

How To
**Write An Effective
Complaint Letter**
After Childbirth



Jennifer Posthuma

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Introduction

My name is Jenni and I am a birth trauma survivor. My traumatic birth happened in September of 2020 in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. After my experience I discovered that, despite the prevalence of birth trauma occurrences, there were very few resources available for survivors.

A big part of my healing process was to write a complaint letter to help ensure that what happened to me will not happen to anyone else.

This book will take you through the process that I went through when I wrote my own complaint letter.

Why use my process?

My letter attracted a lot of attention within the health authority and achieved the results that I was looking for. Where I live it is mandated that the letter has to be acknowledged within 10 business days. Typically this comes in the form of a short reply stating that the letter has been received. In my case I received a telephone call from 2 of the three authorities that I submitted my complaint to. I had lengthy conversations in which my case managers asked for further clarification and discussed their plans for how to address my complaint with me.

The case manager from the College of Nurses and Midwives said to me that based on my letter, I would be qualified to sit on the review board because I went through a similar process to what they will go through.

The head of obstetrics at my local hospital, who ultimately dealt with my complaint, said:

“I can see from the way you’ve written it, it’s come from a lot of insight. And, so, there’s no lack of confidence in what you’re saying.”

Writing the letter was a lengthy process for me. It took 6 months before I was in a state both physically and mentally to start writing the letter. And 11 months had passed before my letter was ready to submit. Some people take years before they are ready to make a complaint, and it is important to go through this process in your own time. It is best to submit your letter sooner rather than later, but it is also difficult to do this while recovering from your experience and looking after a newborn.

Be kind to yourself.

You too can write an empowering letter that will be taken seriously by the people you are submitting your complaint to.

Together we are creating positive change!

Part 1 - Preparation

Preliminary Steps

The first thing that you should do after your birth experience is to write down absolutely everything that you remember happening and who was involved. Write your story out as you remember it. Include how you feel about what happened because that is an important part of your story.

The second thing to do is to request your hospital records from your local health authority. Ask for a copy of everything that they have on file and include all of the dates that you were there.

The third thing to do is to heal. If you are suffering from birth trauma there are several things that you can do:

- * Have a birth debrief with someone you trust. This can be done with a medical professional or someone else in the community. Many doulas also offer this service.
- * Seek help from a trauma counsellor, especially one who specializes in birth trauma. EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprocessing) therapy is a very effective treatment for trauma and PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder).
- * Build a tool box of coping mechanisms to try when you are feeling triggered. Examples include: bilateral tapping, grounding techniques, slow breathing, counting slowly to 10 and super hero postures.
- * Surround yourself with a group of people who are going to support you through this process. They could be family, friends, fellow trauma survivors or professionals.

- * Look for and talk to locals who have already gone through the complaint process in your area and see if you can gain any insider knowledge from them. Their advice may be invaluable to your process.
- * If your complaint is about a doctor and involves malpractice or a serious infringement, you may want to consider consulting with a lawyer.

Next, there will be a period of time for which you will need to wait, both for your records to arrive and for you to feel ready to dive in.

Step 2 - Do Some Research

Take some time to look at the websites for the regulatory bodies for the doctors, nurses and midwives. Often within those websites you will find resources that are available for their

members. Look for standards of practice and codes of ethics.

Take some time to look at the websites for the national regulatory bodies as well, such as the National Medical Association and the Obstetric and Gynaecologist Association.

You can also check the obstetric journals for their published recommendations on which most medical practices are based.

Some resources to start with:

- * In Canada, the SOGC (Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada), and the JOGC (Journal of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada).
- * In the USA, ACOG (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists).
- * In the UK, RCOG (Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists).

Internationally trusted resources:

* NICE (National Institute for Care Excellence)

* Cochrane Library

* The Lancet is one of the world's oldest and best known medical journals

Other resources:

* Birth Place Lab at the University of British Columbia studies maternity care experiences

Take notes and write down anything that you feel might pertain to your situation. Save all of your sources so that you can refer to them later in your letter.

Step 3 - Read Your Records

Once your hospital records arrive get yourself into a safe space to read them over. You may

want to have someone with you or you may feel ready to dive right in. They may be difficult to read, full of medical terminology and short forms that have no meaning to you.

For your convenience, I have created a Medical Reference Sheet to help you decipher your hospital records.

You will probably need to read your records over several times in order to make sense of them. Be warned that reading your records may be upsetting. There may be information that is missing or incorrect. If so, you will have a chance to address this later when you are writing your letter.

You may also see the statement “patient requested” anytime you agreed to any type of medication or procedure whether you actually requested it or not. This is for liability reasons. In every situation, your consent is required and that consent may or may not have been informed and may or may not have been coerced out of you. The statement “patient

requested” is there to take the liability away from the medical professional and does not necessarily represent what happened.

