

CREATE AN ENGLISH LETTER WRITING SECRETARY

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Introduction

Working at Luoyang University in China, we have a course called "English letter writing" for the students of English Department and other departments. As more and more foreign businesses enter the country and the English language plays the most important role in the international trade, publishers of textbooks have to add in more and more different kinds of sample letters, especially business letters, and instructions to writing them to meet the increasing need. However, it might happen that students do not feel that they have learnt a great deal of letter writing. On the contrary, they say they have to remember various words or styles for corresponding kinds of letters, which makes them confused and tired. On the other hand, the English teachers have to prepare a lot before class and cannot finish the planned content at class due to the increased quantity and length of sample letters and the need to repeat the rules of letter styles and patterns. Whenever letter writing is assigned at class, the students' response is immediate and unequivocal. "We have to write about what?" Mutter, grumble, snort, rip and silence as they struggle to begin.

INI files – what are they?

To free students of the difficulty and the teachers from overburden we may employ computers to make letter writing easier and faster. One solution to tackle the problem might be using the most common file in the Windows system – INI files.

Almost every major Windows application includes an INI file, yet most developers rarely use them in their own programs. INI files are extremely useful for storing window size and position, user preferences, and other information that should be preserved between sessions of program use. A quick glance at the \WINDOWS

directory of any computer will prove how widespread their use is. Some programs even use more than one INI file. Personally, I like INI files to store information rather than registry or database as they are easier to work with if you don't have to demand high level of security. And, as this article will show, INI files are very simple to implement into the application to build the English letter writing secretary.

Don't be afraid of INI files. If you do not have much knowledge about your system, you'd better not change/delete values in such already existing important system INI files as win.ini, Ios.ini, and system.ini. Generally, INI files, simple text files, are named for their common three-letter file extension, which is short for initialization. Each INI file is divided into sections, easily recognizable because the section title is enclosed in brackets (e.g. [Boot]). Within each section are a number of statements. Each statement begins with a variable or "identifier," followed by its value (e.g. color=2). Two of the best-known INI files are WIN.INI and SYSTEM.INI, both used to store important parameters for the Windows operating system.

Below is a section from a system.ini, storing the information of VGA.

```
[S3765PCIVGAs] // section title
VirtualScreen=Off // identifier=value
Screen=640X480 // identifier=value
CursorColorRGB=255,255,255 // identifier=value
ChromaKeyRGB=255,0,255 // identifier=value
RefreshRate=60,72,60,60,48 // identifier=value
CursorSize=0 // identifier=value
.....
```

Creating and Storing Letter Information

1. The Heading and the Inside Address

This part mainly includes the information of both addressee and addressor such as name; title; organization; street; telephone number; country; email address, etc. The advantage of the digital secretary is that it can dynamically manage and update the information with a flip and in no time if we know how to create INI files. Suppose you are going to

write to me. The written section in the INI file may look like this:

```
[Guo Shesen] //section title  
  
address=No.1 Daxue Road, Henan //identifier=value  
  
email=guoshesen@21cn.com //identifier=value  
  
country=China //identifier=value  
  
organization=Office of English Dept, Luoyang University //identifier=value
```

As mentioned above, INI files are simple text files, which mean we can use any text editors such as Notepad or other simple editors to create them. Just start a text editor and insert the above section line by line and save it in any extensions. Or we can create the INI files through RAD tools such as VB, Delphi or Visual C++. The important thing is that we can create other sections and identifiers and values in the same INI file. So, if you want to add a new recipient and store his/her information in the same INI file, just input section titles and their identifiers and values as demonstrated above, or use writestring method. For example (in Delphi):

```
INI.writestring('John','address','No.2 ABC Road, City');  
  
INI.writestring('John','email','email:nospam@noad.com');  
  
INI.writestring('John','postal','Postal Code 123456');
```

