

## SNAIL MAIL

# Penning with love

Few of us exchange letters through the post any more, but a growing number of people are beginning to value how special a handwritten letter can be and the lasting impression it can leave.

Words and photography Naomi Bulger



Around three decades ago, give or take a year here or there, little Tracey Hassell sat at the desk in her bedroom in Adelaide, Australia, head bent and sock-clad feet swinging, writing another letter to her nana. At first glance, there was nothing particularly profound in this, or any of her letters. "They were not very interesting," Hassell recalls. "Results of netball games and a summary of birthday presents, mostly. But my parents always encouraged me to write to Nana because she lived a long way away from us, and was very deaf."

It wasn't until years later, after her nana had passed away and while helping to sort through her things, that Hassell understood the true value of what she had given her grandmother when she penned those innocuous words.

"It was my job to sort through Nana's dresser," says Hassell, "the one where she used to sit to fix her hair and place a dab of perfume on her wrists. In the top drawer I found a cache of her special things: stacks of small photographs, a name pin from when she used to call herself Trudy, a newspaper clipping in which she was named 'belle of the ball,' and a tied-up bundle of letters.

"Every envelope in that bundle had been carefully cut with a letter opener, and the edges were frayed and bent from frequent opening and rereading. On that day, I discovered that my nana had kept every letter that her grandchildren had ever written to her. Pages and pages of childish handwriting on cheap, floral news-agency stationery, some letters read so many times the paper was worn.

"To my grandmother, each letter was the voice of a grandchild she had never heard."

Handwritten letters have the power to become, over time, the blueprints of a person. Reading a letter from your childhood is like uncovering the architect's plans for your now century-old house. You shake off the dust, carefully smooth the creases from the fragile paper, and as you read you can recreate, in your mind, the beginning.

Likewise, rereading a letter from someone loved and lost can bring a piece of them back to life, knitting their thoughts, joys, hopes and challenges into flesh and bone with every silly story told, with every characteristic flourish of the letter 'r', or each 'i' dotted with a heart.

Short letters, long letters, gift cards and postcards; letters on pages torn from school books, on pale pink writing paper covered with unicorns (with matching envelopes), on lined sheets decorated with scratch 'n' sniff stickers that long ago lost their sugary whiff. Penmanship, paper, pencils and prose – every letter is a unique and

tangible artefact of your relationship: a physical piece of who the writer is, or was, and who they are to you.

Mention letter-writing at a dinner party and you won't have to wait long before someone calls it a dying practice. "The internet killed the mail," is the most common lament. And it is certainly true that the speed, accessibility and ease of email, text and social media have forever transformed the way we conduct business, and have had a profound impact on the way loved ones stay in touch.

But marketers say we are now entering the 'post digital age', an era in which the concept of online has become so much a part of our everyday lives that there is little benefit any more to separating out 'digital' from 'analogue' in our discourse. And, perhaps, because digital is no longer shiny and new, increasing numbers of people are eschewing its shiny lights for

something that feels more honest, lasting and slow.

As 'slow living' gains popularity worldwide, many are returning to old-fashioned pen, paper and stamps to forge more meaningful connections, express their creativity, and spread kindness. After all, 'slow' is about taking the time to really think about what we are doing and put our hearts into it – cooking a meal from scratch, nurturing green and growing things, turning off the television in favour of conversation, writing a letter instead of banging out a text.

If you think about it, a handwritten letter represents just about everything that is good and wholesome about slow living. A letter is deeply personal: words, feelings,

## Letter-writing: the practice lives on

*The next time you are at a dinner party and someone says the internet has killed the post, read them this list (and then remind them that video didn't kill the radio star, either)*

- Strangers have sent close to one million postcards to the Post Secret art project, contributing to a website that generates more than three million views a month

- Volunteers in the Snail Mail My Email project have written and decorated more than 29,000 creative letters on behalf of others, posting them around the world

- Penpal network Letter Writers Alliance has more than 11,000 paid members, and this is growing every day

- Media surveys show that use of all four major social media apps (Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter) is in decline across the board, internationally

## 13 letters to write today

- Thank someone who doesn't expect it: your child's teacher, your barista, your yoga instructor, your postie

- To someone who lives in the same house as you, telling them what you appreciate about them