It might also be helpful to use the notes to piece together a timeline of events for yourself. Personally, I found that I had a lot of confusion surrounding my birth experience and had remembered events out of order. Reading my notes brought me a lot of clarity.

Step 4 - Rewrite Your Story

Now that you have a better understanding of the details surrounding your hospital experience, take some time to rewrite your story. Combine your personal first hand experience with the details that you have taken from your hospital records.

Write out quotations from your notes for anything that you feel is relevant to your complaint or supports your experience of events. Reference the date and time and the name or initials of the person who wrote it.

Step 5 - Organize Your Thoughts

Make a long list of everything that happened to you that you would like to make a complaint about.

Put that list into an order with the issues that are of most importance at the top. Put everything else into an order that makes the most sense in terms of your story.

If your list is really long, remove anything that you no longer feel is important enough to

include. Your list can be as long or as short as you want it to be. My own list was extremely long and I shortened it down to 10 items that I felt were important enough to address.

For each complaint item, write down what you want them to do about it. It is okay to be unsure of what you want done or what can be done at this point.

Part 2 - Writing The Letter

Step 6 - Know Your Audience

First decide which regulatory bodies you are going to submit your complaint to. You can write multiple letters or you can submit the same letter to all of them. If you submit the same one, include a cover letter explaining that you are submitting the letter to them because it includes a complaint about an individual (name them) in the context of the experience as a whole.

For example, I wrote one letter addressed to my local health authority. I then submitted that same letter to the College of Physicians and Surgeons with a cover letter explaining that it included a complaint about a specific doctor who is registered with them.

The people reviewing your complaint will likely be a mix of medical and non-medical professionals. They will also likely be volunteers.

When you write your letter, provide as much information as possible as they may not read your records themselves. Also, provide as much of your own evidence as possible. Anecdotal evidence is just as valid as hard evidence in this case.

Tell your story. Your experience as a patient is very important to them. It's why they exist to review the complaints that are submitted. The quality of care that they are providing, as well as their reputation as a medical organization is very important to them. Their goal is to

address the issue so that you leave satisfied with the outcome and so that they can do something to avoid further complaints in the future.

Use medical terminology in your letter, but also explain what the terminology means, for those who may not understand. For example: “I had an amniotomy or Artificial Rupture of Membranes (ARM)”. You can then use the shorthand term (ARM) for the rest of the letter.

Use a very matter of fact tone in your letter. Do not give them any reason to doubt what you are claiming.

For your convenience I have created a [Complaint Submission Reference Sheet](#) to help you figure out where you need to submit your complaint.

Step 7 - Use A Formal Letter Template

Using a formal letter template will make your letter look professional. Here is an example of what that might look like:

First and Last Name
Street Name and Number, City,
Province, Postal Code
email@address.com
Phone Number
<space>
Date of Letter

Name of Addressee
Position if applicable
Mailing Address
email@address.com
Phone Number
<space>
<space>

Attention Name of Addressee,

<space>

Introductory paragraph

<space>

Subsequent paragraphs

<space>

Concluding paragraph

<space>

Farewell

<4 to 6 spaces for your signature>

Name Typed Out Again

Preferred Contact Method

Step 8 - Formula For The Letter

Write an introductory paragraph explaining who you are, that you were a patient, say which medical facility and the dates that you were there. Say that you are writing to them to file a complaint and then list your complaints. Say what you want them to do about each complaint and then end the paragraph by asking them to read further details about each complaint below.

Write this first paragraph in such a way that if it is the only part of the letter that they read, then they will have all of the information that you want them to know.

Next write a separate paragraph for each complaint. Give specific details about what

happened. Provide any evidence that you have that supports what you are saying. For example, you can quote your medical records at this point. Tell them what happened from your perspective and how you feel about it. If there were any inaccuracies or missing information in your records, now is your opportunity to correct them. Talk about what was wrong about what happened. Now you can quote any evidence you have to support this including their code of ethics, standards of practice, hospital protocol, etc. Then write out in specific detail what you would like done to correct the issue. If you are also able, include an argument for how a correction would be in the best interest of the public.

Lastly write a concluding paragraph in which you summarize all of your complaints and what you want them to do about them.

Sign off with something similar to:

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Sign your name.

If you like you can also put your phone number or your email address below your name for them to easily find it.

Format For Quotations

For a short quotation:

- * Put quotations around the passage inside of a larger sentence.
- * Mention where it is taken from in the sentence or write the source in brackets at the end of the sentence.
- * Put the punctuation at the end of the sentence after the quotation marks.

EX:

In my notes it states “.....”.

According to the medical code of ethics
“.....”(Name of the source and
page number).

