

On Letters

Not long ago while rummaging through an unused attic at my grandparents' place, I came upon a bundle of letters, packed away neatly at the bottom of a trunk. They were yellow with age and tied by a piece of faded red ribbon. While peering at them and trying to make out the illegible handwriting, I became very interested in them. To whom did they belong? By whom had they been written? In what circumstances? For what purpose? I could not tell. Perhaps they had been written by a lover to his beloved; or by a soldier boy to his dear mother. Hundreds of explanations for their existence came to my mind.

It is the same with any letters one comes across. They are as unknown to us as passing strangers. We do not understand their business or their purposes and we are not concerned at all with them. They register a slight impression and are gone.

Not so with our own letters; they concern us vitally whether we write them or receive them. They are the most intimate way of conversing with the friends we love without actually meeting them, and forever serve as a remembrance of those who have departed. It is a distinct pleasure to read a letter of a good writer; it brings to us his thoughts, his opinions, his doings and his personality, in fact, almost himself, as clearly as if he were talking to us. But the letters of a poor writer are about as interesting and entertaining as a three-minute telephone conversation. They seem to leave something out, to give just a glimpse of the real man. He may be an excellent person, but if his letters are poorly written, he cannot expect to keep his memory fresh in the minds of the friends to whom he writes.

Therefore a letter must be as well written as a composition; not just a few lines thrown together in any form to do one's duty as a friend. It is indeed a very poor example of friendship if the letters to our friends are written carelessly.

A letter must be adapted to the extent of the receiver's knowledge. It would not do to write the same kind of a letter to a child as to an older person, to an unlearned person as to a scholar. Write something of interest to

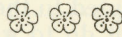
your reader, some story you may have heard, some incident that may have happened to you, something you may have learned, or something of current interest. Do not limit your letter to yourself entirely, introduce facts about your friends, or better still, about mutual friends; a street car incident, anything that may tend to give your letter variety and enable you to break away from the restricted confines of the first person.

Avoid the commonplace. There is nothing that ruins so much the style of a letter as common phrases such as: "Having received your welcome letter," or: "Yours sincerely." When one gets two or three letters beginning with the same phrase, as is often the case, he will judge those letters more harshly than he otherwise would have done. A letter that starts with a bang, either finding fault with you or beguiling you, will probably prove very interesting. The end is not so important, but a new or rare phrase leaves a better taste in one's mouth than the much used phrases, which are seen so often that they are apt to be flat and tasteless.

There are some letters that ramble all over the country, tell stories to the most minute detail, and are generally long-winded. These take about ten minutes to read, ten to understand, and one to decide that they are very boring. Write short letters. They take up less of your time, less of your friends', and prove more satisfactory all around. There are many other points that should be observed in letter writing, but I think these are the most important. There is, however, one point which I particularly wish to emphasize, and that is—write the truth. Do not write a pack of lies to your friend; they will perhaps get him into serious trouble, and, if he finds you out, you will lose a friend. Besides, we should never resort to falsehoods.

In conclusion, therefore, I would say: make your letters short, interesting, original, and truthful, and you will have attained the enviable position of a good letter writer, and you will be enabled to keep those great blessings of humanity—friends.

—J. O'H., '36.



In bridge, a good deal depends on a good deal.—*Punch*.