How to Write a Personal Letter

Garrison Keillor

Writer and broadcaster Garrison Keillor was born in Anoka, Minnesota, in 1942. After graduating from the University of Minnesota, he became a successful writer of humorous stories, many of which appeared in the New Yorker. He is perhaps best known for his radio program, A Prairie Home Companion, which is broadcast on National Public Radio. Keillor has written many books, including Lake Wobegon Days (1985), Leaving Home: A Collection of Lake Wobegon Stories (1987), and Me: By Jimmy (Big Boy) Valentine (1999). He has also produced a wide selection of audiocassettes featuring his stories and radio shows. In this section, written as part of a popular and highly successful advertising campaign for the International Paper Company, the sage of Lake Wobegon offers some sound and practical directions for writing personal letters.

FOR YOUR JOURNAL

How do you feel when you receive a letter from a relative or friend? Do you feel the same way about telephone calls or email messages? To you, what does a letter say about the person who wrote it?

We shy persons need to write a letter now and then, or else we’ll dry up and blow away. It’s true. And I speak as one who loves to reach for the phone and talk. The telephone is to shyness what Hawaii is to February; it’s a way out of the woods. And yet: a letter is better.

Such a sweet gift—a piece of handmade writing, in an envelope that is not a bill, sitting in our friend’s path when she trudges home from a long day spent among wahoos and savages, a day our words will help repair. They don’t need to be immortal, just sincere. She can read them twice and again tomorrow: You’re someone I care about, Corinne, and think of often, and every time I do, you make me smile.
We need to write, otherwise nobody will know who we are. They will have only a vague impression of us as A Nice Person, because, frankly, we don’t shine at conversation, we lack the confidence to thrust our faces forward and say, “Hi, I’m Heather Hooten, let me tell you about my week.” Mostly we say “Uh-huh” and “Oh really.” People smile and look over our shoulder, looking for someone else to talk to.

So a shy person sits down and writes a letter. To be known by another person—to meet and talk freely on the page—to be close despite distance. To escape from anonymity and be our own sweet selves and express the music of our souls.

We want our dear Aunt Eleanor to know that we have fallen in love, that we quit our job, that we’re moving to New York, and we want to say a few things that might not get said in casual conversation: Thank you for what you’ve meant to me. I am very happy right now.

The first step in writing letters is to get over the guilt of not writing. You don’t “owe” anybody a letter. Letters are a gift. The burning shame you feel when you see unanswered mail makes it harder to pick up a pen and makes for a cheerless letter when you finally do. I feel bad about not writing, but I’ve been so busy, etc. Skip this. Few letters are obligatory, and they are Thanks for the wonderful gift and I am terribly sorry to hear about George’s death. Write these promptly if you want to keep your friends. Don’t worry about the others, except love letters, of course. When your true love writes Dear Light of My Life, Joy of My Heart, some response is called for.

Some of the best letters are tossed off in a burst of inspiration, so keep your writing stuff in one place where you can sit down for a few minutes and—Dear Roy, I am in the middle of an essay but thought I’d drop you a line. Hi to your sweetheart—dash off a note to a pal. Envelopes, stamps, address book, everything in a drawer so you can write fast when the pen is hot.

A blank white 8 x 11 sheet can look as big as Montana if the pen’s not so hot—try a smaller page and write boldly. Get a pen that makes a sensuous line, get a comfortable typewriter, a friendly word processor—whichever feels easy to the hand.

Set for a few minutes with the blank sheet of paper in front of you, and let your friend come in mind. Remember the last time you saw each other and how your friend looked and what you said and what perhaps was unsaid between you; when your friend becomes real to you, start to write.

Write the salutation—Dear You—and take a deep breath and plunge in. A simple declarative sentence will do, followed by another and another. As if you were talking to us. Don’t think about grammar, don’t think about style, just give us your news. Where did you go, who did you see, what did they say, what do you think?

If you don’t know where to begin, start with the present. I’m sitting at the kitchen table on a rainy Saturday morning. Everyone is gone and the house is quiet. Let the letter drift along. The toughest letter to crank out is one that is meant to impress, as we all know from writing job applications; it’s hard work to slip off a letter to a friend, maybe you’re trying too hard to be terrific. A letter is only a report to someone who already likes you for reasons other than your brilliance. Take it easy.

Don’t worry about form. It’s not a term paper. When you come to the end of one episode, just start a new paragraph. You can go from a few lines about the sad state of rock ’n roll to the fight with your mother to your fond memories of Mexico to the kitchen sink and what’s in it. The more you write, the easier it gets, and when you have a True True Friend to write to, a soul sibling, then it’s like driving a car; you just press on the gas.

