first written warning

I am writing to confirm the outcome of the disciplinary hearing held on [date] at [location], chaired by [name, job title]. You attended [accompanied by [companion name, colleague or trade union representative] / unaccompanied, having been offered the right to be accompanied]. Also present was [name, job title, note taker].

The hearing considered the following allegation: [restate the allegation word for word as it appeared in the invitation letter, with the dates and incidents it covers].

Having considered the evidence, including [the investigation report of [date] / the witness statement of [name] / the [rota, till records, CCTV, correspondence] provided to you on [date]] and the explanation you gave at the hearing, I have concluded that [state the findings plainly — which parts of the allegation are upheld, which are not, and the reason. For example: on [date] you left the [site/section] unattended for approximately [duration] without arranging cover, contrary to [clause/procedure name]. You accepted this at the hearing and explained that [employee's explanation]. I accept that [what you accept], but it does not change the finding, because [reason].]

I have decided to issue you with a first written warning. In reaching that decision I took into account [the seriousness of the conduct / your [length] service and clear disciplinary record / the mitigation you raised, namely [mitigation]] and the way [Your company] has dealt with comparable matters.

This warning will remain live on your disciplinary record for [number] months from the date of this letter — that is, until [date]. After that date it will be disregarded for disciplinary purposes, although the letter will remain on your personnel file in line with our data retention policy.

What must change: [state the required change specifically and observably. For example: from the date of this letter you must not leave your section unattended at any time without first arranging cover with a supervisor and recording it in the [log name]. I will review this with you at our one-to-ones on [dates] and formally on [review date].]

Support: to help you meet that standard, [Your company] will [state what you will actually provide — for example, arrange refresher training on [topic] by [date], change [rota/process] so that [description], and hold fortnightly check-ins with [name] until [date]]. If anything is preventing you from meeting the standard, including anything about your health or your circumstances that we should know about, please tell [name, job title] straight away rather than waiting for the review.

Consequences: if there is a further act of misconduct, or if the change set out above is not made and maintained while this warning is live, the likely outcome is a final written warning. Sufficiently serious further misconduct could result in dismissal, and conduct amounting to gross misconduct could result in dismissal without notice at any time, regardless of this warning.

You have the right to appeal against this decision. If you wish to appeal, write to [name, job title] at [email address or postal address] within [number] working days of receiving this letter, setting out the grounds of your appeal — for example that the finding was wrong, that the sanction is too severe, or that some part of the procedure was unfair. Your appeal will be heard without unreasonable delay by [name/role, wherever possible someone not previously involved in the case], and you have the right to be accompanied at the appeal hearing by a colleague or a trade union representative. The outcome of the appeal will be confirmed to you in writing.

A copy of this letter will be kept on your confidential disciplinary file. If anything in it is unclear, please speak to [name, job title].

Yours sincerely,

[Name]

[Job title], [Your company]

I acknowledge receipt of this letter. Signing does not mean I agree with it: [employee signature] [date]

Letter two — final written warning

Private and confidential — [employee name]. [Handed over in person on [date] / sent by email to [address] / posted to [home address]].

[Date]

Dear [first name],

Outcome of disciplinary hearing — final written warning

I am writing to confirm the outcome of the disciplinary hearing held on [date] at [location], chaired by [name, job title]. You attended [accompanied by [companion name] / unaccompanied, having been offered the right to be accompanied].

The hearing considered the following allegation: [restate the allegation exactly as it appeared in the invitation letter].

Having considered the evidence, including [list it], and the explanation you gave at the hearing, I have concluded that [state the findings and the reasons for them].

[Where a warning is already live, keep this paragraph:] In deciding the level of sanction I took into account that you received a first written warning on [date] for [subject of that warning], which remains live until [date], and that [the conduct has been repeated / the improvement required by that warning has not been made].

[Where you are going straight to a final written warning with no earlier live warning, keep this paragraph instead:] There is no live warning on your record. I have nevertheless decided that a first written warning would not be a sufficient response in this case, because [explain why the conduct is sufficiently serious — for example, the actions had, or were liable to have, a serious or harmful impact on [Your company], namely [describe the actual or likely impact]]. Our disciplinary policy provides for a final written warning to be issued at the first stage in such cases.

