

GARRISON KEILLOR

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER

Garrison Keillor (b. 1942), is the father of public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" and sole proprietor of the mythical Lake Wobegon, "where all the men are good looking, all the women are strong, and all the children are above average." "How to Write a Letter" comes from *We Are Still Married* (1989), a collection dedicated to Keillor's "classmate" Corinne Guntzel (1942–1986), whom he addresses in the opening paragraphs. Meditating on the person you're writing to "until you can almost see her or him in the room with you" is just one of the steps into which Keillor breaks down the complexities of the writing process.

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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, dial the number, and talk. I say, "Big Bopper here—what's shakin', babes?" The telephone is to shyness what Hawaii is to February, it's a way out of the woods, *and yet*: a letter is better.

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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.*

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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 meet.

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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

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distance. To escape from anonymity and be our own sweet selves and express the music of our souls.

Same thing that moves a giant rock star to sing his heart out in front of 123,000 people moves us to take ballpoint in hand and write a few lines to our dear Aunt Eleanor. *We want to be known.* We want her 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* and *Yes, you're welcome to stay with us next month,* and not many more than that. Write those 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, O Lovely Pulsating Core of My Sensate Life,* 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 a book entitled We Are Still Married but thought I'd drop you a line. Hi to your sweetie, too*) 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 eight-by-eleven sheet can look as big as Montana if the pen's not so hot—try a smaller page and write boldly. Or use a note card with a piece of fine art on the front; if your letter ain't good, at least they get the Matisse. Get a pen that makes a sensuous line, get a comfortable typewriter, a friendly word processor—whichever feels easy to the hand.

Sit for a few minutes with the blank sheet in front of you, and meditate on the person you will write to, let your friend come to mind until you can almost see her or him in the room with you. Remember the last time you saw each other and how your friend looked and what

you said and what perhaps was unsaid between you, and 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 and another. Tell us what you're doing and tell it like you were talking to us. Don't think about grammar, don't think about lit'ry style, don't try to write dramatically, 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 moment: *I'm sitting at the kitchen table on a rainy Saturday morning. Everyone is gone and the house is quiet.* Let your simple description of the present moment lead to something else, let the letter drift gently along.

The toughest letter to crank out is one that is meant to impress, as we all know from writing job applications; if 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 pro football to the fight with your mother to your fond memories of Mexico to your cat's urinary-tract infection to a few thoughts on personal indebtedness and on 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 *compadre*, a soul sibling, then it's like driving a car down a country road, you just get behind the keyboard and 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 ancient eighties that gives them a sudden clear glimpse of you and her and the world we old-timers knew. You will then have 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.

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XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX **FOR DISCUSSION** XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

1. If you don't know where to begin a letter, how does Garrison Keillor suggest you get going once you've said "Dear You" (10)? How might you apply this advice to other kinds of writing?
2. According to Keillor, what's the hardest kind of letter to write? What advice does he give for avoiding this kind of letter when writing to a friend?
3. "A letter is better," says Keillor, than a phone call (1). Why? For what specific purposes does he suggest we write a letter? Which ones(s) can *only* be accomplished by writing?
4. Except for a few "obligatory" kinds, a letter is a gift, says Keillor (6). What are the obligatory kinds? What happens if we don't write them?
5. When does a personal letter written from one ordinary person to another become, in Keillor's view, "an object of art" (15)? Would the same be true of an e-mail message? Why or why not?

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX **STRATEGIES AND STRUCTURES** XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

1. Freewriting is a technique of finding something to write about by freely writing down whatever pops into your head as you are trying to think about a topic. What does Keillor say about the process of freewriting?
2. Getting over the guilt of not writing a letter says Keillor, is often the "first step" in writing one (6). What are the other steps he gives before getting to the salutation?
3. Keillor's essay imitates the process he is ANALYZING. Where does he tell us how to begin actually writing a letter? In which of the paragraphs that follow does he deal more with the beginning and early stages of letter writing? With the middle stages? Why do you think he has so little to say about preparing for the ending?

4. In which paragraphs of his essay does Keillor deal most explicitly with the recipient, or audience, of a letter? How might the advice he gives here carry over to other kinds of writing?
5. Most of Keillor's essay explains how to write a good letter. Where and why does he analyze how not to? Among his letter-writing don'ts, which do you think are most important?
6. At first glance, the EXAMPLES that Keillor gives in paragraph 13 don't seem to have much to do with one another. How do these examples work to tie together his ARGUMENT about letter writing?
7. How would you DESCRIBE the TONE of this essay? What personality does Keillor assume?

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX **WORDS AND FIGURES OF SPEECH** XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

1. The "Big Bopper" was fifties rock star Jape Richardson (1). How does this ALLUSION anticipate the "precious relic" of paragraph 15?
2. What do you think of Keillor's rhyming "letter" with "better" in paragraph 1? How does this fit in with his personality of letter writer?
3. Why does Keillor contract "literary" into "lit'ry" (10)?
4. In what sense is any piece of writing "handmade" (2)?
5. How does the comic METAPHOR in the last sentence of paragraph 13 EXEMPLIFY what Keillor says about yoking ideas?

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX **FOR WRITING** XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

1. Write an e-mail message to Keillor explaining the process of composing an e-mail and why e-mail is better than old-fashioned letter writing.
2. Write an essay ANALYZING the process of one of the following: how to talk on a cell phone in a public place, how to make a good (or bad) impression on a friend's parents, how to change a tire, how to buy or sell a used car, how to train a dog.