GoalTodo

Write 12 letters by hand: what to say, how to post it, 12 ideas

Write 12 letters by hand

52 weeks · Mon, Nov 30 → Sun, Nov 28

Week by week

Tick a box each time you do a session.

Nov 30–Dec 6
Week 1

Your list, your kit and your letter time

One letter

- [ ] Make your list: read the twelve letter ideas in the guide and write a name next to each one you can. Leave gaps where nobody comes to mind yet
  20 min
- [ ] Gather your kit: paper, a pen that doesn't smudge, envelopes and stamps for the first few letters
- [ ] Ask for any addresses you're missing: a message to a relative or friend is usually enough
  10 min
- [ ] Pick a regular letter time, such as Sunday afternoon, and put it in your calendar as a repeating event
  5 min

Done when: Your list has at least six names, you have paper, envelopes and stamps, and your letter time is in your calendar

Sticking point: No idea who to write to? Start with the people who'd be most pleased to hear from you, not the ones you think you ought to write to. Gaps on the list are fine: you'll fill them as you go.

Dec 7–13
Week 2

Letter 1: a thank-you letter

One letter

- [ ] Read letter idea 1, "A thank-you letter", in the guide. Choose someone who did something for you that you never properly thanked: a relative, a friend, a teacher, a colleague or a neighbour
  10 min
- [ ] Check you have their full address, including the postcode or ZIP code
- [ ] Jot three notes: what they did, how it changed things for you, and what you're doing now. Single words or short lines are fine
  15 min

Done when: You know who letter 1 is for, you have their address, and you have at least three notes

Sticking point: If several people come to mind, pick the one you haven't thought about for a while. The others can go on your list for later letters.

Dec 14–20
Week 3

Letter 1: a rough draft

One letter

- [ ] Write a rough draft on scrap paper from your notes: why you're writing, one or two things in detail, a question, and a warm close. Don't stop to fix it
  20 to 30 min
- [ ] A day or two later, read it aloud. Cut anything you wouldn't say to them, and add one specific detail
  10 min

Done when: You have a rough draft of letter 1 that you're happy to copy out

Sticking point: Stuck on the first line? Start with why you're writing: "I've been meaning to write to thank you for" is a fine opening. You can change it when you copy it out.

Dec 21–27
Week 4

Letter 1: write it out and post it

One letter

- [ ] Copy it out by hand, slowly, on good paper. Put the date at the top and sign it
  30 min
- [ ] Address the envelope: their name and address in the middle, your address in the top left corner (or on the back, if that's the custom where you live), and the stamp in the top right corner
  10 min
- [ ] Post it, or give it to them in person. If you can, read it to them first

Done when: Letter 1 is sealed, stamped and in the post: that's One letter on your board

Sticking point: Feels awkward to thank someone out of the blue? In studies at the University of Chicago, people writing letters of thanks overestimated how awkward the other person would feel and underestimated how pleased they'd be.

Dec 28–Jan 3
Week 5

Handwriting that's easy to read

Three letters

- [ ] Copy the same short paragraph twice: once at your usual speed, and once slowly, with clear gaps between words and lines. Ask someone which is easier to read
  10 min
- [ ] Practise the capital letters for names and addresses on a scrap of paper
  5 min

Done when: You've written your test paragraph twice and know which way you'll write letter 2

Sticking point: Legible beats pretty. If your joined writing is hard to read, print. Nobody minds plain writing, only writing they can't make out.

Jan 4–10
Week 6

Letter 2: to a grandparent or an older relative

Three letters

- [ ] Read letter idea 2, "To a grandparent or an older relative", in the guide. Choose a grandparent, great-aunt, uncle or other older relative to write to
  10 min
- [ ] Check you have their full address, including the postcode or ZIP code
- [ ] Jot notes: something from your week in detail, a memory of them from when you were younger, and one question about their life you'd like them to answer in their own time. Single words or short lines are fine
  15 min

Done when: You know who letter 2 is for, you have their address, and you have at least three notes

Jan 11–17
Week 7

Letter 2: a rough draft

Three letters

- [ ] Write a rough draft on scrap paper from your notes: why you're writing, one or two things in detail, a question, and a warm close. Don't stop to fix it
  20 to 30 min
- [ ] A day or two later, read it aloud. Cut anything you wouldn't say to them, and add one specific detail
  10 min

