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**EMILY POST ON INVITATIONS & LETTERS**

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## *Introduction*

While it is true that I would be glad to receive a note scribbled on the back of a grocery list from old friends who have been incommunicado for years, and while some of my most cherished letters are pages of news, confidences, and insights dashed off on paper torn from a spiral notebook, it is also true that I would not particularly admire a dinner invitation or a letter of condolence written so haphazardly. When we are unable to talk to someone face to face, our correspondence speaks for us. The impression it makes perhaps doesn't matter to dear friends, but it is very important to potential employers, places with which we do business, and casual acquaintances.

Accordingly, this book is designed to help you make the best on-paper impression possible. In this day of instant electronic mail, computerized desk-to-desk memos, and the convenience of the telephone, a well-written letter, personalized stationery, and traditionally and beautifully crafted invitations are truly a pleasure to the recipient. A

sincere letter of condolence to a bereaved friend, a formal reply to a formal wedding invitation, a thank-you note instead of a commercial thank-you card—these are all ways of communicating that are especially meaningful.

Although our correspondence *could* be conducted on pages from spiral notebooks and on pre-printed cards, when it is, instead, handwritten on personalized stationery, when it expresses caring, thoughtfulness, a serious business statement, or the whimsical mood of the sender, then it makes a statement about who we are, and it is received as we intended it should be.

Should your last page of engraved, personal stationery be gone, however, don't wait two months for the order for more to be filled before letting someone know you care. By all means, use the back of an old grocery list and write. As Thomas Bailey Aldrich wrote to his friend Edward Sylvester Morse in the late 1800s, "There's a singular and a perpetual charm in a letter of yours; it never grows old, it never loses its novelty. . . ." Whatever the form, however illegible, a letter from a friend brightens everyone's day.

When writing to other than a close friend, of course the grocery list is unacceptable. By following accepted forms and using writing paper or invitations that reflect your good taste, you will find that you have a much better chance of getting the re-

sponse and/or the results you desire. Your correspondence will reveal you as a man or a woman who takes the time to communicate the right way and who expects to be taken seriously.

Elizabeth L. Post

June 1990



## *Personal Correspondence*

**Q.** *How do you choose personal stationery?*

**A.** Your choice is determined by a combination of your personal taste and suitability to the occasion. Everyone who does, or expects to do, any formal correspondence should have a supply of good-quality paper in a conservative color—usually white, ivory, gray, pale green, or pale blue—to be used for condolence notes, answers to invitations, and so on. This “good” paper need not be personalized, although it may have a monogram if you wish. It may be bordered in a conservative color, generally darker tones of the paper color or burgundy or gold or silver. It should not include design motifs, such as butterflies or kittens. Those papers should be reserved for informal notes and letters. The texture of the paper, whether it is rough or smooth, is a matter of personal choice, as is the texture of the edges, which may be moderately ragged to smooth. Most personal stationery produced by writing paper companies ranges from  $5\frac{7}{8}$  inches by  $7\frac{3}{4}$

inches, called princess size, to 7¼ inches by 10½ inches, monarch size.

For more personal letters, there are no longer many restrictions, and color combinations may vary. A woman's paper may be marked with a monogram, initials, or her name and address. These may be placed in the center or upper left corner either in a contrasting shade or in a color to match a border. If stationery is monogrammed, either the single letter of her last name may be used or her three initials (with that of her first name to the left, her last name—larger—in the center, and her maiden name initial to the right). The paper is smaller than a man's, approximately 5½ inches by 6½ inches, and it may be a single sheet or a double, folded sheet.

*Q. Is men's stationery different from women's stationery?*

*A.* Men's stationery is larger, generally 7 inches by 10 inches to 7¼ inches by 10½ inches. Color and texture guidelines are those noted in the answer to the question above. It is folded in thirds to fit its envelope.

*Q. How is stationery personalized for . . .  
. . . married women?*

*A.* A married woman's formal paper is engraved or printed "Mrs. Barry Farnham," rather than "Mrs.