After the above writestring operation in RAD environment, the relevant information will be written in the INI file created. We may find the following information written in the created INI file: (Any text editors can open INI files)

```
[Guo Shesen]  
  
address=No.1 Daxue Road, Henan  
  
email=guoshesen@21cn.com  
  
country=China  
  
organization=Office of English Dept, Luoyang University  
  
[John]  
  
address=No.2 ABC Road, City  
  
email=email: nospam@nospam.com  
  
postal=Postal Code 123456
```

If we want to read the sections and values of the INI file into a text editor, use the

method `Readstring` or `Readsection` in sources: (Suppose the name of a text editor in sources is `happyeditor` – you may give the component any name.)

```
happyeditor.lines[1].text:=INI.readstring('John','address',"");  
happyeditor.lines[2].text:=INI.readstring('John','email',"");  
happyeditor.lines[3].text:=INI.readstring('John','postal',"");
```

After compiling, the user interface editor (the `happyeditor`) from this executable will show:

```
(line 1) No.2 ABC Road, City  
(line 2) email: nospam@nospam.com  
(line 3) Postal Code 123456
```

If you update or modify the information, call the method again without changing section and identifier. For example:

```
INI.writestring('John','address','No.1000 ABC Road, City');  
INI.writestring('John','email','email:write@digital.com');  
INI.writestring('John','postal','Postal Code 100000');  
INI.writestring('John','fax','Fax: 123-123456');
```

Interesting? Whenever we send a letter to a new recipient, just `writestring` to create and store the information, and if we want to load the stored information into a text editor, `readstring`. The trick is that by using only one INI file we can merge separate information into one file. Let's look at the next step.

2. *The Body*

Generally we divide English letters into family letters, social letters and business letters, with each kind subdivided. While creating the secretary application I do not consider it necessary and practical to include all these hundreds of letters in the same version, as all kinds of letters are equally important when they are used on different occasions. However, for students I feel the most needed and urgent will be letters of application – such as those in job hunting and follow-up letters. They are the way of communicating with the society and finding a prospective employer. Thus, they have great influence on students' career. Even only making this kind of templates, the number of letter is large. I arrange the letters in the order of the frequency of use: a letter of application, a letter of

inquiry, a letter thanking for the interview, a letter thanking for the job offer, a letter of acceptance. This arranged order of letters and application steps are commonly accepted by most people and are easily located by users.

If you think social letters are important, include them in the INI file. However, as the number of letters is large, we suggest including them in different versions of the application or different INI files of the same application.

On the basis of the above examples of creating INI files, we may input the following information into a text editor such as Notepad:

[Letter of Application] {section}

I am writing in reference to your advertisement for a staff consultant as listed in the Engineering Career Services Office at Iowa State University. I will be graduating in May 20__ with a Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering, and I believe my qualifications to be consistent with those desired by your firm.*****Throughout my collegiate career, I have stayed well-rounded by combining my academics with leadership and work experience. By majoring in Electrical Engineering, I have been exposed to all facets of scientific and analytic disciplines from mathematics to circuit analysis. My co-op experience with IBM in Boca Raton, Florida, allowed me to gain practical experience in the field of electronic circuit logic and driver design. I have also held several leadership positions, which have enhanced my communications and management skills.*****Enclosed is a resume that will give you greater detail regarding my education, work experiences and activities. If you have any questions regarding my qualifications, please call me at 515-296-0000. Thank you for your time and consideration.=

{skip a line here}

[Letter of Inquiry]

I am seeking a full-time position as a mechanical engineer with interest in working in a manufacturing environment. I will receive a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering from Iowa State University in...=

{skip a line here}

[Thanks for the Interview]

...=

{skip a line here}

```
[Thanks for the Job Offer  
...=  
{skip a line here}  
[Letter of Acceptance]  
...=  
{skip a line here}  
[Declining a Job Offer]  
...=  
{skip a line here}  
[Follow Up After Interview]  
...=  
{skip a line here}  
[Other follow-ups]  
...=
```

Teachers may collect the letters anywhere or input sample letters from the textbook, they could even store broken or misspelled sentences for students to complete or correct. The use of the English letter writing secretary depends on the concrete objectives or practice methods.