Done when: You have a rough draft of letter 2 that you're happy to copy out

Jan 18–24
Week 8

Letter 2: write it out and post it

Three letters

- [ ] Copy it out by hand, slowly, on good paper. Put the date at the top and sign it
  30 min
- [ ] Find a photo to enclose: you, your home, your children or a place they know
  5 min
- [ ] Address the envelope: their name and address in the middle, your address in the top left corner (or on the back, if that's the custom where you live), and the stamp in the top right corner
  10 min
- [ ] Post it, or hand it over

Done when: Letter 2 is sealed, stamped and in the post

Sticking point: Write a little larger than usual and leave clear gaps between words and lines. Many older readers find big, plain handwriting much easier than small joined writing.

Jan 25–31
Week 9

Things to send with a letter

Three letters

- [ ] Put by two or three flat things to enclose in later letters: a photo, a newspaper cutting, a child's drawing, a pressed leaf, a recipe
  10 min

Done when: You have at least two things put by to enclose

Feb 1–7
Week 10

Letter 3: to a friend who lives far away

Three letters

- [ ] Read letter idea 3, "To a friend who lives far away", in the guide. Choose a friend who lives in another town or country
  10 min
- [ ] Check you have their full address, including the postcode or ZIP code
- [ ] Jot notes: an ordinary day where you live, what you can see from your window, and something local they'd like or remember. Single words or short lines are fine
  15 min

Done when: You know who letter 3 is for, you have their address, and you have at least three notes

Feb 8–14
Week 11

Letter 3: a rough draft

Three letters

- [ ] Write a rough draft on scrap paper from your notes: why you're writing, one or two things in detail, a question, and a warm close. Don't stop to fix it
  20 to 30 min
- [ ] A day or two later, read it aloud. Cut anything you wouldn't say to them, and add one specific detail
  10 min

Done when: You have a rough draft of letter 3 that you're happy to copy out

Feb 15–21
Week 12

Letter 3: write it out and post it

Three letters

- [ ] Copy it out by hand, slowly, on good paper. Put the date at the top and sign it
  30 min
- [ ] Address the envelope: their name and address in the middle, your address in the top left corner (or on the back, if that's the custom where you live), and the stamp in the top right corner
  10 min
- [ ] If they live abroad, write the country name in capitals as the last line of the address, and ask at the post office for the right postage
  10 min
- [ ] Post it, or hand it over

Done when: Letter 3 is sealed, stamped and in the post: that's Three letters on your board

Sticking point: Not sure what's interesting? The everyday is: what you had for lunch, the walk to work, the weather. Far away, those are the things they can't see.

Feb 22–28
Week 13

Three letters: look back

Six letters

- [ ] Look at your list: tick off three letters, and fill in names for letters 4 to 6
  10 min
- [ ] If anyone has written back, read it again and note what you'd like to answer
  5 min

Done when: Your list has names for letters 4 to 6

Mar 1–7
Week 14

Catch-up week

Six letters

- [ ] Finish and post any letter that's running late
- [ ] If you're on track, answer a reply, or send a short note to someone on your list
  20 min

Done when: 3 letters are in the post

Sticking point: Behind? Skip the rough draft: write the letter straight out from your notes. A short letter that's posted beats a long one that isn't.

Mar 8–14
Week 15

Letter 4: to a teacher who made a difference

Six letters

- [ ] Read letter idea 4, "To a teacher who made a difference", in the guide. Choose a teacher, coach, tutor or mentor who made a difference to you
  10 min
- [ ] Check you have their full address, including the postcode or ZIP code
- [ ] Jot notes: one moment you remember from their class or their help, what it taught you, and where it led. Single words or short lines are fine
  15 min
- [ ] Find an address: if you don't know where they live, send it to the school or college, with their name and "Please forward" on the envelope
  10 min

Done when: You know who letter 4 is for, you have their address, and you have at least three notes

Sticking point: Worried they won't remember you? Say when you were taught and one detail, such as the year, the class or the room. Even if they don't remember, they'll know the work mattered.

