

# Writing Love Letters

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Letter writing used to be such an art form. Every word, every phrase had a meaning to the reader - possibly a different meaning than that intended by the writer.

Not everyone grew up knowing how to write a proper, discreet letter. Therefore, publishers printed a number of books designed to assist men and women in their personal correspondence. One such book was *The Ladies' Letter Writer* (full title: *A New Letter-Writer for the Use of Ladies Embodying Letters on the Simplest Matters of Life, and on Various Subjects, With Applications, for Situations, Etc., and a Copious Appendix of Forms of Address, Bills, Receipts and Other Matters, Compiled from the Best Previous Works on the Subject, with Considerable New Additions, Hints on Style, Etc., Etc.*).

First published in the 1860s and regularly reissued for decades afterwards, *The Ladies' Letter Writer* contained samples of letters that could be sent in response to all things courtship and matrimonial, from requests to call and proposals to acceptances and refusals. A similar volume - aimed towards gentlemen rather than ladies - provided advice for men wishing to send letters to their lady loves. The following are excerpts from both books.



Detail from *The Ladies Letter Writer* (Georgen)

## EXCERPTS FROM THE GENTLEMEN'S LETTER WRITER

*The love letter ought to be more easy to write than any other, premising always that the writer is really under the influence of the grand passion. Upon first addressing the object of your regard, there should be no prudent hesitation about committing yourself too far. You either love the fair being whom you address or you do not. If you are not decided upon that point, you do wrong to write at all; but if you earnestly desire to unite your*

*destiny with hers, you just, in the first instance, give her to understand that you entertain for her a sincere and earnest admiration.*

*Your letters should express respect blended with exalted and overpowering passion, and this applies more particularly to your first letter. A tame, hesitating lover cannot make a strong impression upon the hearts of the gentle sex. The writer must show the woman of his choice that his love is too real and too violent to be prudent, or to have any place for selfish fear of compromising himself. He must compromise himself, fearlessly and thoroughly, in his first address to her, and have his mind made up to stand the hazard of the die; for the first thing a man has to do when disclosing his love for a woman, is, to convince her that he does love her, and that he loves her a great deal, and her alone.*

*Let this be the aim of your letters; speak just as you feel, and speak out all that you feel, in straight-forward, simple, honest language – which is always the language of strong emotion – and if she be a virtuous woman, whose heart has not been hackneyed by the arts of coquetry, she will know how to estimate your sincerity and your devotion.*

*It is best to use gilt-edged paper, and of a fine quality; write in good hand if possible; fold and seal your missive neatly, and direct it in a bold plain manner, that it may not fall into the hands of the wrong person, and expose your lady-love to the jeers and malicious remarks of idle and heartless wordings.*

#### **EXCERPTS FROM THE PREFACE TO THE LADIES LETTER WRITER**

*In the present day when education is so rapidly progressing, a superior work on the subject of Letter Writing is obviously needed. The old works of the kind were obsolete in diction, exaggerated and unnatural – frequently to a ludicrous excess – their thoughts, and the topics upon which they professed to give specimens were not well chosen.*

*As to letters on courtship, matrimony, and such like matters ... had [the editor] consulted his own inclinations, he would probably have excluded any attempts to deal with such matters (where befitting writing can only spring from the deepest recesses of the human heart); but, in deference to custom, he has prepared some specimens, and selected a few others, which he trusts will, at all events, not lead his readers to any of the display of folly or misplaced romance, which too frequently form painfully-ludicrous episodes in the earlier acquaintance of the two sexes.*

*There is a class of people whose wants are likely to be greater, and whose interest has been more immediately consulted in the following pages, viz: clerks, servants, sailors and*

*others, whose education may be very slight, but who may at the same time wish to be able to express themselves clearly, and to prefer something like an English diction to the vulgarity which a little pains and care might avoid*

*In the present day, when ignorance is deservedly at a discount, and when so much is expected of every one, even in a humble position of life, there is no reason why the letters from one servant to another, or the application for a situation, or answer to an advertisement, should only furnish so many examples of outrageous grammar and absurd diction.*

*Many such letters have been inserted in the present work, which, it is believed, will be found useful, not only to female servants and others of the lower class, but to the pupil teachers and governesses who are chiefly concerned in their instruction.*