Carolyn Farnham." For informal, personal letters she may have paper engraved "Carolyn Farnham," if she wishes. Women's stationery used for business correspondence may be marked with her professional name without title—"Sylvia Barrett"—rather than "Mrs. William Barrett."

*Q. . . . for single women?*

*A.* The name engraved or printed on an unmarried woman's paper is written without title—"Susan Foltin," never "Miss" or "Ms Susan Foltin." If engraved or printed envelopes are ordered, they may include "Miss" or "Ms" before the name in the return address.

*Q. . . . for divorced women?*

*A.* A divorcée's name may be preceded by whatever title she is using on the envelope (Mrs., Miss, or Ms), followed by her own first and last name, not the given name of her former husband.

*Q. . . . for men?*

*A.* When a man's stationery is personalized, it is usually marked in plain block or Roman letters at the top center. His name, without title (Mr., Dr., etc.), and his street address, city, state, and zip code all appear. His telephone number is optional. For purely social use, he may also have a family crest engraved or printed in the top center or the upper left-hand corner. If it is marked in the corner, his

name and address are engraved or printed in the right corner.

Q. . . . *for children?*

A. Children's stationery may be personalized with just a first name or with a first and last name. Mr., Master, or Miss should not precede the name.

Q. *Is it possible to get stationery for everyone in the household to use?*

A. Yes, and it is often very practical to do this instead of purchasing separate stationery for each person. Family stationery has the address engraved or printed in plain letters at the top. Frequently the telephone number is put in small type under the address or in the upper left-hand corner, with the address in the center. No names are included with the address.

Q. *I stayed with my uncle last summer and was invited to attend different parties with him. I was hesitant to use his stationery, which is printed with his address and phone number, in order to write thank-you notes to my hosts, but I didn't bring any of my own stationery along. When is it all right to use another's stationery?*

A. It would have been perfectly all right for you to have used your uncle's stationery for your thank-you notes, since it did not include his name, monogram, or crest. Naturally, it is considerate to ask first, but family or household engraved or printed



stationery is properly used by guests as well as by any family members.

*Q. Are there any guidelines you can offer to distinguish when to use stationery and when a fold-over note is sufficient?*

A. Fold-over notepaper is used for short notes to friends, for acceptances or regrets to informal invitations, and for informal invitations. Stationery is used for longer letters, for business correspondence, for letters of condolence, and for acceptances or regrets to formal invitations.

*Q. Should children have their own stationery?*

A. Yes. It helps make children consider letter writing a pleasure rather than a chore. Children's stationery is widely available at stationery stores. Usually it includes a design motif, which should be appropriate to the age of the child.

*Q. Where should the return address appear on the envelope—on the upper left-hand corner of the envelope or on the back flap?*

A. If the envelope is engraved, the return address is marked on the back flap because of the restrictions of the engraving process. However, the U.S. Postal Service prefers that the return address appear in the upper left-hand corner, so if the return address is printed or handwritten, it is preferable to follow Postal Service preference.

*Q. Must the return address be handwritten if envelopes don't have the return address printed on the back flap? Or may I use printed return address labels?*

**A.** You may use printed return address labels or handwrite your return address, whichever you prefer. You may also use labels even though the address is engraved on the back flap for business letters or other correspondence where it is important that the address be noticed.

*Q. Must formal stationery be engraved? Are other printing methods acceptable?*

**A.** Years ago, writing paper was engraved or it was not marked at all. Although a supply of paper with an engraved initial, monogram, or crest to be used for formal or special correspondence is very nice to have, today the cost of engraving has caused a change in thinking, and printed stationery is perfectly acceptable. Thermography is a printing process used as an alternative to engraving. The type is raised, and to the unpracticed eye it is indistinguishable from engraving. It is far less expensive than engraving, although more expensive than plain printing, where the letters are not raised.