Mar 15–21
Week 16

Letter 4: a rough draft

Six letters

- [ ] Write a rough draft on scrap paper from your notes: why you're writing, one or two things in detail, a question, and a warm close. Don't stop to fix it
  20 to 30 min
- [ ] A day or two later, read it aloud. Cut anything you wouldn't say to them, and add one specific detail
  10 min

Done when: You have a rough draft of letter 4 that you're happy to copy out

Mar 22–28
Week 17

Letter 4: write it out and post it

Six letters

- [ ] Copy it out by hand, slowly, on good paper. Put the date at the top and sign it
  30 min
- [ ] Address the envelope: their name and address in the middle, your address in the top left corner (or on the back, if that's the custom where you live), and the stamp in the top right corner
  10 min
- [ ] Post it, or hand it over

Done when: Letter 4 is sealed, stamped and in the post

Mar 29–Apr 4
Week 18

Replies, and a box for your letters

Six letters

- [ ] Keep your list, your kit and any letters you receive in one folder or box
  10 min
- [ ] Answer any reply you've had: start with what they told you, answer their questions, then add your news
  30 min

Done when: Your letters, list and kit are in one place, and any reply you've had is answered

Sticking point: A reply you write can count as one of your twelve: swap it for any letter idea you haven't used.

Apr 5–11
Week 19

Letter 5: to a child in your life

Six letters

- [ ] Read letter idea 5, "To a child in your life", in the guide. Choose a child you're close to: a grandchild, niece or nephew, godchild, or a friend's child (ask their parent first)
  10 min
- [ ] Check you have their full address, including the postcode or ZIP code
- [ ] Jot notes: one thing you've noticed they're good at, something funny from your week, and a question or a riddle they can answer. Single words or short lines are fine
  15 min

Done when: You know who letter 5 is for, you have their address, and you have at least three notes

Apr 12–18
Week 20

Letter 5: a rough draft

Six letters

- [ ] Write a rough draft on scrap paper from your notes: why you're writing, one or two things in detail, a question, and a warm close. Don't stop to fix it
  20 to 30 min
- [ ] A day or two later, read it aloud. Cut anything you wouldn't say to them, and add one specific detail
  10 min

Done when: You have a rough draft of letter 5 that you're happy to copy out

Apr 19–25
Week 21

Letter 5: write it out and post it

Six letters

- [ ] Copy it out by hand, slowly, on good paper. Put the date at the top and sign it
  30 min
- [ ] Address the envelope: their name and address in the middle, your address in the top left corner (or on the back, if that's the custom where you live), and the stamp in the top right corner
  10 min
- [ ] Add something small and flat: a drawing, a sticker or a puzzle, and if you'd like a reply, a stamped envelope with your address on it
  10 min
- [ ] Post it, or hand it over

Done when: Letter 5 is sealed, stamped and in the post

Sticking point: Keep it short and clear: a few lines in big, plain letters is plenty for a young child. Children who can't read yet love having a letter read to them.

Apr 26–May 2
Week 22

A short note when something happens

Six letters

- [ ] Send a two-line card or note to someone with news: a birthday, a new baby, an exam, a new home or a new job
  10 min

Done when: You've sent one short note, or you have nobody with news and you've put the next birthdays on your list in your calendar

May 3–9
Week 23

Letter 6: to someone going through a hard time

Six letters

- [ ] Read letter idea 6, "To someone going through a hard time", in the guide. Choose someone going through a hard time: an illness, a death, a move, a break-up or a lost job. If someone you know has been bereaved, even months ago, write to them
  10 min
- [ ] Check you have their full address, including the postcode or ZIP code
- [ ] Jot notes: say plainly what's happened and that you're sorry, a memory or something you value about them (or the person who died), and one specific thing you can offer. Single words or short lines are fine
  15 min

Done when: You know who letter 6 is for, you have their address, and you have at least three notes

Sticking point: Afraid of saying the wrong thing? You don't need the perfect words. Name what happened, use the name of the person who died, and don't give advice. See "Writing to someone who's grieving" in the guide.

May 10–16
Week 24

Letter 6: a rough draft

Six letters

- [ ] Write a rough draft on scrap paper from your notes: why you're writing, one or two things in detail, a question, and a warm close. Don't stop to fix it
  20 to 30 min
- [ ] A day or two later, read it aloud. Cut anything you wouldn't say to them, and add one specific detail
  10 min

Done when: You have a rough draft of letter 6 that you're happy to copy out

Sticking point: Keep it short. A few honest lines that name the loss, share a memory and offer one specific thing are better than a long letter that tries to fix it.