For a long quotation:

- * Put quotation in a separate paragraph
- * Indent the paragraph on both sides
- * Use “justified” alignment for this
paragraph
- * Put the source underneath in brackets and
aligned to the right

EX:

The document states as follows:

<space>

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet,
consectetur adipiscing elit, sed
do eiusmod tempor incididunt
ut labore et dolore magna
aliqua. Ut enim ad minim
veniam, quis nostrud
exercitation ullamco laboris nisi
ut aliquip ex ea commodo
consequat. Duis aute irure dolor
in reprehenderit in voluptate.
(velit esse cillum).

<space>

Continue on with your letter

This doesn't have to be perfect. The
purpose of this is to make the letter look
professional. This isn't an academic paper,
so don't worry too much about getting it
exactly right.

Part 3 - Afterwards

Step 9 - Once You Are Finished

Once you have finished your letter and you are happy with it, have someone you trust read it over. Fix any mistakes and clarify anything that needs further clarification. Then submit your letter(s) in the appropriate manner.

YOU DID IT!

No go treat yourself! This was hard work and you just had a huge win! You deserve it!

Now, it's time to prepare yourself for a long wait. In the meantime let it go. Know that you

have done good and that the complaint you have submitted will be going into their permanent record. And every complaint made towards any individual builds a body of evidence against them. The results may not happen right away but they will happen eventually.

Have the right mindset. Thinking about all of these negative experiences has probably put you into a bad head space.

A mindset exercise that I have found to be very helpful:

- Put on some relaxing music, close your eyes and slowly relax all of the muscles in your body.
- Imagine the outcome that you want has already happened AND/OR imagine the person that you complained about realizing their mistake and making a change for the better.
- Now send that image love. This will put you in a place of love rather than a place of sorrow.

Step 10 - Once They Get Back To You

Save any and all correspondence they send to you. If they call you on the phone, make sure that you take extensive notes and write down everything that they say. If you are unable to take notes, ask them to call you back and arrange a time that will work for both of you.

If you are able to, record the conversation. In some places you need to ask the other person permission to record the call and in some places your permission as a person who is part of the conversation is enough. Check your local laws regarding this. Take notes even if you are recording the conversation in case something happens to the recording.

You may be tempted to go to the media. It is best for you to leave that as an absolute last resort or wait until your complaint process has been completed. They will likely ask for you to keep your complaint confidential to protect your privacy and that of anyone else involved. In the meantime, it is okay to talk about your complaint in private and if talking in a public forum, leave out the names of any individuals who are involved.

Step 11 - If You Are Not Satisfied With The Outcome

In most cases, the organization to which you are submitting your complaint has a two level process. If you are unhappy with the initial outcome you can find out if they have a higher level review board you can then submit to.

If you have gone through both levels of review and are still unhappy with the outcome, most countries have an ombudsperson at a local and national level who's job it is to investigate complaints regarding people's rights, and attempt to resolve them, usually through recommendations or mediation.

You also have the option of contacting your local elected official at whichever level of government that is responsible for health care. There is usually also a particular person, such as a "Minister of Health" who is specifically responsible for all things healthcare related.

Step 12 - Protecting Yourself For Next Time

And finally, here are some tips to help you advocate for yourself and to protect yourself in the medical system in the future.

- * Always carry a notebook. Write down everything that is discussed during your appointments or interactions with medical professionals.
- * Ask for the name of the person you are talking to if you don't already know it and write it down.
- * Write down your questions ahead of time and come prepared. If the doctor's time is limited, tell them your list of concerns and then ask them which items they feel are most urgently needing to be addressed.
- * Follow up with everything. In the medical system often information isn't shared properly between care providers and sometimes referrals never make it to their destination. If you were supposed to have a test done or go see a specialist, follow up and

make sure that appointments are set and everything is arranged.

- * Educate yourself. Unfortunately, in maternity care, informed consent is often not given. Look for trustworthy sources of information and look things up on your own.
- * Have someone with you. This isn't always possible, but it is best to have someone with you in the hospital. If you are going to an appointment, ask if you can bring someone with you. Make sure that person also knows and supports your decisions.

If you have a conflict with a staff member in the hospital:

- * Attempt to first resolve the conflict with the person directly.
- * Kindly ask to speak to the unit manager, often this is the “charge nurse”. You can say you just have a question to ask them.

- * Ask for the Patient Care Coordinator. They ensure needs are being addressed and act as a liaison between the patient and healthcare personnel.
- * Ask for the hospital social worker. They counsel those experiencing distress and connect patients with necessary resources.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this guide has helped you with your individual letter writing process. There is no wrong answer in this process. While it helps to have your letter as academic and official as possible, this isn't a final exam. The most important thing is that you feel good about your letter and you feel heard. Your experience is important, and making a complaint serves to further improve things for

the next person giving birth within the health care system.

You are a part of a larger movement that is working hard to improve maternity care and your efforts are greatly appreciated.

To download the Reference Sheets go to:

<https://www.empressbirthworks.com/downloads>