

The Bantam Book of

CORRECT LETTER WRITING

*an abridgment based on
Lillian Eichler Watson's world-famous*

STANDARD BOOK OF LETTER WRITING



THIS AUTHORITATIVE GUIDE TELLS YOU HOW
TO WRITE CLEAR, SUCCESSFUL, EFFECTIVE
AND INTERESTING LETTERS FOR ALL OCCASIONS

MODERN ♦ PRACTICAL ♦ COMPREHENSIVE ♦ EASY-TO-USE

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Book I

*

The Basic Rules of Successful Letter Writing

* * *

1. Letter Writing as a Social Asset

There's an old familiar saying that you must have heard many times: "To have a friend, you must be a friend."

It's equally true that to receive interesting letters, you must *write* interesting letters. If you write only when absolutely necessary, when duty or responsibility demands, you are missing out on what can be one of the greatest personal enjoyments of life.

But apart from the pleasure and satisfaction that a wide correspondence with friends can mean to you, letter writing is an important social asset. The ability to write good letters can be as useful to you socially as the ability to talk well or entertain successfully. In some ways letter writing can be even more useful to you, for it helps facilitate all social activities—often saves you much time, trouble and inconvenience.

The letter you write is your personal representative. It takes your place when circumstances make it impossible for you to be there in person. It goes to the hospital to cheer a sick friend. It goes to your hostess to thank her for entertaining you. It conveys your best wishes, congratulations, condolences—when you are not able to do so in person.

WHAT THE ABILITY TO WRITE GOOD LETTERS CAN MEAN TO YOU

Letters can be one of the most powerful and far-reaching influences in your life, if you let them be. They can do amazing

things—can help you in more ways than you may realize. In fact, few accomplishments can serve you so well, in so many varied ways, all through life, as the ability to write good letters.

We are not here concerned with the great *practical* value of letter writing, which is discussed in a later chapter. Everybody knows and realizes the tremendous importance of letter writing as a business asset. Everybody knows that good convincing letters win more jobs and influence more people than dull, stereotyped, rubber-stamp letters.

But what is not so well-known and well-realized is the importance of letter writing as a personal asset. Letters can add in every way, and in very great measure, to the enjoyment of life. They can bridge any distance . . . bring friends closer in intimacy and understanding . . . enrich social relationships . . . increase personal popularity . . . win affection . . . inspire love . . . provide a most satisfying means of self-expression!

A LETTER IS LIKE A VISIT ON PAPER

If you "hate to write letters," it's simply because you have not yet discovered the fun it can be to write and receive letters that are *good talk* on paper. Do you hate to visit your friends and talk with them face to face? Then why hate to write a letter which is—or should be—a pleasant "visit" on paper?

Many people actually disregard letters from family and friends, deliberately neglecting to answer them. Others put off answering until the person who wrote has every reason to feel slighted and hurt. To leave a letter unanswered is like saying, "I can't be bothered writing! I don't think you're worth the time and effort it takes to write a letter."

Surely you wouldn't dream of saying that directly to anyone! Then don't imply it by leaving letters unanswered, or by putting off your answer for too long a time. Courtesy demands that every letter you receive be answered . . . and answered promptly.

This is especially true of family letters. It is not only a discourtesy but an unkindness to ignore letters from relatives who are concerned about your welfare, or the welfare of members of your immediate family. Few things can give a greater lift to the spirit, a greater boost to morale, than a cheerful, newsy letter . . . an intimate visit on paper with someone near and dear.

The late General Smedley D. Butler said, "Give our fighting men bullets and biscuits and a letter from home and they'll lick the world!"

He rated letters from home right up at the top with am-

munition and food . . . the three most vital elements for a fighting man's well-being and morale.

How eagerly, in all times and all places, have people waited for mail from home! How wistfully have they repeated, over and over again, that old familiar question: "Any mail for me?"

"I wonder what letter was ever received with such thankfulness!" wrote Thomas Carlyle's wife, thanking him for a letter that arrived on her birthday.

"I long for a letter from you!" wrote Princess Alice of England—happily married to Prince Louis of Hesse and living with him in Darmstadt—but lonely for her mother, Queen Victoria, as any child might be lonely for a parent.

"Your letter and mother's have come at last! I was so glad to get them I cried," wrote Anne Sullivan Macy to Helen Keller, her beloved pupil and lifelong friend.

HOW LETTERS CAN ENRICH LIFE—
CREATE MORE ENDURING FRIENDSHIPS

There's a lot of truth in the old saying, "Out of sight, out of mind!" But letters keep your influence and personality alive—keep you in the hearts and minds of those far removed from you. Through an appreciation and understanding of the best uses of letter writing, you can not only maintain your friendships uninterrupted over long periods of separation, but you can lay the foundations for much real pleasure and enjoyment in future years. Letter writing brings its own great rewards; and not the least of these are more enduring friendships and far less likelihood of ever being lonely or bored.

History tells us of many beautiful and inspiring friendships built on letters alone. A hundred years ago, Elizabeth Barrett, a lonely invalid, published a volume of poems which brought a friendly letter of praise from Robert Browning. Miss Barrett, in her own words, "pounced upon the opportunity of corresponding with the poet" . . . and the whole world knows the result of that correspondence.

George Bernard Shaw and Ellen Terry carried on a fascinating correspondence for more than twenty-five years—a delightful romance on paper that enriched the lives of both.

Charles Lamb, Horace Walpole, Madame de Sévigné, Madame de Staël, John Keats, Robert Louis Stevenson are only a few of the notable letter writers of the past.

