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The Lost Art of Correspondence

As voice mail and e-mail replace snail mail, writer and entertaining authority **Sally Quinn** puts the glamour and originality back into written communication

I PLEAD GUILTY. I DON'T CORRESPOND BY MAIL as often as I should. This does not mean that I don't know better. I do. All of which makes me the right person to write this article. It's more important to learn from a sinner than be lectured by the perfect correspondent.

Here are my excuses—you will surely identify with some of them: I don't like my notepaper. I've run out of stamps. The mail is unreliable. I'm a writer; I'm afraid if I write a less-than-brilliant note, the recipient will say, "She calls herself a writer?" Even if I weren't a writer, I would want the notes to be just right. I prefer to call people on the phone to thank them so we can have a good gossipy chat.

And all these excuses are irrelevant because they miss the point of correspondence. The point is to

make the recipient feel loved, appreciated, admired, worthy, validated. Think how you feel when you get a letter or a note. More and more these days it is becoming a rarity, which makes it so much nicer when you do receive one. I am constantly surprised and delighted when I get notes from my well-brought-up friends, and I do often. Unfortunately I also feel guilty because I'm not as good about it.

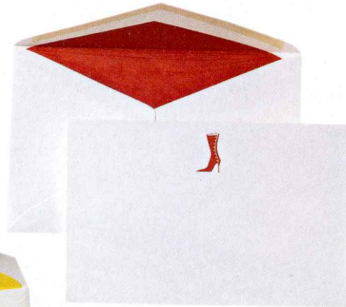
In my family, it was always my father who was the note writer. He loved doing it and was celebrated for his wonderful, original notes. My mother had beautiful stationery, which gathered dust on the library shelf. Instead she called. She was great on the phone. I'm afraid I have inherited both her phone talent and her reluctance to write notes.

I have to say that I have gotten better at note

BY SALLY QUINN

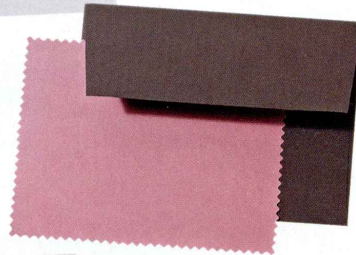
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Oaxaca by Kate Spade Paper, 866/999-5283, www.katespade.com.

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Chinese Imperial Dragon notecards from Mrs. John L. Strong, 212/838-3775, www.mrsstrong.com.

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writing recently because I have figured out a few things that work, which I am happy to pass along.

1 Write a note promptly. The longer you put it off, the worse it gets and the more guilty you become as it hangs over you. No, you don't have to write a note the minute you get home from a party. But do it in a few days and you will save yourself a lot of grief.

2 Buy some nice notepaper, but don't obsess over it. Plain ecru notepaper is perfectly acceptable; I prefer that to goopy-looking cards. I used to think my notepaper had to embody my entire identity, and I was paralyzed every time I went into a stationery store. It is nice to have your name or initials or the like engraved—it just feels richer somehow. I also like to see that people I know consistently use the same writing paper. I remember my parents had a very glamorous friend in London who had beautiful pale-blue onion-skin paper with a red border and her name engraved in red. How exciting it was for us to see those envelopes show up in the mail. She was a great note writer, and I still remember some of the things she wrote, even 40 years later.

I have now settled on a paper that I like from Mrs. John L. Strong in New York. It is an ecru paper with an iridescent blue border and my name engraved in the same color. It has a beveled border and envelope liner in that color as well. That's for formal notes. For fun, I have added little note cards with my initials and a crab (I am a Cancer) all in the same color. I guess this means that I have discovered the real me.

3 What you say is the most important thing. There are no rules. Originality is the key. There is nothing wrong with simply thanking someone, but it shows you have made an effort if you can find something specific to comment about. "Thank you for the wonderful evening. We had a great time" is fine but a bit perfunctory. But when you say, "The table looked spectacular. I loved those figurines/place card holders/candlesticks/vases," it makes the recipient feel that they have not made an effort in vain. I always use pink lightbulbs for parties, and one note I received complimented me on how beautiful the rose color made everyone look. I loved that.

Bereavement notes are the most difficult, especially if you know the person you are writing but don't know the person who died. Yet even one

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specific thing makes the note so much more appreciated. "I remember eating your mother's delicious cookies that she had sent you and how special that made all of us feel at the lunch." Personalizing things just makes it seem as though it's not an assembly line, one-size-fits-all note for every occasion. When my mother died, the notes I loved the most were from those remembering her with a glass of Champagne in her hands, always trying to make the left-out guest at the party feel welcome.

As for simple letter writing, I am afraid that is a lost art. Sadly the epistolary form of communication as we know it is over. We can bemoan it or we can move on. Phones and cell phones make communication so easy, and then, of course, there is e-mail and the ubiquitous BlackBerry.

Today there is a lot of debate about whether e-mail is acceptable instead of handwritten notes. My feeling is that it is always nice to hear from somebody. Note writing often falls to the women, and we are all so busy with our jobs, children, partners, or community work. Then there is the notepaper issue and stamps and the problem of the Postal Service. But I would rather get e-mail than nothing. It's really the thought that counts. I simply print them out and keep them with the rest of the notes or letters I receive. I think it is a bit churlish to criticize someone for taking the time to write you a heartfelt note just because it is e-mail. It is very much with us as a part of our lives.

However, there is still nothing like getting a beautiful envelope in the mail and opening it up to find a name or initials engraved on the paper with a funny or thoughtful sentiment from somebody you really care about. Which is what I keep reminding myself of when I think I'll just put it off until tomorrow. ♦