I have decided to issue you with a final written warning. This warning will remain live on your disciplinary record for [number] months from the date of this letter — that is, until [date] — after which it will be disregarded for disciplinary purposes.

What must change: [state the required change specifically and observably, with the timescale. For example: with immediate effect and for the duration of this warning, every cash reconciliation you complete must be signed off by a duty manager before you leave the premises, and no variance over [amount] may go unreported beyond the end of your shift.]

Review and support: your progress will be reviewed with [name, job title] on [dates], with a formal review on [date]. [Your company] will provide [training, supervision, adjustments, or other support — be specific and only promise what you will deliver]. If there is anything affecting your ability to meet this standard, including a health condition or a need for adjustments, tell [name, job title] now so we can consider it.

Consequences: you should understand clearly that if there is a further act of misconduct of any kind, or if the improvement set out above is not made and maintained while this warning is live, the likely outcome is dismissal. [If your contract allows an alternative sanction, add: Depending on the circumstances, [Your company] may instead consider [demotion / transfer to another role], as our disciplinary policy and your contract allow.]

You have the right to appeal against this decision. If you wish to appeal, write to [name, job title] at [email address or postal address] within [number] working days of receiving this letter, setting out the grounds of your appeal. The appeal will be heard without unreasonable delay by [name/role, wherever possible someone not previously involved in the case], and you have the right to be accompanied at the appeal hearing by a colleague or a trade union representative. The outcome will be confirmed to you in writing.

A copy of this letter will be kept on your confidential disciplinary file.

Yours sincerely,

[Name]

[Job title], [Your company]

I acknowledge receipt of this letter. Signing does not mean I agree with it: [employee signature] [date]

Writing the improvement requirement so a stranger could judge it

The Acas Code requires the warning to state the change in behaviour or improvement in performance required, with a timescale. The practical test is harder than the wording suggests: at the review date, someone who was not in the room — a new manager, an appeal chair, a tribunal — should be able to read the warning, look at what happened, and say yes or no without needing your recollection.

- Too vague to use: "improve your attitude"; "be more of a team player"; "show a better standard of work"; "sort out your timekeeping". None of these can be marked right or wrong six months later.
- Usable: "arrive on shift, changed and on the floor, by the rostered start time on every shift; any lateness to be reported to the duty manager before the shift starts".
- Usable: "complete the opening checklist in full, including the fridge temperature entries, on every opening shift you work, and countersign it".
- Usable: "respond to customer complaints allocated to you within [number] working days, with no more than [number] overdue at any point during the review period".
- Give the timescale and the review date, not just a duration — "by [date], reviewed at our one-to-one on [date]" beats "over the next three months".
- Name the measure and where it lives: the rota, the checklist, the ticket queue, the till reconciliation. A warning that points at a record you already keep is one you can prove or disprove without argument.
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Say what support goes with it. Acas guidance lists any support or training the employer will provide as part of what a written warning should say for a performance issue — and an unsupported improvement requirement is easier for the employee to challenge than an unmet one.

How long the warning stays live

There is no statutory period. The Acas Code says only that the employee should be told how long the warning will remain current, and Acas guidance says the letter should say how long the warning will stay in place. The number is yours — but it must come from your disciplinary policy, be applied consistently, and appear in the letter.

- Typical practice is a shorter period for a first written warning and a longer one for a final written warning; [Your company] uses [number] months and [number] months respectively. Whatever you choose, use it for everyone.
- Say when the clock starts. This template runs it from the date of the letter and states the expiry date in words, which removes any argument about whether the warning was live on the day of a later incident.
- Once the live period ends, the warning is disregarded for disciplinary purposes. Do not resurrect an expired warning to bump a later sanction up a level — this is one of the most reliably fatal mistakes in a conduct dismissal.
- Expiry is not deletion. Acas advises keeping a written record of all disciplinary cases, and says records must be confidential and kept only for as long as necessary under data protection law — so retain the letter under your data retention policy, and stop using it as a live sanction.
- An extended live period for very serious conduct is possible but is a policy decision, not a spur-of-the-moment one. If you use it, define it in the policy and explain in the letter why this case falls into it.

