



E-mail Tips from 1890

by KeithParsons

While thinking about what to write concerning tips and tricks of using E-mail when I came across a great article by Lewis Carroll, of Alice in Wonderland fame. This article contains many wise rules that are directly applicable to e-mail today.

Take a minute or two to read this treatise and mark those sections you believe can help you with your correspondence today. Over one hundred and ten years ago, Lewis Carroll described how to avoid 'flame wars' and hinted at making sure you add your attachments to e-mail first, rather than after finishing the document. I'm sure you'll enjoy his writing style and use of English. Enjoy!

Eight or Nine Wise Words about Letter Writing

Lewis Carroll, Oxford, England (1890)



How to begin a Letter.

If the Letter is to be in answer to another, begin by getting out that other letter and reading it through, in order to refresh your memory, as to what it is you have to answer, and as to your correspondent's *present address* (otherwise you will be sending your letter to his regular address in London, though he has been careful in writing to give you his *Torquay* address in full.)

Next, Address and Stamp the Envelope. "What! Before writing the *Letter*?" Most certainly. And I'll tell you what will happen if you don't. You will go on writing till the last moment, and, just in the middle of the last sentence, you will become aware that 'time's up!' Then comes the – wildly-scrawled signature – the hastily-fastened envelope, which comes open in the post – the address, a mere hieroglyphic – the horrible discovery that you've forgotten to replenish your Stamp-Case – The frantic appeal, to everyone in the house, to lend you a stamp – the headlong rush to the Post Office, arriving, hot and gasping, just after the box has closed – and finally, a week afterwards, the return of the Letter, from the Dead-Letter Office, marked "address illegible"!

Next, put your own address, *in full*, at the top of the note-sheet. It is an aggravating thing – I speak from bitter experience – when a friend, staying at some new address, heads his letter "Dover," simply, assuming that you can get the rest of the address from his previous letter, which perhaps you have destroyed.

Next, put the date *in full*. It is another aggravating thing, when you wish, years afterwards, to arrange a series of letters, to find them dated "Feb. 17", "Aug. 2", without any year to guide you as to which comes first. An never, never, dear Madam (this remark is to ladies only: no man would ever do such a thing), put "Wednesday", simply, as the date! "*That way madness lies.*"

How to go on with a Letter.

There is a golden Rule to begin with. Write legibly. The average temper of the human race would be perceptibly sweetened, if everybody obeyed this Rule! A great deal of the bad writing in the world comes simply from writing *too quickly*. Of course you reply,

“I do it to save *time*”. A very good object, no doubt: but what right have you to do it at your friend’s expense? Isn’t *his* time as valuable as yours? Years ago, I used to receive letters from a friend – and very interesting letters too – written in one of the most atrocious hands ever invented.

It generally took me about a week to read one of his letters! I used to carry it about in my pocket, and take it out at leisure times, to puzzle over the riddles which composed it – holding it in different positions, and at different distances, till at last the meaning of some hopeless scrawl would flash upon me, when I at once wrote down the English under it; and, when several had been thus guessed, the context would help one with the others, till at last the whole series of hieroglyphics was deciphered. If *all* one’s friends wrote like that, Life would be entirely spent in reading their letters!

This Rule applies, specially, to names of people or places – and *most* specially to *foreign names*. I got a letter once, containing some Russian names, written in the same hasty scramble in which people often write “yours sincerely”. The context, of course, didn’t help in the least: and one spelling was just as likely as another, so far as *I* knew: it was necessary to write and tell my friend that I couldn’t read any of them!

My second Rule is, don’t fill *more* than a

page and a half with apologies for not having written sooner!

The best subject, to *begin* with, is your friend’s last letter. Write with the letter open before you. Answer his questions, and make any remarks his letter suggests. *Then* go on to what you want to say yourself. This arrangement is more courteous, and pleasanter for the reader, than to fill the letter with your own invaluable remarks, and then hastily answer your friend’s questions in a postscript. Your friend is much more likely to enjoy your wit, *after* his own anxiety for information has been satisfied.

In referring to anything your friend has said in his letter, it is best to quote the exact words, and not to give a summary of them in your words. *A*’s impression, of what *B* has said, expressed in *A*’s words, will never convey to *B* the meaning of his own words.

This is specially necessary when some point has arisen as to which two correspondents do not quite agree. There ought to be no opening for such writing as “You are quite mistaken in thinking I said so-and-so. It was not the least my meaning, &c., &c.,” which tends to make correspondence last for a life-time.

A few more of my Rules may fitly be given here, for correspondence that has unfortunately become *controversial*.

One is, *don’t repeat yourself*. When once you have said your say,



fully and clearly, on a certain point, and have failed to convince your friend, *drop that subject*: to repeat your arguments, all over again, will simply lead to his doing the same; and so you will go on, like a Circulating Decimal. Did you ever know a Circulating Decimal come to an end?