- Say hello to a friend who isn't on Facebook; enclose photographs

- The words that don't come easily face-to-face

- An invitation to your next catch-up with a friend, instead of texting

- To a former teacher, to let them know what you remember about their class, and how it mattered to you

- Write down your memories, so that future generations can know what your life was like

- A letter to your neighbour, telling them how much you enjoy their holiday decorations

- Write to your food-loving friend and share your favourite recipe

- A letter of love and support to someone who is going through a difficult time, or who is in hospital

- To leaders and politicians to advocate for positive change

- Congratulate someone on their achievements: a graduation, a new job, a deadline met, a difficult decision made

- To your mother or father, sharing the story of something they did or said to you in your childhood that made you feel special and loved



ideas and stories shared from one person to another, within the privacy of a sealed envelope.

The mark of the writer is right there on the page, in crossed-out mistakes and afterthoughts in the margins and between the lines. (Sitting at her grandmother's dresser that day, Hassell decided to write one final letter to her nana, in place of a eulogy).

**In the moment**

Writing a letter is an exercise in mindfulness. The very act of writing by hand slows us down and makes multi-tasking almost impossible, forcing us to be present in the moment. We pause and think about our words, and about what we want to express.

Psychologists call this "reflective functioning," the capacity to both feel an experience as we write it down, and then to make sense of it as we read it back. Scientists now link expressive writing – particularly expressions of gratitude – with better moods, reduced stress, better sleep and improved health.

Studies have found significant cognitive benefits to writing by hand, with improvements in memory, creativity and skill development. Beyond that, the letter is a canvas for creative expression. For flourishes in the handwriting and drawings on the back, for illustrated envelopes and handmade gifts inside.

"Mail artists" all over the world send decorated mail through the post as gestures of kindness, community and artistic expression.

Every letter is unique, a tangible expression of the writer; everything from their choice of pen and paper to style of handwriting makes a letter a bespoke and precious object.

Writing someone a letter is an act of true generosity. For most of us, life today is busier than it has ever been, and our time is one of the greatest gifts we have to give. To tell a friend we love them, that we are thinking of them, can be expressed on Facebook with a poke. It takes considerably more time, effort and focus to put thoughts and feelings onto paper, place them in an envelope, write the address, stick a stamp on it and carry it to the nearest postbox.

But the joy this gives our friends is immeasurably greater.

And a letter is, by every standard these days, slow. There's

a reason many call it 'snail mail.'

A physical letter travels hundreds or even thousands of kilometres, crosses oceans and highways, passes through dozens of hands, and, when a letter I write finally reaches you, it bears the marks of its journey: creases and smudges, extra stamps and stickers, perhaps even a tear or two, that are the tangible evidence of its adventure, and which become part of its story. Our story.

**Letters held dear**

*"My grandpa was never confident in spelling or penmanship as he only attended school until he was eight, and was then needed to work on the family farm. But when I was a teenager, I opened an envelope and there was a single sheet of white paper. On it my grandpa had written, 'This is the second letter I ever wrote and it is my longest.' I have held that letter close ever since, and it still brings a smile to my face."*  
via [instagram @jackfrankielove](#)

*"Two years ago I was walking along the beach near my home when a plastic bottle washed up. There was a letter inside. It was from a nine-year-old girl who wanted a pen-pal. I was so excited to have found a letter like this. We wrote each other a few times. The letters stopped coming at the end of summer, but it is still one of my most precious memories."*  
Molly Leon

**Wish you were here**  
*Postcards were the social media of the 20th century. They were short and pithy, widely available and affordable, sometimes frivolous and often impermanent. During its heyday in the early 1900s, New York amusement park destination Coney Island regularly attracted crowds of more than 100,000 people a day. On any given weekend, that crowd would routinely send more than a quarter of a million postcards to family and friends, and, on just one single day in 1906, the Coney Island Post Office processed more than 200,000 postcards.*

**Community, creativity and kindness**

Open projects and call-outs that use the humble postal service for creating community, expressing creativity and to deliver random acts of kindness