*To the young, moreover, whose zeal (especially in some matters touched upon in the following letters) is apt to outrun their discretion, it is to be hoped that this book will be even more useful, Care has been taken to blend scrupulous delicacy with such natural warmth of expression as seemed warranted by the subject, and without which all correspondence must sink into stale and lifeless matter-of-fact.*

#### **EXCERPTS FROM SAMPLE LETTERS**

**From a Young Lady In Answer to a Proposal For a Private Meeting** *Sir - I am altogether surprised at the proposal in your [recent] letter. Although our acquaintance has been of but short standing, I believe my conduct has never been such as to give you reason to suppose me capable of an act which, in my opinion, is equally incompatible with truth and female propriety. Known as you are to both my parents, I can see no object in your seeking a clandestine interview, and my feelings both for my own and their honor are such as would forbid my sanctioning any such conduct. ... I must utterly decline any correspondence of a clandestine character.*

**Answer to the Proposal of a Gentleman Who Had Met Her the Previous Evening** *Sir – Although it is the highest compliment that can be paid our sex, to receive offers calculated to ensure a lasting acquaintance, I must still complain of the precipitate character of your address to one who, till last night, was a total stranger to you. Without wishing to say anything harsh, I must confess that I do not feel any motive to entertain so hasty a proposal, and have felt bound to lay your letter before my parents, as I could not think of concealing from them any correspondence of such a description.*

**On Receiving a Second Letter, After Frequent Meetings** Dear Sir – It is impossible for me to deny that your assiduous, but delicate, attentions to me of late have confirmed a favorable impression I had formed, but which the suddenness of your address rendered it impossible I could avow. Your whole conduct has been that of a gentleman; ... I feel it would be false modesty in me to disclaim a feeling of strong regard for yourself. Let us not, however, be too hasty in our conclusions – let us not mistake momentary impulse for permanent impression; let us rather seek to know more of each other, to study each other's tempers, and to establish that sincere esteem which should, which must, be the foundation of every deeper feeling.

**To a Gentleman Who had Sent an Absurdly Romantic Letter** Sir – I do not know whether your epistle was intended in a jest, in which case its absurdity might have been excused on the grounds of its plagiarisms. But if you can really write in earnest to any woman whom you profess to esteem, I must express my humble opinion that such is not the proper course by which to excite a reciprocal feeling.

**From a Young Gentleman, to a Young Lady, Desiring Her to Elope With Him** My Dear \_\_\_\_ – I cannot live without you, and if you persist in refusing to comply, I am miserable forever. ... If ever you loved me, let me beg that you will not make me any long unhappy. Let me entreat you by all that is dear, that you will comply with my request, and meet me at six on Sunday evening, at the back door of the garden, where a carriage will be ready. I will fly on the wings of love to my charmer, and be happy in her embraces forever.

**From a Youth to His Sweetheart** Dear \_\_\_\_\_. – I have been long in love with you, but was afraid to tell you. When I go with you to the theatre I am almost like a fool, and altogether unfit for company. I think of you all day, and all night I dream of my dear \_\_\_\_\_. I am well settled in work and my wages are eight dollars every week. You and I can live on that, and I shall bring it home untouched on Saturday evening. I will not go to any tavern, but as soon as my work is done, return to my dearly beloved \_\_\_\_\_. I hope my dear, you will not be angry, for I am really in love. I cannot be happy unless you are mine. ... How happy shall I be to hear from my charmer; but a thousand times more to think she will be mine.

**The Young Lady's Answer to the Preceding** Dear \_\_\_\_ – I received your very kind letter, but I do not know what to say in answer. Although I would be glad to marry, yet you men are so deceiving, that there is no such thing as trusting you. There is \_\_\_\_ the carpenter, and \_\_\_\_ the smith, who have not been married above six months, and every night come home drunk and beat their wives. What a miserable life is that?, and how do I know but you may be as bad to me? How may I know but you like them may get drunk every night and beat me black and blue before morning? ... But possibly you may not be so bad; for there is \_\_\_\_ the braiser, and

\_\_\_\_\_ the painter, who are both very happy with their wives; they are both home-bringing husbands, and have every day a hot joint of meat. ...