Another Rule is, when you have written a letter that you feel may possibly irritate your friend, however necessary you may have felt it to so express yourself, *put it aside till the next day*. Then read it over again, and fancy it addressed to yourself. This will often lead to your writing it all over again, taking out a lot of the vinegar and pepper, and putting in honey instead, and thus making a *much* more palatable dish of it! If, when you have done your best to write inoffensively, you still feel that it will probably lead to further controversy, *keep a copy of it*. There is very little use, months afterwards, in pleading “I am almost sure I never expressed myself as you say: to the best of my recollection I said so-and-so”. *Far* better to be able to write “I did *not* express myself so: these are the words I used.”

My fifth Rule is, if your friend makes a severe remark, either leave it unnoticed, or make your reply distinctly *less* severe: and if he makes a friendly remark, tending towards ‘making up’ the little difference that has arisen between you, let your reply be distinctly *more* friendly. If, in picking a quarrel, each party declined to go more than *three-eighths* of the way, and if, in making friends, each was ready to go *five-eighths* of the way – why, there would be more reconciliations than quarrels! Which is like the Irishman’s remonstrance to his gad-about daughter – “Shure, you’re *always* goin’ out! You go out *three* times, for *wanst* that you come in!”



My sixth Rule (and my last remark about controversial correspondence) is, *don't try to have the last word!* How many a controversy would be nipped in the bud, if each was anxious to let the *other* have the last word! Never mind how telling a rejoinder you leave unuttered: never mind your friend’s supposing that you are silent from the lack of anything to say: let the thing drop, as soon as it is possible without discourtesy: remember ‘speech is silvern, but silence is golden’! (If you are a gentleman, and your friend is a lady, this Rule is superfluous: you *won't get the last word!*)

My seventh Rule is, if it should ever occur to you to write, jestingly, in *dispraise* of your friend, be sure you exaggerate enough to make the jesting *obvious*: a word spoken in *jest*, but taken as *earnest*, may lead to very serious consequences. I have known it to lead to the breaking-off of a friendship. Suppose, for instance, you wish to remind your friend of a sovereign you have lent him, which he has forgotten to repay – you might quite *mean* the words “I mention it, as you seem to have a conveniently bad memory for debts”, in jest: yet there would be nothing to wonder at if he took offense at the way of putting it. But, suppose you wrote “Long observation of your career, as a pickpocket and burglar, has convinced me that my one lingering hope, for recovering that sovereign I lent you, is to say ‘Pay up, or I’ll summons yer!’” he would indeed be matter-of-fact friend if he took that as seriously meant!

My eighth Rule. When you say, in your letter, “I enclose a cheque for £5”, or “I enclose John’s letter for you to see”, leave off writing for a moment – go and get the document referred to – and put it in the envelope. Otherwise, you are pretty certain to find it lying about, after the post has gone!



My ninth Rule. When you get to the end of a note-sheet, and find you have more to say, take another piece of paper – a whole sheet, or a scrap, as the case may demand: but, whatever you do, don't write on the back of the first piece of paper. It's hard enough to read handwriting once, let alone when it bleeds through from the other side.

How to end a Letter.

If doubtful whether to end with 'yours faithfully', or 'yours truly', or 'yours most truly', &c. (there are at least a dozen varieties, before you reach 'yours affectionately'), refer to your correspondent's last letter, and make your winding-up *at least as friendly as his*: in fact, even if a shade *more* friendly, it will do no harm!

A postscript is a very useful invention: but it is *not* meant (as so many ladies suppose) to contain the real *gist* of the letter: it serves rather to throw in the shade any little matter we do not wish to make a fuss about. For example, your friend had promised to execute a commission for you in town, but forgot it, thereby putting you to great inconvenience: and he now writes to apologize for his negligence. It would be cruel, and needlessly crushing, to make it the main subject of your reply. How much more gracefully it comes in thus! "P.S. Don't distress yourself any more about having omitted that little matter in town. I won't deny that it *did* put my plans out a little, at the time: but it's all right now. I often forget things, myself: and 'those who live in glass-houses, mustn't throw stones,' you know!"

When you take your letters to the Post, *carry them in your hand*. If you put them in your pocket you will take a long country-walk (I speak from experience), passing the Post-Office *twice*, both going and returning, and when you get home, will find them *still* in your pocket.

On registering Correspondence.

Let me recommend you to keep a record of Letters Received and Sent. I have kept one for

many years, and have found it of the greatest possible service, in many ways: it secures my answering Letters, however long they have to wait; it enables me to refer, for my own guidance, to the details of previous correspondence, though the actual Letters may have been destroyed long ago; and, most valuable feature of all, if any difficulty arises, years afterwards, in connection with a half-forgotten correspondence, it enables me to say, with confidence, "I did *not* tell you that he was 'an *invaluable* servant in *every* way', and that you *couldn't* 'trust him too much'. I have a *précis* of my letter. What I said was 'he is a *valuable* servant in *many* ways, but *don't* trust him too much'. So if he's cheated you, you really must not hold *me* responsible for it!"

The End



Lewis Carroll was the pseudonym of British author Charles Lutwidge Dodgson. He is best known for his nursery tale Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and its sequel, Through the Looking-glass, which were both illustrated by Sir John Tenniel.

The choice of violet as a secondary ink color in this document is in keeping with Lewis Carroll's preference for writing with violet ink.

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