May 17–23
Week 25

Letter 6: write it out and post it

Six letters

- [ ] Copy it out by hand, slowly, on good paper. Put the date at the top and sign it
  30 min
- [ ] Address the envelope: their name and address in the middle, your address in the top left corner (or on the back, if that's the custom where you live), and the stamp in the top right corner
  10 min
- [ ] Post it, or hand it over

Done when: Letter 6 is sealed, stamped and in the post: that's Six letters on your board

Sticking point: Late is fine. A note a few months after a loss can mean even more, because it shows they haven't been forgotten.

May 24–30
Week 26

Six letters: halfway

Twelve letters

- [ ] Count your letters, tick off six, and fill in names for letters 7 to 12
  10 min
- [ ] Note which letter was easiest to write and why. Use that for the second half
  5 min

Done when: Your list has names for letters 7 to 12

May 31–Jun 6
Week 27

Catch-up week

Twelve letters

- [ ] Finish and post any letter that's running late
- [ ] If you're on track, answer a reply, or send a short note to someone on your list
  20 min

Done when: 6 letters are in the post

Sticking point: Behind? Skip the rough draft: write the letter straight out from your notes. A short letter that's posted beats a long one that isn't.

Jun 7–13
Week 28

Letter 7: to your future self

Twelve letters

- [ ] Read letter idea 7, "To your future self", in the guide. Decide when your future self opens this letter: a year from now works well
  10 min
- [ ] Decide who will keep it for you: someone you trust who'll post it back to you, or a safe place you'll find it. Put the opening date in your calendar
- [ ] Jot notes: what your days are like now, what you're worried about, what you're hoping for, and one question to ask yourself. Single words or short lines are fine
  15 min
- [ ] Look up a pen-pal befriending scheme and apply as a volunteer, ready for letter 9: matching takes time. See "Pen pals: writing to someone who's lonely" in the guide
  20 min

Done when: You know when you'll open letter 7 and who'll keep it for you, and you have at least three notes

Jun 14–20
Week 29

Letter 7: a rough draft

Twelve letters

- [ ] Write a rough draft on scrap paper from your notes: why you're writing, one or two things in detail, a question, and a warm close. Don't stop to fix it
  20 to 30 min
- [ ] A day or two later, read it aloud. Cut anything you wouldn't say to them, and add one specific detail
  10 min

Done when: You have a rough draft of letter 7 that you're happy to copy out

Jun 21–27
Week 30

Letter 7: seal it for next year

Twelve letters

- [ ] Copy it out by hand, date it at the top and sign it
  30 min
- [ ] Seal it. Write "Open on" and the date a year from now on the envelope
  5 min
- [ ] Address and stamp it to yourself and give it to someone you trust to post in a year, or put it somewhere you'll find it on the day

Done when: Letter 7 is sealed, dated and posted to you, or handed to someone to post back to you

Sticking point: Feels odd to post a letter to yourself? Address it to yourself and give it to someone you trust to post in a year, or seal it, write "Open on" and the date, and put it where you'll find it.

Jun 28–Jul 4
Week 31

Keep a record

Twelve letters

- [ ] Start a simple record on paper or your phone: the date, who, which letter idea, and whether they wrote back
  10 min

Done when: Your record lists every letter you've sent so far

Jul 5–11
Week 32

Letter 8: to an old friend you've lost touch with

Twelve letters

- [ ] Read letter idea 8, "To an old friend you've lost touch with", in the guide. Choose an old friend you've lost touch with. If you don't have their address, ask a mutual friend or a relative of theirs
  10 min
- [ ] Check you have their full address, including the postcode or ZIP code
- [ ] Jot notes: why you thought of them, one memory you share, a little of your news, and how they can reach you. Single words or short lines are fine
  15 min

Done when: You know who letter 8 is for, you have their address, and you have at least three notes

Sticking point: Don't spend the letter explaining the gap. "I was thinking of you, and I'd love to hear how you are" is enough. Put your address and phone number at the end so a reply is easy.