**From a Gentleman to a Lady With Whom He Is In Love** Madam – I have three times attempted to give you a verbal relation of the contents of this letter; but my heart as often failed. I know not in what light it may be considered, only if I can form any notion of my own heart from the impression made on it by your many amiable accomplishments, my happiness in this world will, in a great measure, depend on your answer. I am not precipitate, madam, nor would I desire your hand if your heart did not accompany it. My circumstances are independent, my character hitherto unblemished, of which you shall have the most undoubted proof. ... I shall not only consider myself extremely happy, but shall also make it the principal study of my future life, to spend my days in the company of her whom I do prefer to all others in the world. I shall wait for your answer with the utmost impatience.

**The Lady's Response to the Preceding Letter** Sir – I received your letter last night, and as it was on a subject I had not yet any thoughts of, you will not wonder when I tell you I was a good deal surprised. Although I have seen and familiarly conversed with you at different times, yet I had not the most distant thoughts of your making proposals of such a nature. Some of your sex have often asserted that we are fond of flattery, and very much pleased with praise; I shall therefore suppose you one of that class, and excuse you for those encomiums bestowed upon me in your letter; but I am afraid were I to comply with your proposals, you would soon be convinced that the charms you mention, and seem to value so much, are merely exterior appearances which like the summer's flower, will very soon fade, and all those mighty professions of love will end, at last, either in indifference or, which is worse, disgust. ...

**To a Young Farmer Who Has Offered Marriage** Dear \_\_\_\_\_ – I cannot say I am displeased at your proposal, but I want to know you better before I make up my mind. Mothers says that "they who ride fast never ride long," and I think we shall both do better if we try to know more about one another than we do at present. Mother is willing for you to visit here, and I shall make no opposition, as I cannot say I dislike you.

**A Negative Response to an Old Acquaintance, On the Grounds of Poverty** Dear \_\_\_\_\_ – To say that I do not feel pleased and flattered at your proposal, would be to tell a useless untruth. I feel deeply, almost painfully, the conviction that your kind expressions are dictated by sincerity, and am the more grieved to be compelled to discourage them. But how are we situated? What hope is there of happiness with our unsettled prospects, and worse than small means? Industry has doubtless never been, and never will be, wanting on your part; but the want of patronage and capital will ever hold back the efforts of the most strenuous.

**A Negative Response to a Suitor, On the Grounds of a Pre-Engagement** *Sir – While confessing myself honored by the preference avowed for me by one whom I have every reason to respect as a gentleman, I feel that it would be dishonorable in me to keep you in any suspense, where the answer must be unfavorable. For some time past, I have been engaged to a gentleman, from whom I have every reason to expect happiness and comfort. I must, therefore, hope that you will henceforth regard me only in the light of a friend.*

**A Negative Response to a Suitor, On the Grounds of Levity** *Sir – It is to my sorrow that I confess that there was a time when your addresses would have both flattered and pleased me. That time has long since passed. Why – you best know. I could never consent to unite myself to a man who has marred the happiness of more than one young person, by his total forgetfulness of the proper duties of the stronger sex to the weaker. ...*

**From a Widow, in Answer to Proposals** *Dear Sir – ... You wish to know whether I am willing to enter again into the marriage state, and in event of my being so, whether I should be adverse to admitting you in the quality of a suitor. I assure you, sir, I feel flattered by the latter question, and as to the former, I can only say, that I have no dislike to entering again into that state. But our acquaintance is at present imperfect, and we are comparatively strangers to each other's tastes and tempers. I need scarcely observe that an intimate knowledge of such matters is absolutely requisite, before we can decide whether we are fitted for enjoying together a partnership in life. Meanwhile, I have no objection to allowing such freedom of acquaintance as shall enable us both to arrive at this knowledge, and can therefore only say, in conclusion, that the commencement of your addresses will meet with no obstacle.*

**From a Female Servant, Refusing Addresses** \_\_\_\_\_ *– I do not know what could have led you to believe that I had any partiality for you. Such is not the case. I wish you well, as I have no reason for wishing you otherwise, but I have no desire for any attentions from you of any kind.*