The right of appeal and how to handle one

- Offer the appeal in the letter, every time, with a named recipient, a route (email or postal address) and a deadline. The Acas Code lists allowing an employee to appeal against any formal decision as one of the basic elements of fairness, and the statutory right to be accompanied applies at the appeal hearing — say so in the appeal invitation, not only in the outcome letter.
- Ask for the grounds in writing — the Code says employees should let employers know the grounds for their appeal in writing — but do not treat an imperfectly worded appeal as no appeal, and hear a late one where there is a decent reason for the delay.
- Hear it without unreasonable delay, and wherever possible use a manager who has not previously been involved in the case. In a small business that may mean [owner / a director / a manager from another site]; say in your policy who it will be so nobody has to improvise.
- Confirm the appeal result in writing as soon as possible, as the Code requires. The appeal can uphold the warning, reduce it, or overturn it — and if it is overturned, remove it from the live record and say so in the letter.

Mistakes that cost employers at tribunal

- No appeal offered. The Code treats the right to appeal a formal decision as basic fairness; a warning letter that is silent on it undermines both this sanction and any dismissal that later relies on it.
- No live period stated. If the letter never says how long the warning remains current, you cannot show it was live when the next incident happened — and the Code expressly requires the employee to be told.
- Vague improvement wording. "Improve your attitude" cannot be met or breached. When the follow-on dismissal comes, there is nothing to point at.
- Skipping to a final warning without saying why. The Code allows it where the conduct is sufficiently serious, but the reasoning has to be in the letter, not in the chair's head.
- Deciding before the hearing. A letter drafted in advance and dated the day of the meeting reads exactly like what it is. Adjourn, decide, then write.
- Inconsistency. Two people, the same conduct, different sanctions and no recorded reason for the difference is one of the first things a tribunal probes.
- Delay. The Code says decisions and their confirmation should not be unreasonably delayed; a warning issued six weeks after the hearing is hard to defend and useless as a management tool.
- Using a disciplinary warning for a genuine capability or health problem. Where poor performance stems from ill health or disability, the disciplinary route is the wrong one — consider adjustments and use the capability procedure.

Delivery, records and review

- Deliver the outcome in person where you can, and follow with the letter the same day. Acas says the employer should tell the employee the outcome as soon as possible and in writing — a letter or email both work.
- Where the employee is absent or has left the meeting, send the letter to their home address and, if you have it, their personal email, and keep proof of sending.
- Ask for a dated acknowledgment of receipt. Make it explicit on the letter that signing acknowledges receipt, not agreement.
- File the letter with the invitation, evidence, hearing notes and the decision record on the confidential disciplinary file in [system/location]. Acas advises keeping a written record of all disciplinary cases, including those where no action was needed.
- Diarise the review dates and the warning expiry date in [HR system] on the day the letter goes out. An unreviewed warning teaches the employee that the standard was not real.
- Keep records confidential and only for as long as necessary, in line with data protection law and your data retention policy — and record who has access.

How to use this template

1. Hold the hearing first and reach the decision on the evidence — this letter confirms a decision, it never makes one.

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2. Pick the right letter: first written warning as the usual first formal step, final written warning where a live warning has been breached or the first offence is serious enough to justify skipping a stage.
3. Replace every [bracketed placeholder], taking the live period and the appeal deadline from your own disciplinary policy rather than inventing numbers letter by letter.
4. Rewrite the improvement requirement until someone who was not in the room could judge at the review date whether it was met.
5. Send it within the timescale your policy sets, get a dated acknowledgment, and file it with the invitation, evidence and hearing notes.
6. Diarise the review dates and the expiry date, and stop treating the warning as live the day it expires.

Official guidance

- › [Acas — Code of Practice on disciplinary and grievance procedures](#)
- › [Acas — Disciplinary procedure step 5: deciding the outcome](#)
- › [Acas — Disciplinary outcome letter templates](#)
- › [GOV.UK — Taking disciplinary action against an employee](#)
- › [GOV.UK — Dismissing staff: eligibility to claim unfair dismissal](#)

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