*Q. May social letters be typewritten?*

**A.** There is no longer any rule against using a typewriter for most personal letters, but there are three types of letters that should always be handwritten unless you are disabled and cannot write with a pen. They are notes of condolence, formal replies to

invitations, and thank-you notes. If your thanks are a part of a longer, personal letter, the rule can be waived, and you could type the letter if you prefer.

*Q. Our family crest appears on my parents' stationery. I heard that, as the only daughter in the family, I shouldn't use the crest, but that my brothers can. Is this true?*

A. Yes, even today this is true. The crest is the exclusive property of male members of a family, although it may be used jointly by a husband and a wife on some occasions.

*Q. Addressing a letter to a couple used to be easy—the wife took her husband's name and that was that—but no more. Can you provide some guidelines for addressing letters to . . .*

*. . . a husband and wife who don't use the same surname?*

A. Address their letter to "Ms Monica Taggart and Mr. Hugh Huntington," or if they prefer, simply to "Monica Taggart and Hugh Huntington."

*Q. . . . a couple who live together but are not married?*

A. This couple's correspondence is addressed in the same way as for a married couple who don't use the same surname.

*Q. . . . a widow?*

A. A widow continues to use her husband's given name. She is "Mrs. Frederick Corry," not "Mrs.

Sarah Corry," which would indicate that she is a divorcee.

*Q. . . . a divorced woman?*

**A.** A divorced woman does not continue to use her husband's given name. She should be addressed as "Mrs. Elizabeth Seldon" unless she has followed an older custom, whereby a woman combined her maiden name with her ex-husband's last name. In that case, Elizabeth Northshield, who married and was divorced from John Sheldon, could become "Mrs. Northshield Seldon." If a divorced woman has taken back her maiden name, she uses the title "Miss" or "Ms," not "Mrs." When a woman is divorced more than once, she uses the name of her last husband with her own first name or with her maiden name—she does not use her former husband's name.

*Q. How are letters to government officials addressed?*

**A.** A business letter to the President of the United States is addressed "The President, the White House, Washington, DC 20500." The salutation is "Sir:" or "Madam:." A social letter is addressed either the same way or "The President and Mrs. Washington, the White House," etc. The salutation is "Dear Mr. President:," "Dear Madam President:," "Dear Mr. President and Mrs. Washington:," or "Dear Madam President and Mr. Black:."

A business letter to the Vice President of the

United States is addressed "The Vice President, United States Senate, Washington, DC 20510." The salutation is "Sir:" or "Madam:." A social letter is addressed the same way or "The Vice President and Mrs. Adams," home address, or "The Vice President and Mr. Adams," home address. The salutation is "Dear Mr. Vice President:," "Dear Madam Vice President:," "Dear Mr. Vice President and Mrs. Adams:," or "Dear Madam Vice President and Mr. Smith:."

A business letter to a United States senator is addressed "The Honorable Daniel Webster, United States Senate, Washington, DC 20510." The salutation is either "Sir:" or "Madam:." A social letter is addressed the same way or "The Honorable and Mrs. Daniel Webster," home address, or "The Honorable Jane Webster and Mr. Daniel Webster," home address. The salutation is "Dear Senator Webster:" or "Dear Senator and Mrs. Webster:" or "Dear Senator Webster and Mr. Webster."

A business letter to a member of the House of Representatives is addressed the same as one to a senator of the United States. A social letter is addressed the same as for a senator, except that the salutation is "Dear Mr. Clay:," "Dear Mrs. [Miss, Ms] Franklin:," "Dear Mr. and Mrs. Clay:," or "Dear Ms Franklin and Mr. Clay . . ." for a social letter.

*Q. I am often at a loss as to how to begin a letter. Have you any suggestions?*

A. All too often the social letters we write are months and months overdue, and we tend to begin with an apology for our tardiness. It is far nicer to say "You don't know, Eileen, how many letters I planned to write to you" than to say "I suppose you think I've been very neglectful, but I just haven't had a minute to get around to writing," which is actually unfriendly.

