



Rediscover the not-quite-lost art of letter writing:
from setting the right tone to practising your
hand and selecting stationery

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Envelopes

"Use the recipient's full title and any post-nominals, such as CBE. If you're not sure what their title is, check beforehand" – Lucy Hume, Debrett's Associate Directory, debretts.com

"Write slightly left of centre, and refer to Mr and Mrs if addressing a couple. A return address on the envelope or the corner of a letter helps those who may have mislaid yours" – William Hanson, etiquette coach, williamhanson.co.uk

"The seal is a lovely touch but rather looked upon as antiquated. Royalty may use a seal, but stickers are very popular at the moment as an alternative – a nice whimsical thing to do" – Philip Sykes, The British School of Etiquette, thebritishschoolofetiquette.com

Thank You

"Thank you letters are necessary to acknowledge a present or hospitality. They should be sent within a week to 10 days of an event or receipt of a present."

"If an event is hosted by several people, it is good etiquette to send a letter to each person or couple. If hosted by a family you should address it to the couple and then mention any children by name within the note."

"Ideally, these letters should be handwritten. When thanking somebody for a present, refer to the item directly and include details to ensure the tone is personal. If after an event, take your cue from the invitation: a formal invitation requires a formal thank you, while an 'at home' card suggests a short note would be acceptable" – Hume

"A personal thank you letter can be sent after any act of generosity that you have been lucky to be the recipient of – although a written note after a cup of tea may be a little over the top" – Sykes

"Write one side of correspondence paper for a present or short meal, but two pieces of paper for an overnight stay. Don't write on the back" – Hanson

Invitations

"An invitation to a formal event is traditionally landscape, six inches wide by 4.5 inches high or slightly larger. It is traditionally engraved on good quality card and prepared in the name of the host. It should include the venue, date, start and finish time, RSVP information and a dress code if appropriate."

"There are many occasions at which a traditional, formal invitation is not appropriate. For a birthday party, hosts may prefer to design their own style of invitation incorporating photos or illustrations in keeping with a theme or dress code."

"An 'at home' invitation signifies a personal invitation, even if the event will not be held at the host's home. These were traditionally prepared in the name of the host only (although this varies nowadays), with guests' names written in the top left hand corner. They are typically the same size as a formal invitation or slightly smaller. It should include venue, timings, RSVP information, and may include the nature of the event, such as 'lunch' or 'cocktails'" – Hume

"A reply to a formal invitation should always be handwritten in the third person, with the date written at the bottom of the page" – Sykes

Etiquette experts
lay down the law
on how to format
correspondence –
all with a
contemporary
flourish

THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT: WHITE LAID KINGS ENVELOPES, £12 FOR 25, SMYTHSON.COM. OPPOSITE PAGE, STAMP: ANDY LIDSTONE/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



Two clichés are particularly pertinent to letter writing: modern technology has driven us into a constant rush, delivering a blow to postal communications, but it's still the thought that counts. We may be out of practice with handwriting – yet all is not lost.

Etiquette experts William Hanson and Philip Sykes and contemporary calligrapher Betty Soldi are among the professionals encouraging a renaissance of handwritten correspondence.

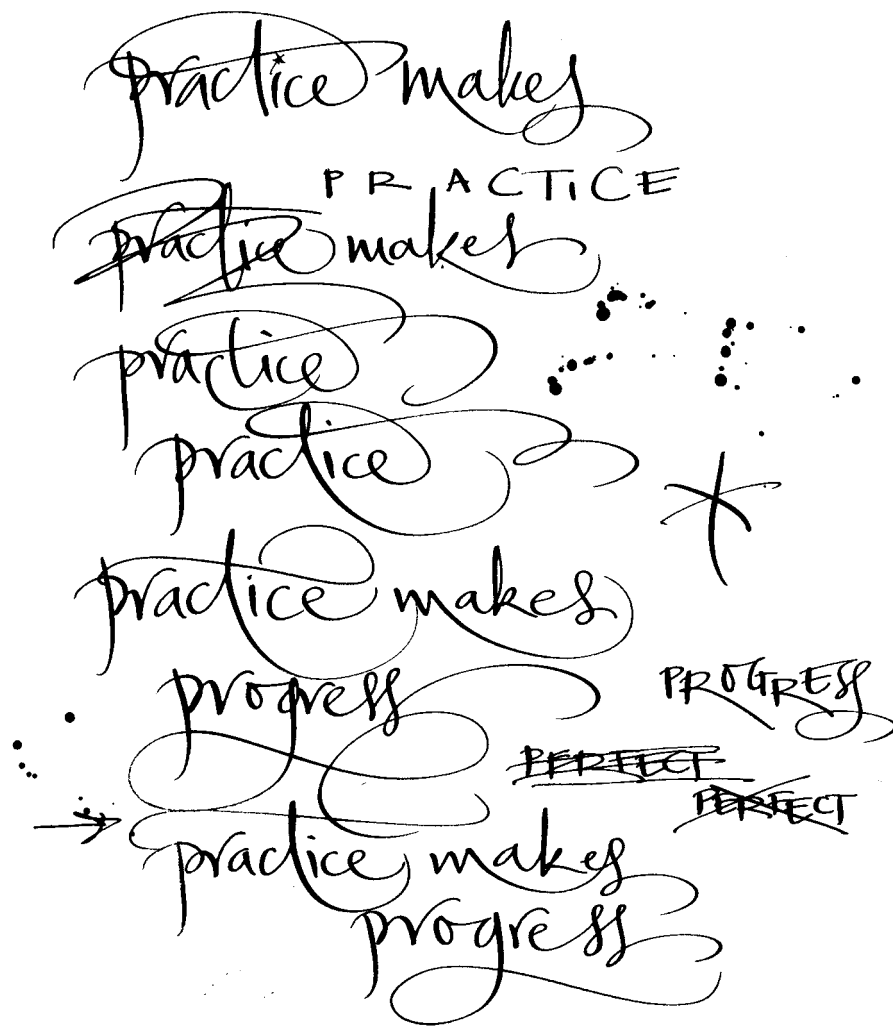
“I think that in today's techno-centric world, letters carry a lot more cache than digital communications,” says Hanson. “With thank yous, people feel validated and appreciated if someone has actually spent time to say so. Sadly, gratitude is a dying art – and there is a growing sense of entitlement, especially when it comes to the millennial generation.”

