

Written warning email template

Document a conduct or performance issue in writing with facts, expectations, and consequences.

Updated October 15, 2026. Written and reviewed by the HRTally Research Team.

When to use this template

A written warning is usually the second step in progressive discipline, after a verbal warning, though serious issues can go straight to writing. Its job is to make sure the employee clearly understands the problem, what needs to change, and what will happen if it doesn't. It's also the record HR will rely on if the situation ends in termination.

Write it as if a judge, a juror, or the employee's family might read it someday, because they might. Stick to facts: dates, what happened, which policy it relates to, and earlier conversations. Avoid opinions about character or motives. Deliver it in a meeting first, then send this email with the formal warning attached. Our harassment prevention guide covers conduct issues that need investigation first.

Version 1: Conduct warning

SUBJECT Written warning: [Brief subject]

Hi [Employee first name],

This email confirms our meeting today with [Manager name] and serves as a written warning about [issue].

What happened: On [Date], [factual description of the conduct, such as you raised your voice at a coworker on the sales floor in front of customers and used profanity].

Policy: this conduct violates our [Policy name], which says [brief quote or summary]. [It follows a verbal warning on Date about a similar incident.]

What we expect: [Specific, observable expectations going forward].

Consequences: if this happens again, or if there are other violations of our conduct standards, it may lead to further discipline, up to and including termination.

Support: [If relevant, mention the employee assistance program or other resources].

You are welcome to add a written response, which we will keep with this warning in your file. Please sign the attached copy to acknowledge that you received it. Your signature doesn't mean you agree.

[HR contact name]
[Title], [Company]

Version 2: Performance warning

SUBJECT Written warning: [Performance area]

Hi [Employee first name],

This confirms our conversation today about your performance in [area].

The issue: [Specific facts, with dates and examples, such as order accuracy was 91 percent in May and 89 percent in June against a team standard of 98 percent].

Previous discussion: we discussed this on [Dates], and [what was agreed or provided].

What needs to change: [Measurable expectation] by [Date].

Support: [Training, coaching, or tools].

If performance doesn't improve to the expected level, further action may follow, up to and including termination.

Please let me know if anything is getting in the way of meeting these expectations, including anything personal or health related, so we can see how to help.

[Manager name]

Subject lines to try

- Written warning: [Brief subject]
- Written warning: [Performance area]
- Follow-up to today's meeting
- Documentation of our conversation on [Date]
- Formal warning and expectations

How to personalize it

- Describe what happened, when, and where, without adjectives.
- Link the issue to a specific policy or standard.
- List earlier conversations with dates.

- Invite the employee to add a written response.

| Mistakes to avoid

- Labels like bad attitude or lazy.
- Disciplining an employee more harshly than others for the same issue.
- Issuing discipline shortly after a complaint or leave request without review.
- Sending the warning by email alone with no conversation.

| Legal and compliance notes

Inconsistent discipline is one of the most common bases for discrimination claims. Before issuing a warning, check how similar issues were handled for other employees. If the employee recently complained, requested leave or an accommodation, or filed a workers' compensation claim, review the timing with HR or counsel to avoid retaliation claims. Unionized employees may have contract rights, including the right to a representative. Don't count absences protected by FMLA, ADA, or paid sick leave laws against the employee.

| When to send it

As soon as possible after the issue is confirmed, while facts are fresh. Hold the meeting first, then send the email the same day.

| Before you hit send

- HR or counsel reviewed the message if discipline or a complaint is involved.
- Facts are stated with dates, without opinions or labels.
- Protected leave or a recent complaint plays no part in the action described.
- Any request for discretion is narrow and explained, not a blanket ban.
- A copy is saved to the employee file or the case record.

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