It is easier to begin a letter in answer to one that has recently been received. The natural beginning is "We were all so happy to get your letter" or "Your letter was so very welcome," followed by responses to various subjects in the letter you received.

A business letter should begin with a direct statement of the intent of the letter. If it is in answer to a letter, it may begin "In response to your letter of October 3, following is . . ."

*Q. Once I finally get around to writing to old friends, I find I go on and on or abruptly close with something foolish like "I'm sure I've bored you to tears by now." There is a better way to end a letter, isn't there?*

A. Of course there is. Just as the beginning of a letter should give the reader an impression of greeting, so should its ending express friendly or affectionate leave-taking. After responding to a friend's

questions and comments, and sharing your own news, an ending such as "Will write again soon—you cannot imagine how much I miss you!" or "Counting the days till you get here" or "The ironing [or the bills, or the children, or a huge stack of reading for work] is calling and I can't ignore it any longer—will write again soon" are all friendly ways to end a letter that don't leave the reader with a feeling of abruptness or a sense that you couldn't wait to finish an unpleasant duty (writing to him or her).

*Q. Some people have a talent for writing letters that are a joy to receive. I wish I were one of them. Can you provide some guidelines for writing such letters?*

**A.** The letter we all love to receive is the one that carries so much of the writer's personality that he or she seems to be there with us. There are some things to keep in mind that make it easy to achieve a sense of *talking* through a letter. First, phrases typical of your speech should be used, not artificial formal language that is not natural to you. For example, if you would say "John is absolutely gorgeous and incredibly funny—I can't wait till you meet him!" write it. Don't say "John is an attractive young man with a good build who is often very amusing." Second, punctuation can add interest and variety to your letters in the same way as the change in the tone of a speaker's voice adds zest and

color to a story. Underlining a word, using an exclamation point, inserting dashes as pauses in a long sentence—all give the reader a sense of hearing you speak. Next, remember that the use of contractions can make your writing natural. If you would not say "I do not know," don't write it. Write "I don't know." Occasionally inserting the name of the person to whom you are writing gives your letter an added touch of familiarity and affection. "And, Jeanine, guess what we are going to do this summer!" makes Jeanine feel that what you are writing is of special interest to her. Write as you think, as quickly as possible. This helps your letter seem as if you are truly talking to your friend.

*Q. When I write a long letter, I'm never sure if there are guidelines about numbering the pages. Can you enlighten me?*

A. One may write on both sides of single-sheet stationery if it is heavy enough that writing does not show through from one side to the other. Pages are numbered, beginning with page two, sequentially. Folded stationery sometimes causes confusion about proper page order. A two-page letter on folded stationery is usually written on the first (the front) and third pages. This leaves the second and the fourth, or outside back, page blank and prevents the writing from showing through the envelope. For longer letters, one may write pages one through four in regular order, or write on the first



and fourth pages and then open the sheet and turn it sideways to write across the two inside pages as one. On fold-over or informal notepaper, when the address is at the top and there is nothing in the center, the note begins on the first page and follows into the center pages. The paper is opened flat and written on vertically as if it were a single page. If there is an initial, monogram, name, or design in the center of the front page, the note begins at the top of the opened center pages if it is long enough to cover more than half, and on the lower half if it is to be only a few words.

*Q. I always put the date on my letters; should I include my home address as well?*

**A.** If your stationery is not marked with your address, it is a good idea to provide it for your correspondent's convenience in replying. The upper right-hand corner of the first page of your letter is the usual place for your return address. You may also place it in the lower left-hand part of the page, just below the level of your signature. In either case, the date goes on the line directly below the address.

*Q. If I thank someone in person, must I also send a thank-you note?*

**A.** It depends on the circumstances. Thank-you letters are not necessary for presents that have been given in person on a birthday, at a house party, a shower, or other similar occasions when you have