**From a Female Servant to a Proposal of Immediate Marriage** *Dear \_\_\_\_\_ – I am, I can assure you, quite as anxious for our union as you can be, but I feel that prudence is necessary. We are both young, myself especially, and it is of no use for us to rush into a state of life which we have not the means of supporting. ... Do not think that it is any coldness that makes me object to our immediate happiness; it is only prudence that makes me wish to spare ourselves the risk of that poverty, which too often leads to dissipation and misery on both sides. We have seen so many sad examples, that I am sure you will take in good part these words.*

**From a Female Servant to Her Suitor** *Dear \_\_\_\_\_ – I received your kind letter and am happy to hear that you are well in health, and giving satisfaction to your employer. I look forward with anxiety to the day when we shall be united forever, and when I shall enjoy the protection of an*

*honest and persevering husband. Continue to go on as you have done, and assure yourself of the constant affection of me.*

**From a Female Servant to a Young Journeyman, Advising Caution** Dear \_\_\_\_\_ – *I had no idea you would have been so hasty as to have made a proposal to me within a few months after being out of your apprenticeship. I cannot give you a positive denial; but I think that prudence requires some little delay, to enable you to realize those means of comfort which you as well as myself, I am sure, would feel the want of; and I believe they are more likely to be obtained by either us while single. If your love be as true as you profess, it will spur you on to the attainment of them, and you will not regret a slight, but useful delay. ...*

**To a Sweetheart Soldier Who Is Ordered to March** Dear \_\_\_\_\_ – *I cannot express my feelings as I reflect that you are so soon to be parted from me, and that I may possibly never behold you more. It is a sad thing to love sincerely one who is in so fearful a profession as war, but we must resign ourselves to God's will, and believe that all is for the best. ... I pray that you may once more return.*

**On Receiving a Miniature From Her Suitor** My Dear \_\_\_\_\_ – *I never thought that any fresh proof of your attachment was needed, nevertheless, I have this day received another, and that one of the most acceptable I could have desired, viz. the portrait of him whom, of all others, I am most desirous to keep in recollection. In contemplating this specimen of the artist's skill, I feel that it will ever recall you forcibly to my recollection, and in doing so ... will afford me some kind of solace during your absence. ...*

**From a Young Lady to Her Sister, Announcing Her Engagement** My Dear Sister – *You may remember my mentioning to you, the marked attention Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ paid me; it has now terminated in a formal proposal of marriage, which I think of accepting, but it won't be prudent to be hasty in my decision, as such a course might lead him to suppose I was anxious to have him. A lady's policy under circumstances of this kind, ought to be so effectually carried out, as to cause the gentleman some trouble in the attainment of his ends, so that he may more highly value the prize, when gained. ...*

**From a Lady, Confessing a Change of Feeling** My Dear Sir – *I fear my avowal may give you some pain, but it is better to be sincere and open in matters where the happiness of another is concerned. To speak plainly, then, I feel that my sentiments in regard to yourself are no longer what they were. While my esteem for your character remains unshaken, I still cannot blind myself to the fact that I do not cherish that affection which a wife ought to feel for her husband, and without which the married life is one continual scene of torment and vexation ...*

**In Answer to a Letter In Which Her Suitor Intimates His Wish to Break Up** *Sir – I acknowledge the receipt of your last letter which now lies before me, and in which you convey the intimation that the position in which, for some time past, we have regarded each other must henceforth be abandoned. Until the receipt of this letter, I had regarded you in the light of my future husband; you were, therefore, as you have reason to know, so completely the possessor of my affections, that I looked with indifference upon every other suitor. The remembrance of you had never failed to enhance the pleasures of daily life, and you were in my thoughts at the very moment in which I received this most unkind and unexpected letter. But deem me not so devoid of proper pride as to wish you to revoke your determination, from which I will not attempt to dissuade you, whether it may have been made in cool deliberation or in precipitate haste. Sir, I shall endeavor to banish you from my affections, as readily and completely as you appear to have banished me from yours ...*

**From a Lady to a Gentleman, Complaining of His Indifference** *Sir – However light you may make of promises, yet I am foolish enough to consider them as something more than mere trifles; and as likewise induced to believe that the man who voluntarily breaks a promise, will not pay much regard to an oath; and if so, in what light must I consider your conduct? Did I not give you my promise to be yours, and had you no other reason for soliciting than merely to gratify your own vanity? A brutal gratification, indeed, to triumph over the weakness of a woman, whose greatest fault was that she loved you.*



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