- More Love Letters** a global project across 49 countries to write letters of love and support for complete strangers  
[moreloveletters.com](http://moreloveletters.com)
- The Graceful Envelope** a long-running (since 1994) annual competition to create a beautifully decorated envelope  
[calligraphersguild.org/envelope](http://calligraphersguild.org/envelope)
- Dear Holly** an invitation to write words of encouragement for teens (words you wish you had heard yourself) on a postcard  
[dearhollyproject.wordpress.com](http://dearhollyproject.wordpress.com)
- The Postcard Club** a pen-pal exchange list for artists who want to swap postcard-sized works of original art with one another  
[postcard-club.tumblr.com](http://postcard-club.tumblr.com)
- InCoWriMo** a global challenge to handwrite and post or deliver one letter, card, note or postcard every day for a month  
[incowrimo.org](http://incowrimo.org)
- Post Secret** an ongoing community art project through which people mail their secrets, anonymously, on one side of a postcard  
[postsecret.com](http://postsecret.com)
- Mail A Smile** a monthly call-out for strangers to send mail-art (decorated envelopes) to cheer a stranger in need  
[mailasmile.org](http://mailasmile.org)



*"Studies have found significant cognitive benefits to writing by hand, with improvements in memory, creativity and skill development. Beyond that, the letter is a canvas for creative expression."*



## TIPS AND TRICKS FOR decorative mail

*As long as the address is clear and you have enough postage, the only limit is your imagination.*

Words, photography and illustrated templates Naomi Bulger

You don't need to be an artist to send mail-art; there are plenty of ways you can make your letter the kind of mail that gives joy to the recipient and the postie, without needing a degree in fine-arts.

If you feel confident, draw a picture with the address on the envelope. You could make this a picture that stands next to the address, or actually incorporate the address into your design. I find speech bubbles, signs, flags and oversized leaves are all good design elements to incorporate into a drawing, on which to write the address. You may even want to colour or paint your design to make it extra special.

Of course, not everyone likes to draw, colour and paint, but there are plenty of other ways to make your mail look special. For example:

- Cut out pictures from magazines to create a collage around or incorporating the address
- Use rubber stamps or stickers to decorate your envelope
- Make mail colourful with stripes or patterns of washi tape
- Paste vintage stamps alongside real stamps to decorate your mail
- I like to include a wax seal on many of my envelopes, if there is room for it. Buy sealing wax and seals at specialty stationery shops or order them online
- That old favourite, "brown paper packages tied up with string," is still a crowd pleaser (although I'm told string is not accepted in the US mail so you might want to check with your local post office first).

### Mail-art that makes it

One of the dangers of making mail-art is that anything 'not standard' runs the risk of not making it through the postal system. An artistically designed address can't be read by machines. Here are some tips for creating mail-art that is more likely to survive its journey through the post.

- Make sure the address is clearly visible to the postie.

Sometimes I leave messages for the postie, along the lines of "Kindly deliver to", to draw attention to the address.

- My local postie once told me to make sure the country was in the same place as the rest of the address to be sure it wouldn't be missed. Postal workers are busy, they don't always have time to search over a complex picture.
- If you're using paint, be aware that water-based paints might run if your letter is delivered in the rain. I still use watercolours and gouache in the mail I send, but I outline everything – especially the addresses – in waterproof felt-tip pen, so that the details are clear, no matter what.
- Depending on how bulky or heavy my letter is, sometimes I reinforce each of the corners with sticky-tape so that it's not so likely to become torn in the mail.



### getting started

Use our templates (opposite page and next page) to create your own mail art. Above are examples from Naomi to show what the finished envelopes could look like.

- Make your return address bold and clear so that if the postie does get confused, at least they can send the letter back to you.
- If you're using stamps rather than postal labels and they won't all fit on the front of your envelope without ruining your design, it's okay to put more on the back. Just leave a note for the postie: "more stamps over" with a little arrow pointing them in the direction of the extra stamps.
- If you do put stamps on the back of the envelope, write "Sender" above your return address, so they don't confuse it for the recipient's address (that actually happened to me!).

Despite all this care, sometimes your letter will still arrive bruised and battered, or even torn. Don't let it distress you overly. See any wear and tear as marks of the journey, of the great adventure that your mail has taken across land and sea.

The original mail-artists of the '60s and '70s believed this was a kind of participatory art process: a collaboration between the original artist (you) and the entire postal system! **g**

*This is an excerpt from Naomi's e-book Making Mail: 10 steps to writing letters that become keepsakes. You can download the e-book for free via her blog [naomiloves.com/making-mail-e-book](http://naomiloves.com/making-mail-e-book)*



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