

Guidelines for writing 19th century letters

Letters are written on small, folded pieces of plain white, blue, or blue-lined paper. Paper sizes can be foolscap or smaller. Don't use standard 8 1/2" by 11" paper without first folding or cutting it down. The paper should be folded into a sort of "booklet" unless you are writing on small sizes of paper. After you fold your paper in half, write on it as though it were a small "book" (in other words, if you fold a piece of 8 1/2 by 11" paper in half, you would have four pages.) You'll need some small envelopes; just buy some cheap thank-you notes and recycle the notes. Civil War era envelopes were usually tan, yellowish-brown, or white. If you want to be very correct, you might make some envelopes from tan good quality rag paper. Don't use any sealing wax (see discussion below.)

Format:

1. put today's date and your location (the name of your town or county) in the upper right hand corner. For example:

January 4th, 1862
Madison County, Ills.

or:

September 12th, 1865
Washington

2. typically, you would address your correspondent by his/her title, not the first name. Capitalize the relationship, e.g., Dear Husband, Beloved Brother, Dearest Friend, Honored Sir, etc. No matter how close you are, don't address him by his first name. Yes, I've seen it – but it's rare. I would say that only one letter in 500 was addressed that way.

3. You might begin by stating the obvious: you're writing a letter. Although many etiquette books made fun of this silly habit, it was quite common. "I take my pen in hand ..." or "I take this opportunity to answer ..."

Note: for some reason women often begin by apologizing, especially when they are writing to men. You might make excuses for your bad writing, the poor quality of the ink, pen, or paper, your inability to express yourself, etc. I've rarely seen a lady's letter that didn't apologize in this way, except for wives of long standing.

4. Or else, begin by thanking the correspondent for his previous letter and / or apologizing for the length of time it took you to answer it. Or else you might chide the correspondent for not writing sooner. A letter was often called a "favor." For example, "thank you for your favor of the 14th. By the way, the current month was called the instant, or "inst.," and the previous month was called the ultimo, or "ult." In other words, in a business letter (*not a letter to a relative*) you might say, "this is in reply to yours of the 14th ult.," meaning that you are replying to his letter of the 14th of last month.

5. Subjects: talk about crops, slaves, farm news, neighbors, deaths, births, engagements, everybody's health; mention the weather, the livestock, family members' doings. It's fine to be a little humorous or cheerful!
6. You could make a few comments about the current situation, but you don't have to discuss politics or war news. I found very few letters by women who discussed the war news in general; if anything they might make some comments about what's going on locally.
7. Tell your correspondent how you feel about him (it's okay for wives to tell husbands they miss them and pray for them, for example.)
8. Close with your relationship and your full name: "Affectionately yours, your wife, Jane Edith Smith."
9. Feel free to be creative with your spelling, and don't worry about punctuation.

Sample phrases

I take my pen in hand to write ... to answer ...

I have a few minutes and so I improve upon this opportunity to write ...

Thank you for your favor (meaning, your letter)

Please pardon the poor paper, the scratchy pen, the ungraceful language ...

How long it has been since we last ...

My thoughts / prayers are often with you ...

Do you yet recall ...?

The folks often ask about you

10. Closings:

For someone very close, like a sister or wife: Affectionately yours, or With Sincere Regard

Your loving wife, your loving sister, your affectionate cousin

For a father or uncle, or someone you don't know well: Respectfully, or Faithfully

Remember: always sign with your relationship and full name.

The envelope is addressed in the front just as it would be today. On the back, or in the upper left hand corner of the front, you write your initials and last name, J.E. Johnson, and the town and/or county. If you live on a farm, you would only include the county.

About crossed lines.

If paper was scarce, people sometimes turned their letters sideways and carefully wrote across the letter at a 45 degree angle. I wouldn't bother crossing the lines, because that will be difficult to read, and I didn't see all that many letters that were crossed in my research. Generally, only the last paragraph was crossed, if at all.

Mailing the letter:

As mentioned above, the envelopes should be pretty small and don't need sealing wax. Sealing wax went out of style by 1857 or 1858. By that time envelopes had come into general use, and those were gummed or glued shut. Therefore, sealing wax was unnecessary. Back in the 1850s, sealing wax was used only to glue together sheets of writing paper, but this was before envelopes were invented. Never seal an envelope with wax -- that is only done in Harry Potter movies.

If you do want to use red sealing wax, then don't use an envelope. You will have to explain that in your letter. You would have to say something like, "pardon the use of old-fashioned wax, but we have no envelopes and I had to use some wax that I found in Father's desk." In that case, you would leave a blank space on the back of your letter for the address. You will have to plan for this before writing your letter. First fold your paper into the size of a small period-style envelope (about 2 ½ by 3") and write the address as above. You'll have to be careful to leave a space for the sealing wax. Then unfold the paper again and write your letter. When you're done, seal the back.

The stamp goes in the usual place. Ideally you would cancel the stamp, but I have never figured out a satisfactory way of doing so. Someone should design a rubber stamp to do this! The stamp is cancelled with a double circle with a double line through the middle that contains the date. It actually looks just like a modern hand-cancellation.

If you send packages, then just cut apart a brown paper grocery bag or use brown kraft paper. Tie it with hemp twine and put extra stamps on it.