



# Understanding a "show cause" letter from your employer

**Date: Sunday September 28, 2025**

Receiving a "show cause letter" (often called a "show cause notice") from your employer can be a very stressful experience. Understanding what a show cause letter means, what your rights and responsibilities are, and how best to respond, can all significantly affect the outcome and your employment position.

## What is a show cause letter?

A show cause letter is a formal request for a person to explain or justify their actions, conduct, or performance. These letters are usually issued when your employer is considering disciplinary action, such as termination.

The purpose is to give the recipient an opportunity to present their side of the story before a final decision is made. This is regarded as a requirement of "procedural fairness" (sometimes called "natural justice").

## When are show cause letters issued?

A show cause letter is typically issued after the employer has conducted a preliminary investigation and believes that formal action may be required. A show cause letter will typically be issued in circumstances such as:

- allegation/s of poor conduct (e.g. inappropriate behaviour, breaches of company policy or company code of conduct);
- allegation/s of serious misconduct (e.g. theft, harassment, fraud);
- ongoing poor performance after warnings or performance management;
- absenteeism or other workplace issues.

# What does a show cause letter include?

Show cause letters will typically outline:

- the allegations or concerns being raised;
- the evidence supporting those concerns;
- the proposed action (e.g. termination);
- a deadline by which you must respond;
- who to address your response to.

A typical show cause letter might read as follows:

*Dear Bill,*

*An allegation concerning your workplace conduct has come to our attention, namely that on 3 June 2025, you engaged in inappropriate behaviour with a colleague, Jane Smith, by calling her a “loser” and “hopeless” during a team meeting.*

*Such behaviour, if established, is considered a serious violation of the company’s policies and code of conduct.*

*You are hereby directed to show cause in writing within 14 days from receipt of this letter as to why disciplinary action should not be taken against you for the above-mentioned alleged conduct. You may provide your response in writing to Mr Steve Bob, HR Manager.*

*The matters subject of this disciplinary process are to remain confidential. This will ensure the integrity of the process. You are directed not to discuss this matter with anyone, apart from your union, legal representative, or support person. The company’s employee assistance program is available to you throughout this process.*

*If you have any questions regarding this matter, please contact Mr Bob.*

*Failure to respond within the stipulated time may result in the company proceeding with appropriate action in your absence.*

*Sincerely,*

It is important to read the show cause letter carefully. Like the above example, such letters might request that you maintain confidentiality and may give you a direction not to discuss the allegations with others in order to maintain the integrity of the disciplinary process.

# How to respond to a show cause letter

Responding effectively to a show cause letter can significantly impact the outcome. When preparing a response, consider the following.

## Stay calm and review the details

- Read the letter carefully.
- Identify what is being alleged, what response is required, and what deadlines apply to any response.

## Request further particulars (if required)

- A show cause letter should contain sufficient information to allow you to fully understand what is being alleged.
- If there is insufficient information or the allegations are too vague or ambiguous, you should ask your employer to provide further “particulars” of what is alleged (such as dates, times, people involved, what act or omission is alleged, which specific policy has been breached, etc.).
- This should be done well in advance of the due date.
- For example, an allegation that "*You have demonstrated inappropriate behaviour in the workplace*" is too general and does not allow a person to understand what behaviour they are alleged to have engaged in and when.
- An employer isn't legally obligated to provide every detail and piece of evidence, however if they refuse to clarify key allegations sufficiently to allow you to know what you have been accused of and be able to respond fully, this could support a claim that the process was procedurally unfair.

You can read more about the importance of having detailed information in a show cause letter in our earlier article, [“The purpose and importance of particulars in disciplinary proceedings”](#).

## Gather evidence

- Collect documents (such as emails, timesheets, etc.), or witness statements that support your version of events.
- Remember, it is important to consider any directions that may have been given to you by your employer to retain confidentiality, and you should carefully consider whether to make a request to access documents (such as emails if you have been suspended and cannot access company emails/computers etc.) or speak to colleagues who could support your version of events.

## Prepare a response

- Address each allegation specifically and clearly.
- Be factual, respectful, and remember to avoid emotional language.
- Provide supporting evidence (if applicable).

- Offer context or explanations for any conduct or decisions.
- Keep a copy for your records.

## Meet the deadline

- Ensure your response is submitted on or before the due date.
- Missing the deadline *may* result in your employer proceeding with disciplinary action without considering your input.
- If you need more time to provide a response or obtain advice (including legal advice), you should write to the relevant person handling the matter and seek an extension of time. Such requests should be made in advance of the due date.

## What happens after you respond to a show cause letter?

After receiving your response, your employer should:

- review your explanation;
- consider any supporting documents and witness statements;
- if necessary, invite you to a follow-up meeting to investigate further or provide you with a response.

Depending on your response, your employer may decide to:

- take no further action;
- issue a warning or performance improvement plan;
- proceed with termination of employment or other adverse action.

## Get help from an employment lawyer

Receiving a show cause letter can be daunting, but it doesn't automatically mean you're in the wrong or that a negative outcome is certain. By understanding the purpose of the letter, acting promptly, and responding appropriately, you give yourself the best chance of achieving a fair result.

Show cause letters must be taken very seriously, and if you receive one, you may face disciplinary action, including termination. It's important that you act promptly and seek legal advice early.

Our lawyers at Gilshenan & Luton Legal Practice are experts in disciplinary and professional misconduct matters and regularly assist our clients to achieve optimal results.

## Contacting Gilshenan & Luton Lawyers

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