

PREVIEW

How to Write a Letter

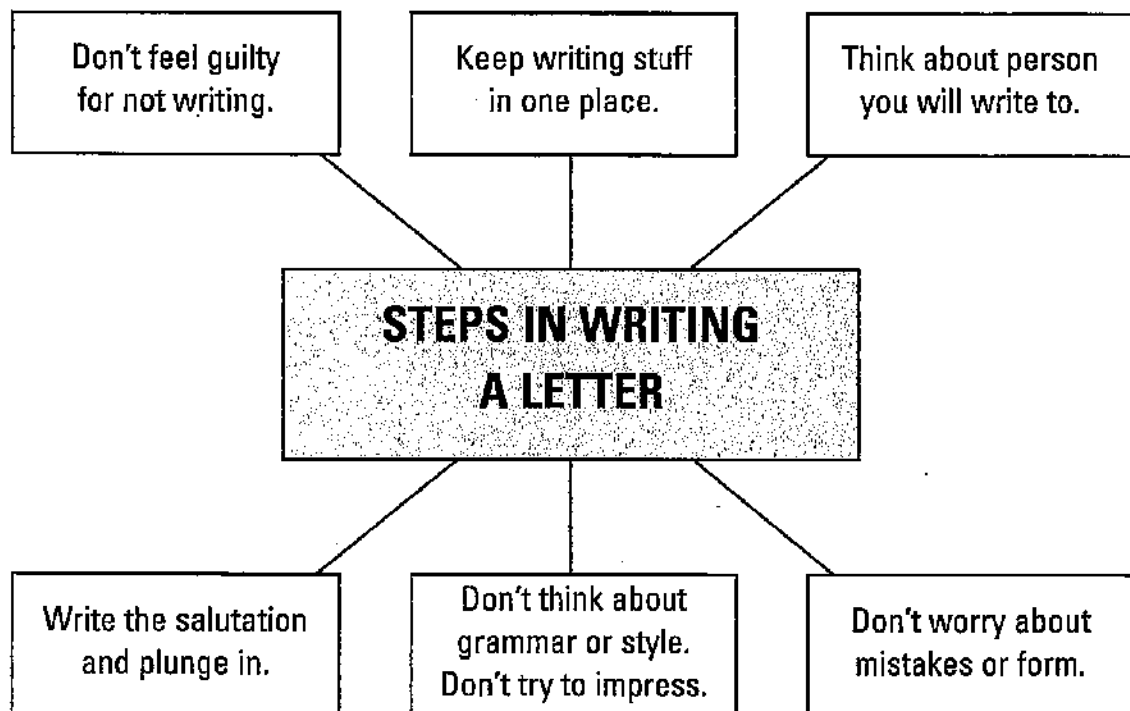
Garrison Keillor

Summary

In his informal essay "How to Write a Letter," Garrison Keillor offers amusing but practical advice to letter writers. He claims that letters are better than phone calls because they can be enjoyed over and over. People should write, he says, so that news of their lives will be known. He advises writers to forget the guilt of not having written for a long time. He suggests that they simply plunge into the task and not worry about grammar or style. If no ideas come, he advises writers to start by describing the present moment—where they are and what it's like. Keillor ends by saying that a writer's letters might be reread and enjoyed years later, even by the recipient's grandchildren.



Visual Summary



PREPARE TO READ

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Informal Essay

An informal essay is a brief discussion of a topic. It is written in a friendly, conversational style, as if the writer is talking to you. The informal essay "How to Write a Letter" is also an instructional essay. The title lets you know that the writer is going to tell you "how to" do something.

Friendly style, with humor	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, <i>and yet</i> : a letter is better.
Conversational style, with contractions and short, direct sentences	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.

READING STRATEGY

Reading Aloud With Expression

When you read aloud, use your voice to express the meaning of the words. You can adjust your reading in the following ways:

PACE	tone of voice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read at normal speed as the text builds to a point. • Slow down for a key point. • Pause before a fact or short sentence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise your voice at the end of a question. • Lower your voice at the end of a statement. • Raise your voice for words that are set off by quotation marks or italics.

Practice reading sections of "How to Write a Letter" aloud. Try to read with expression. Be careful not to rush through the passages. Remember to pause and to vary your tone of voice to show the meaning.

How to Write a Letter

Garrison Keillor

In "How to Write a Letter," Garrison Keillor uses humor and examples from his own experience to describe the value of letter writing. He believes that letters are gifts to those who receive them. In addition, letters help writers learn more about themselves. Keillor gives step-by-step instructions for writing a letter.