Don’t tear up the page and start over when you write a bad line—try to write your way out of it. Make mistakes and plunge on. Let the letter cook along and let yourself be bold. Outrage, confusion, love—whatever is in your mind, let it find a way to the page. Writing is a means of discovery, always, and when you come to the end and write Yours ever or Hugs and Kisses, you’ll know something you didn’t when you wrote Dear Pal.

Probably your friend will put your letter away, and it’ll be read again a few years from now—and it will improve with age.

And forty years from now, your friend’s grandkids will dig it out of the attic and read it, a sweet and precious relic of the [late twentieth century] that gives them a sudden clear glimpse of the world we old-timers knew. You will have then created an object of art. Your simple lines about where you went, who you saw, what they said, will speak to those children and they will feel in their hearts the humanity of our times.

You can’t pick up a phone and call the future and tell them about our times. You have to pick up a piece of paper.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Keillor calls a personal letter a “gift” (2). Why do you suppose he thinks of a letter in this way?
The Beekeeper

Sue Hubbell

Essyist and nature writer Sue Hubbell was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan. After graduating from Swarthmore College, she moved to the Missouri Ozarks and took up beekeeping, an activity she pursued for twenty-five years. Hubbell recounts her experiences with bees in A Book of Bees: And How to Keep Them (1988). Her other books on country living and the natural world include A Country Year: Living the Questions (1986), Broadsides from the Other Orders: A Book of Bugs (1993), Far-Flung Hubbell: Essays from the American Road (1995), Waiting for Aphrodite: Journeys into the Time before Bones (1999). Today Hubbell lives on the coast of Maine. In the following selection from A Book of Bees, Hubbell carefully explains the process of getting a person prepared to work with bees.

FOR YOUR JOURNAL

Each of us has little routines or rituals that we follow to get ready to do something. For example, before sitting down to write, one author routinely makes a fresh cup of coffee, cuts up a piece of fruit for a snack, sharpens two pencils, locates a pad of paper for notes, cleans his computer table, and loads paper in his printer. Some athletes and entertainers eat the same foods, wear the same clothes, or talk with the same people before each game or performance. Briefly describe one of your routines or rituals.

The time to harvest honey is summer's end, when it is hot. The temper of the bees requires that we wear protective clothing—a full set of overalls, a zippered bee veil and leather gloves. Even a very strong young man works up a sweat wrapped in a bee suit in the heat, hustling 60-pound supers while being harassed by angry bees. It is a hard job, harder even than haying, but jobs are scarce here and I've always been able to hire help.

This year David, the son of a friend of mine, is working for me. He is big and strong and used to labor, but he was nervous about bees. After we had made the job arrangement I set about desensitizing him to bee stings. I put a piece of ice on his arm to numb it and then, holding a bee carefully by its head, I put it on the numbed spot and let it sting him. A bee stinger is barbed and stays in the flesh, pulling loose from the body of the bee as it struggles to free itself. The bulbous poison sac at the top of the stinger continues to pulseate after the bee has left, pumping the venom and forcing the stinger deeper into the flesh.

That first day I wanted David to have only a partial dose of venom; so after a minute I scraped the stinger out. A few people are seriously sensitive to bee venom; each sting they receive can cause a more severe reaction than the one before—reactions ranging from hives, breathing difficulties, accelerated heart beat and choking to anaphylactic shock and death. I didn't think David would be allergic in that way, but I wanted to make sure.

We sat down and had a cup of coffee and I watched him. The spot where the stinger went in grew red and began to swell. That was a normal reaction, and so was the itching that he felt later on.

The next day I coaxed a bee into stinging him again, repeating the procedure, but I left the stinger in place for 10 minutes, until the venom sac was empty. Again the spot was red, swollen and itchy but had disappeared in 24 hours. By that time David was ready to catch a bee himself and administer his own sting. He also decided that the ice cube was a bother and gave it up. I told him to keep to one sting a day until he had no redness or swelling and then to increase to two. He was ready for them the next day. The greater amount of venom caused redness and swelling for a few days, but soon his body could tolerate it without reaction and he increased the number of stings once again.

Today he told me he was up to six stings. His arms look as though they have track marks on them, but the fresh stings are having little effect. I'll keep him at it until he can tolerate 10 a day with no reaction and then I'll not worry about taking him out to the bee yard.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What are the steps in the process of desensitizing a person to bee venom? Is Hubbell's process analysis directional or informational? Explain.