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TEN IF BY HAND

by Daniel Cappello



Jacqueline Kennedy pens a note in her Georgetown home, ca. 1960. Mrs. Kennedy famously used a signature robin's-egg blue stationery for her correspondence.

Why the handwritten letter is the ultimate luxury

Last fall, on a trip to New Orleans to celebrate a friend's birthday, I found myself at a loss for a gift. As Italian luggage and original works of art were being lavished upon the guest of honor (a man who already had everything, to boot), what could I possibly offer of equal value? The sister of the birthday man made a brilliant suggestion: write him a handwritten note, the ultimate personalized gift.

To be sure, a letter is a gift in itself—a thing of beauty, from the special paper to the gracious gesture it represents. Never has this been truer than today, as BlackBerries, mobile telephones, and Wi-Fi make communication ever faster and easier. "We've never been busier; we've never been more hectic," observes Colin Cowie, the international arbiter of style and author of, most recently, *Colin Cowie Chic*. "So it's more important than ever not to let the handwritten letter fall by the wayside." Even though we might be able to thank our dinner host faster and more efficiently in a text message on the way home, Cowie stresses that "the best thing is still the heartfelt handwritten statement."

Today's demands for speed and efficiency have steadily worn protocol thin, and to many, "etiquette" seems quaint, irrelevant, and an unnecessary hindrance to getting things done. Why bother with a written letter when e-mail and emoticons convey the same feelings with fuss-free expediency?

Etiquette, in fact, isn't as fastidious as it's made out to be. Letter writing is a joyful staple of good manners. It fulfills a basic human desire to communicate and connect with others, and it does so with a fundamental expression of oneself, the personalized stamp of penmanship. It is less about the "rules" governing thank-yous or condolences and more about the spirit of the act and the sincerity of what's written.

It is precisely for these reasons that we ought to make the handwritten effort. Mannered-life maven David Monn, who produces the annual Costume Institute gala at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, explains, "When I see something handwritten, it means that someone has cared enough to take the time out of his busy life to say something to me." And in an era when "luxury" is thrown about in terms of handbags and Michelin-starred meals, Monn insists, "Luxury isn't what we spend our money on, it's how we spend our time—what we make of our time. And sitting down to write is, especially today, a true luxury, for both writer and recipient."

Indeed, letter writing is not so much a task as it is a reward. To realize as much, don't be bothered by the supposed rules of etiquette; instead, remember the single most important one—that there really aren't any. Peggy Post should know. She is the great-granddaughter-in-law of Emily Post and the author of the 17th edition of *Emily Post's Etiquette*. Post says, "There's no perfect formula," and advises those making the effort simply to "be respectful, considerate, and honest."

Putting thoughts on paper can be refreshingly therapeutic and a significant way of expressing who you are. Like the words you choose, your stationery becomes an extension of yourself. Monn says that his stationery "is an expression of me and my personality, down to the color, my embossed name at the top, and feel and size of the paper." Some people become so identified with their stationery that it's their trademark, and recipients come to cherish that celadon envelope with the elegant script or that fashionable white-alligator-lined ecru stock when it arrives in the mail. Jay Fielden, the editor of *Men's Vogue*, uses a unique brown-bag stationery of handsome weight, suggestive of tobacco leaf. It is stylized yet sober, inventive yet masculine, and befitting the editor of a *Vogue* title.

For thank-you notes, I think of how I might like to know that a gift was appreciated, then say as much to whomever I'm writing. Being playful or irreverent—especially if you know your recipient's whims—shows that you've thought about your note and are not sending off a generic thank-you.

Letters are treasures; when we save them, we preserve our personal history. Just by rereading them, we are able to conjure the people, places, and moments that have been most significant in life. This should encourage us to write out those thank-you notes, but let's not stop there. Write when a baby is born, write when a wedding is announced, write when a friend is promoted, write for a birthday, write to say you're sorry, write to say you love someone, write on an anniversary, or write—and this is my favorite—out of the blue, and spontaneously. If that's not enough, our competitive natures might do the trick. Cowie has a scale that grades us on writing manners. "Send a text message," he says, "and you get 2 points; an e-mail, 6; a written fax, 8 points; and a note sent by hand, a perfect 10!"

Daniel Cappello is an assistant editor at the *New Yorker*. He is a ballet critic for *Dance* magazine and has written for *Newyorker.com*, *Playbill*, *Absolute New York*, and *Quest*. He writes and photographs for *New York Social Diary* and for the fashion magazine *Q*.

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