Jul 12–18
Week 33

Letter 8: a rough draft

Twelve letters

- [ ] Write a rough draft on scrap paper from your notes: why you're writing, one or two things in detail, a question, and a warm close. Don't stop to fix it
  20 to 30 min
- [ ] A day or two later, read it aloud. Cut anything you wouldn't say to them, and add one specific detail
  10 min

Done when: You have a rough draft of letter 8 that you're happy to copy out

Jul 19–25
Week 34

Letter 8: write it out and post it

Twelve letters

- [ ] Copy it out by hand, slowly, on good paper. Put the date at the top and sign it
  30 min
- [ ] Address the envelope: their name and address in the middle, your address in the top left corner (or on the back, if that's the custom where you live), and the stamp in the top right corner
  10 min
- [ ] Post it, or hand it over

Done when: Letter 8 is sealed, stamped and in the post

Jul 26–Aug 1
Week 35

Write together

Twelve letters

- [ ] Invite someone to write a letter alongside you at your letter time: a child, a partner or a friend
  30 min

Done when: Someone wrote a letter with you, or you've asked someone to join you next time

Aug 2–8
Week 36

Letter 9: to a pen pal

Twelve letters

- [ ] Read letter idea 9, "To a pen pal", in the guide. Write your first letter to the pen pal your scheme matched you with. If you haven't been matched yet, write to an older person you know who'd like a letter, and use the pen pal for a later one
  10 min
- [ ] Check you have their full address, including the postcode or ZIP code
- [ ] Jot notes: who you are, where you live, what you like doing, and one or two questions about them. Single words or short lines are fine
  15 min

Done when: You know who letter 9 is for, you have their address, and you have at least three notes

Sticking point: Follow the scheme's rules about what to share, such as your address and surname. Keep the first letter light and friendly: the friendship builds over several letters.

Aug 9–15
Week 37

Letter 9: a rough draft

Twelve letters

- [ ] Write a rough draft on scrap paper from your notes: why you're writing, one or two things in detail, a question, and a warm close. Don't stop to fix it
  20 to 30 min
- [ ] A day or two later, read it aloud. Cut anything you wouldn't say to them, and add one specific detail
  10 min

Done when: You have a rough draft of letter 9 that you're happy to copy out

Aug 16–22
Week 38

Letter 9: write it out and post it

Twelve letters

- [ ] Copy it out by hand, slowly, on good paper. Put the date at the top and sign it
  30 min
- [ ] Address the envelope: their name and address in the middle, your address in the top left corner (or on the back, if that's the custom where you live), and the stamp in the top right corner
  10 min
- [ ] Post it, or hand it over

Done when: Letter 9 is sealed, stamped and in the post

Aug 23–29
Week 39

Nine letters: look back

Twelve letters

- [ ] Tick off nine letters on your list and check you have names and addresses for letters 10 to 12
  10 min
- [ ] Answer any reply you've had
  30 min

Done when: You have names and addresses for letters 10 to 12, and any reply you've had is answered

Aug 30–Sep 5
Week 40

Catch-up week

Twelve letters

- [ ] Finish and post any letter that's running late
- [ ] If you're on track, answer a reply, or send a short note to someone on your list
  20 min

Done when: 9 letters are in the post

Sticking point: Behind? Skip the rough draft: write the letter straight out from your notes. A short letter that's posted beats a long one that isn't.

Sep 6–12
Week 41

Letter 10: to someone who brought you up

Twelve letters

- [ ] Read letter idea 10, "To someone who brought you up", in the guide. Choose a parent, or someone who brought you up or looked out for you. If that relationship is hard, choose another adult who did
  10 min
- [ ] Check you have their full address, including the postcode or ZIP code
- [ ] Jot notes: something they did that you only understood later, something of theirs you've kept, and a time you were glad they were there. Single words or short lines are fine
  15 min

Done when: You know who letter 10 is for, you have their address, and you have at least three notes

Sticking point: If feelings get big, keep it simple: one memory and one thank-you is a whole letter. You don't have to cover everything.

Sep 13–19
Week 42

Letter 10: a rough draft

Twelve letters

- [ ] Write a rough draft on scrap paper from your notes: why you're writing, one or two things in detail, a question, and a warm close. Don't stop to fix it
  20 to 30 min
- [ ] A day or two later, read it aloud. Cut anything you wouldn't say to them, and add one specific detail
  10 min

Done when: You have a rough draft of letter 10 that you're happy to copy out

Sep 20–26
Week 43

Letter 10: write it out and post it

Twelve letters

- [ ] Copy it out by hand, slowly, on good paper. Put the date at the top and sign it
  30 min
- [ ] Address the envelope: their name and address in the middle, your address in the top left corner (or on the back, if that's the custom where you live), and the stamp in the top right corner
  10 min
- [ ] Post it, or hand it over