Pay attention to asterisks (***) in the INI file. I add them for the paragraph marker as the value of an identifier in a section which is not formatted. Using the method `readsection` and `readstring` in sources of RAD environment as mentioned above, we can read the relevant information (identifiers and their values) into the `happyeditor` (in RAD environment an editor can be given any names). After compiling the source into an executable, the editor in RAD tools will be the user interface editor with functions. Notepad is an editor; UltraEdit is an editor; Ms Word is another editor. There are thousands of computer text editors with thousands of different names and functions. This is because there is a class named `Tedit/Tmemo` in RAD tools, we can create as many customized editor as we like. We can replace `*****` with Carriage Return plus Line Feed (`Chr(13)+Chr(10)`).

Similarly, we can store information of the complimentary close and signature line in the

INI file.

For reference, the full INI file of the digital secretary can be downloaded at <http://guoshesen.51.net/download/inidemo.zip>. Unzip inidemo.zip and open the file with any text editors.

Merging of the Two Parts

With the framework constructed above the digital secretary is ready to write. Place a command button and just enter several lines of readstring with parameters to load the separate information of addressee, addressor, the body of a letter, and complimentary close or signature into a text editor. You will read a full and complete letter.

```
var
letter: string;
INI.readsection('Letter of Inquiry',letter);
editor.lines[1].text:=INI.readstring('John','address','');
editor.lines[2].text:=INI.readstring('John','email','');
editor.lines[3].text:=INI.readstring('John','postal','');
...{other heading or inside address}
editor.lines.add(''); // skip a line
editor.lines.add(datetostr(date)); // add date
editor.lines.add(''); // skip a line
editor.lines.add('Dear '+':');
editor.lines.add('');
editor.lines.add(letter);
```

The output in the user interface editor will be the following:

```
No.2 ABC Road, City
email: nospam@nospam.com
Postal Code 123456
...{Other heading or inside address}
{skip a line here}
{add current date here}
```

{skip a line again here}

Dear :

{skip a line}

I am seeking a full-time position as a mechanical engineer with interest in working in a manufacturing environment. I will receive a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering from Iowa State University in...

The purpose of this article is not to give a detailed instruction on how to build the secretary but rather outline the idea and the method to put it into practice. The key function is inputting information only once, and we can write to as many recipients as we like and their information is stored in the INI file. Whenever we want to write to persons previously written to, we may immediately locate his/her information which will be automatically provided on the screen. Of course, we can rename and delete any of the existing information. The use of the function saves us a lot of time and energy and it lays the foundations for efficiency in teaching and learning letter writing.

Secondly, the letters in the INI files actually play the role of templates just as in a word processing application, however, the difference is that you rewrite the templates directly in the program. And the limited kind and number of templates available may not satisfy our requirement. By creating our own INI files and embedding customized and personalized letters in them we can provide students or teachers with rich and suitable examples. The advantage of a single file of course simplifies the building of the program and facilitates the control of data though not so powerful. Any text editor can open the INI files, which can also facilitate the making process.

When dealing with English letters we are sure to discuss the letter layout such as punctuation patterns or letter styles (full block, modified block or semi-block) or lines spaced and etc. To make the letter styles easily remembered and flexibly modified, it is advisable that the templates be all output automatically in full block form and properly spaced between relevant parts (inside address, salutation...). With the help of editing, we can directly make the modifications or revisions on the basis of the template letters with the information of addressee and addresser.

Different Letters

Jobhunting letters account for only a small portion of English letters. How about other kinds of letters? We may solve the problem by simply replacing or modifying the INI file which can be easily done by teachers or students themselves. Execute “Copy” command to replace the previous kind of the letter, so that the secretary meets all and particular requirements of various kinds of letters needed by the writer.

In order to provide the examples and support the article, I have built a fully functional digital secretary, free and downloadable at: <http://guoshesen.51.net/download/letwr.zip>
All readers are welcome to download the program and provide the author with suggestions and comments .