Keillor begins by explaining why he thinks a letter is better than a phone call.

♦ ♦ ♦

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.

♦ ♦ ♦

Keillor says that a letter is a sweet gift. Our words can cheer up a friend who may have had a rough day. The words just have to be sincere. Our friend can then read the letter over and over.

We need to write, says Keillor, so that people will know who we are. Writing is especially important for shy people who aren't very good at conversation.

♦ ♦ ♦

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

♦ Literary Analysis

Circle two examples of humorous writing in this paragraph.



♦ Reading Check

Why is writing important for shy people?

Vocabulary Development

anonymity (AN uh NIM uh tee) *n.* the condition of being a stranger, not known by name

own sweet selves and express the music of our souls.

♦ ♦ ♦

◆ Reading Check

Underline the words that tell what makes people want to write a letter.



◆ Reading Strategy

Read aloud this bracketed paragraph. Notice the words *not*, which is in italics, and *owe*, which is set off with quotation marks. Say these two words louder than the other words to emphasize the meaning of the sentences.

The same thing that moves a rock star to sing his heart out to thousands of fans moves us to write a few lines in a letter. We want to be known, says Keillor. We want dear Aunt Eleanor to know that we've fallen in love or quit our job or that we're moving to New York.

♦ ♦ ♦

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.

♦ ♦ ♦

Keillor says don't apologize for not writing. The only obligatory letters are thank-you notes and expressions of sympathy. You should also write to answer direct questions.

Keep all of your writing stuff together so that when you're ready to write, it's at your fingertips. If a blank eight-by-eleven sheet of paper stops you from writing, try a smaller page or use a note card. Use whatever feels easy, a pen or a computer keyboard.

♦ ♦ ♦

◆ Stop to Reflect

Who would you like to write to?

What would you tell that person?

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.

Vocabulary Development

obligatory (uhb LIG uh TOHR ee) *adj.* required
meditate on (MED i tayt) think about

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.

♦ ♦ ♦

Don't write to impress, and don't worry about form, says Keillor. You're not writing a term paper. Just start a new paragraph when you come to the end of an episode. You can go from a few lines about football to the fight with your mother to your fond memories of Mexico and on to the kitchen sink and everything in it. The more you write, the easier it gets.

♦ ♦ ♦

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

♦ Literary Analysis

The use of contractions such as *lit'ry* help create a friendly conversational style. Underline the words in this bracketed sentence that tell other ways to keep your writing **informal**.

♦ Stop to Reflect

If you had to describe what you are doing at this very moment, what would you write?

♦ Reading Check

What do you write first in a letter?

What do you do next?

Vocabulary Development

salutation (SAL yoo TAY shun) *n.* word or phrase of greeting at the beginning of a letter

declarative (deh KLAR uh tiv) **sentence** a sentence that states a fact

episode (EP uh soh'd) *n.* one in a series of related events

◆ Reading Check

What does Keillor say will probably happen to your letter?

come to the end and write *Yours ever* or *Hugs and kisses*, you'll know something you didn't when you wrote *Dear Pal*.

◆ ◆ ◆

Keillor says that your friend will probably save your letter. Forty years from now, her grandkids will read it. The letter will give them a glimpse of the world we knew.

◆ ◆ ◆

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.

REVIEW AND ASSESS

1. What is the reason Keillor gives for the need to write letters?

2. According to Keillor, what are two kinds of letters you are obligated to write?

1.

2.

3. **Literary Analysis:** In the chart, write an example of each style from the essay.

Friendly style with humor	
Conversational style with informal language	

4. According to Keillor, what is the first step in writing a letter?

- (a) Find a pencil.
- (b) Get over the guilt of not writing.
- (c) Sit and meditate.
- (d) Remember when you saw your friend.

5. What does Keillor suggest doing if you make a mistake while writing?

(Continued)

6. **Reading Strategy:** Read the following passage aloud with expression. To prepare, read it to yourself. Underline any words or phrases you want to emphasize. Put vertical lines where you want to pause or stop. When you are ready, read it aloud to your teacher or classmates.

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*.

Writing

Postcard

Writing a postcard is a fun, easy way to send a message. It is similar in many ways to writing a letter. Use Keillor's suggestions in "How to Write a Letter."

- First, think of something you want to write about. For example, you might want to send a postcard from a favorite vacation spot.
- Make a list of three things you want to say.

Now, write your postcard on the lines below. Remember to:

- Use short sentences.
- Include specific details that make it personal.