THE BUSIEST PEOPLE MAKE
THE BEST LETTER WRITERS

So don't ever say, "I haven't the time to write!" Everyone has exactly twenty-four hours a day—no more, no less. The

time is there; it's up to you to use some part of it for writing interesting letters *if you want to receive interesting letters in return.*

After all, it's the busiest people who usually make the best letter writers! They have so much more to write about.

Washington, Hamilton, Emerson, Mark Twain—all were conscientious letter writers who took time from their busy careers to correspond regularly with family and friends.

Lincoln was often too busy to eat or sleep, but never too busy to write the letters he wanted to write. Some of the most human and touching letters in existence are from his pen, written when he was most oppressed and most obsessed by the state of the Union.

But by far one of the most brilliant and prodigious correspondents of all time was Benjamin Franklin. Scientist, statesman, philosopher, editor, printer, inventor—Franklin had so many busy careers, you would think he had no time at all for personal correspondence. Yet he wrote regularly to friends on both sides of the Atlantic. He thoroughly *enjoyed* letter writing. He looked upon it as a pleasant relaxation and as an enrichment of life rather than a dull, time-consuming duty.

The busiest woman in Labrador, one bitter cold Christmas not very long ago, was an Australian nurse by the name of Kate Austen. But Nurse Austen was not too busy to acknowledge with a long, friendly letter every gift of food or clothing received for distribution to the natives in that bleak and barren outpost of the north. Among the gifts was a box of knitted things for children, made and sent by a woman in Toronto. Nurse Austen, busy, harassed, and not too well that winter, could have written just an ordinary routine note of thanks, cold and informal. But that was not her way. She sat down and wrote a *real* letter telling all about the village, and the names of the children who were wearing the knitted gloves and caps, and what they said when they got them, and how they looked when they wore them. She wanted the woman who had made and sent all those lovely knitted things "to see how much happiness and warmth she had created."

Here is the answer Nurse Austen received. It illustrates perfectly what I said at the very beginning of this chapter: that to *receive* interesting letters, you must *write* interesting letters!

Dear Miss Austen,

Your letter made me happy. I did not expect such a full return. I am eighty years old, and I am blind. There is little I can do except knit, and that is why I make so many caps and sweaters and scarves. Of course I cannot write this, so my daughter-in-law is doing it

for me. She also sewed the seams and made the button-holes for the knitted things.

I know something of the work you are doing. At the age of nineteen I married a man who was going to China to be a missionary. For forty years, with an occasional year at home in America, we worked in China, and during that time our two sons and a daughter were born to us, of whom only one son survives. After forty years, my husband's health began to fail. We returned to the States where he took charge of a settlement house in Brooklyn, New York. A surprising number of the problems we faced there were similar to problems we had met in China. When my husband died, I came to Toronto to live with my son and daughter-in-law. They are very good to me, and I pride myself that I am little trouble to them, though it is hard for a blind old lady to be sure of anything.

What I most wanted to say, my dear, is this. For sixty years I have been making up missionary packages of such clothing or food or medicine or books as I could collect. In various parts of the world and to various parts of the world I have sent them. Sometimes I have received a printed slip of acknowledgement from the headquarters depot or mission board, sometimes nothing. Occasionally I have been informed that my contribution was destined for Syria or Armenia or the upper Yangtze. But never before in all that time have I had a personal letter picturing the village and telling me who is wearing the clothing and what they said. I did not suppose that ever in my lifetime I should receive a letter like that. May God bless you.

Sincerely yours,
Laura N. Russell

WRITE THE LETTERS THAT
DON'T NEED TO BE WRITTEN

Comparatively few of us ever discover the joy of writing the letters *we do not need to write*. How long has it been since you sat down to write a letter for no other purpose than to give someone pleasure? Why not form the habit of writing little notes now and then to those you like, and whose friendship you value? Try to make opportunities to write, instead of waiting for some logical reason or excuse to come up.

For example, you might write a friendly little note of encouragement to someone just entering college . . . or someone just starting out in business. You might write a few words

of cheer to an invalid . . . a shut-in . . . or someone you know is lonely, worried or unhappy. Or you might try a letter of congratulation to someone who has just had a promotion, wishing him or her success in the new job. Such notes are always received with gratitude, and often remembered a lifetime.

SEND PERSONAL LETTERS INSTEAD
OF GREETING CARDS WHENEVER YOU CAN

A good time to write personal notes to your friends is on birthdays and holidays, instead of sending the customary greeting cards. A personal message is more gracious, and means so much more than a printed sentiment. Even the old traditional "Happy New Year!" has more meaning—sounds more eloquent and sincere—when it's in your own handwriting.

But perhaps you are thinking, "*I must* send greetings cards—they save time! I couldn't possibly write personal notes to all my friends at Christmas."

That's true, of course, if you have a great many friends and acquaintances. It would be too big a job to write letters to all of them; and a needless waste of time and energy when greeting cards are so universally used.

But among those many friends, aren't there a few who would deeply appreciate a personal message? Isn't it worth a little extra effort for the intense satisfaction that an unexpected "visit on paper" can mean to them . . . and to you?

IF YOU "DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY"
IN A LETTER

If you complain that you never know what to say in a letter, it's only because you still think of writing as somehow different from talking. It isn't! Talking is an expression of thoughts and ideas in spoken words. Writing is, or should be, those same words on paper.

The only person who can truthfully say he has nothing interesting to write about is the person who sits alone in an empty room twenty-four hours a day—seeing no one, doing nothing—just sitting and staring. And even he could write an interesting letter telling his impressions of complete solitude!

So don't ever say that you don't know what to write in a letter! It's an admission that you are leading a dull and empty life. Write about the things you see, and hear and do—and plan to do! Write to share good news or relate an interesting experience. Write to express your thoughts and ideas on whatever subjects are mutually interesting to you and your correspondent.