Writing is a more considered way of speaking, in Soldi's view. But it is also “about you as the writer taking time to look at your thoughts, and express feelings and emotions”. Soldi has collaborated with Mount Street Printers for many years and recently published *Inkspired*, a book that – rather than a how-to calligraphy manual – is about rediscovering your own style of writing and the joy of putting pen to paper.

“Nowadays people are quite lost. There are so many different ways you can grow as a person (yoga, detoxing, retreats), but writing is about coming back to yourself and scribbling without judging whether it's beautiful or correct. For many people it's about finding the art of writing for your own satisfaction again.”

Inkspired begins with pencil exercises while keeping your eyes shut; then moves on to taking notice of other people's handwriting and ‘collecting’ ways of writing words; practising how to shape certain letters in both their simplest and most embellished forms. It ends on writing with other instruments “like asparagus, which feels like a paintbrush, with lipstick on a mirror, or even directly onto fruit as place cards”.

Unlike the restrictions and “tightening up” learnt at school, “the whole process is about loosening up and letting go. For me, practice makes progress, rather than perfection – which is way overrated,” says Soldi. “I love celebrating mistakes along the way, which are unique to you and a computer can't do.” Rather than starting a letter with “dear”, Soldi



suggests writing one large word on a correspondence card to prompt what you're trying to say.

Handwriting is as much a portrayal of our identity as our clothes or the interior design of our homes. “Yet as we grow up and change hairstyles or friends, handwriting is often something that we never review,” Soldi continues. The power of self-aware penmanship prevailed for Michelangelo, however, halfway through his life the artist changed his scholarly handwriting to a more fluid style. It caught the Medicis' attention and paved the way for the aristocratic family to commission some of Michelangelo's most famous creations.

Whether making a conscious decision to switch to cursive handwriting, or simply putting good manners into practice, quality stationery is essential, agree Hanson and Sykes: “it always leaves a lasting impression”. While Sykes prefers a gel ink pen in black or blue, Soldi favours well-worn ink pens for their softened nibs, and coloured inks (“but not blue, which feels rather scholastic”).

Sykes recommends engraved letterheads to really make a statement, with diamond flapped envelopes and matching writing paper. Yet Hanson has a word of warning. “On any personalised letterheads, print just the address of the house and perhaps a telephone number, but not your own name. This dates back to an era when stationery would have been passed to those inheriting a property, and those staying could use the paper as well.”

Letters should always be dated and handwritten on cream, white or ivory paper, with a minimum weight of 110gsm to avoid ink showing through on the other side, says Sykes. “One should not write on the reverse.”

For every good mannered formality, however, there is an equally sincere alternative for correspondence with a creative twist. “If you have a fountain pen in your hand, you're already a bit more poised to write in a certain way,” says Soldi. Lipstick and asparagus at the ready, then. ■



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, IMAGE CREDIT: ILARIA COSTANZO; DEBI TRELOAR

Pen to paper

*Tools to inspire messages from the heart
and leave a lasting impression*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT **PERSONALISED WAX SEAL STAMP**, £125, QUILLLONDON.COM; **VINCENT VAN GOGH CHAIR FOUNTAIN PEN**, £195, VISCONTI.IT; **TETBURY FLORAL CORRESPONDENCE CARDS**, FROM £17.50 FOR 10, CHELSEAFINESTATIONERY.COM; **TORUN PAPER KNIFE**, £250, GEORJENSEN.COM; **MONTBLANC MUSE EDITION MARILYN MONROE FOUNTAIN PEN**, £755, MONTBLANC.COM; **LILIPUT BRONZE CLIP**, £5.65, [KAWECO](http://KAWECO.COM), CULTPENS.COM; **ROYAL YORKSHIRE TERRIER LONG PAD**, \$16, ALEXAPULITZER.COM; **CLASSIC ANELLO GRENADILLA FOUNTAIN PEN**, £500, [GRAF VON FABER-CASTELL](http://GRAF VON FABER-CASTELL.COM), HARRODS.COM; **PRETZEL NOTECARDS**, £12 FOR SIX, DEARTOMESTUDIO.COM

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT **LINE D PICASSO ROLLER BALL**, £1,400, ST DUPONT, HARRODS.COM; **ANTONIO CANOVA FOUNTAIN PEN**, 18CT YELLOW GOLD, €15,900, MONTEGRAPPA.COM; **FLAMINGO CORRESPONDENCE CARDS IN PARK AVENUE PINK**, £26 FOR 10, SMYTHSON.COM; **BETTY SOLDI, INKSPiRED**, PUBLISHED BY KYLE BOOKS, £16.99, AMAZON.CO.UK; **BORDERED CORRESPONDENCE CARDS**, £22 FOR 10, SMYTHSON.COM; **BOW CLIPS**, £14 FOR 12, KATE SPADE, SELFRIDGES.COM; **TRADITION FOUNTAIN PEN**, MATT TITANIUM WITH 18CT ROSE GOLD RINGS AND CLIP, £3,300, BREGUET.COM; **CUSTOM ORDER LETTERHEADS**, FROM £162 FOR 100, MOUNTSTREETPRINTERS.COM