Done when: Letter 10 is sealed, stamped and in the post

Sep 27–Oct 3
Week 44

Birthdays in your calendar

Twelve letters

- [ ] Put the birthdays of everyone on your list in your calendar, with a reminder a week before, so a card or a note gets there in time
  15 min

Done when: The birthdays you know are in your calendar with a reminder

Oct 4–10
Week 45

Letter 11: to a neighbour or someone in your community

Twelve letters

- [ ] Read letter idea 11, "To a neighbour or someone in your community", in the guide. Choose a neighbour or someone in your community: a new neighbour, the person who delivers your post, a nurse, a volunteer, or someone who runs a local group
  10 min
- [ ] Check you have their full address, including the postcode or ZIP code
- [ ] Jot notes: who you are and where you live, what you've noticed them do, and why it matters to you. Single words or short lines are fine
  15 min

Done when: You know who letter 11 is for, you have their address, and you have at least three notes

Sticking point: Don't know their name? "To the volunteers at" the group, or "To our neighbours at number 12", is fine. Hand it in or drop it through the door.

Oct 11–17
Week 46

Letter 11: a rough draft

Twelve letters

- [ ] Write a rough draft on scrap paper from your notes: why you're writing, one or two things in detail, a question, and a warm close. Don't stop to fix it
  20 to 30 min
- [ ] A day or two later, read it aloud. Cut anything you wouldn't say to them, and add one specific detail
  10 min

Done when: You have a rough draft of letter 11 that you're happy to copy out

Oct 18–24
Week 47

Letter 11: write it out and post it

Twelve letters

- [ ] Copy it out by hand, slowly, on good paper. Put the date at the top and sign it
  30 min
- [ ] Address the envelope: their name and address in the middle, your address in the top left corner (or on the back, if that's the custom where you live), and the stamp in the top right corner
  10 min
- [ ] Post it, or hand it over

Done when: Letter 11 is sealed, stamped and in the post

Oct 25–31
Week 48

Who's next

Twelve letters

- [ ] Start a list for after the twelve: people you'd like to write to next year, and anyone who wrote back
  10 min

Done when: Your list for next year has at least three names

Nov 1–7
Week 49

Letter 12: a letter to keep, to someone you love

Twelve letters

- [ ] Read letter idea 12, "A letter to keep, to someone you love", in the guide. Choose someone you love: a partner, a best friend, a sister or brother, a son or daughter
  10 min
- [ ] Check you have their full address, including the postcode or ZIP code
- [ ] Jot notes: three moments with them you'll always remember, and what they mean to you now. Single words or short lines are fine
  15 min

Done when: You know who letter 12 is for, you have their address, and you have at least three notes

Nov 8–14
Week 50

Letter 12: a rough draft

Twelve letters

- [ ] Write a rough draft on scrap paper from your notes: why you're writing, one or two things in detail, a question, and a warm close. Don't stop to fix it
  20 to 30 min
- [ ] A day or two later, read it aloud. Cut anything you wouldn't say to them, and add one specific detail
  10 min

Done when: You have a rough draft of letter 12 that you're happy to copy out

Nov 15–21
Week 51

Letter 12: write it out and post it

Twelve letters

- [ ] Copy it out by hand, slowly, on good paper. Put the date at the top and sign it
  30 min
- [ ] Address the envelope: their name and address in the middle, your address in the top left corner (or on the back, if that's the custom where you live), and the stamp in the top right corner
  10 min
- [ ] Post it, or hand it over

Done when: Letter 12 is sealed, stamped and in the post: that's Twelve letters on your board

Sticking point: Say the things you'd normally leave unsaid. This is a letter they may keep for years, so date it in full and sign it the way you'd say goodbye in person.

Nov 22–28
Week 52

Twelve letters: look back, and keep going

Twelve letters

- [ ] Look back over your twelve letters, using your list or record if you kept one: who wrote back, and which you enjoyed writing most
  15 min
- [ ] Answer any reply you've had
  30 min
- [ ] Choose who your next letter is for, and keep your letter time in your calendar
  5 min

Done when: Twelve letters are posted, any reply you've had is answered, and your next letter time is in your calendar

How to write a letter by hand

A letter doesn't have to be long or beautifully written. It has to be from you, in your own words, and easy to read. Here's how, start to finish.

1. Choose who and why. One person, and one reason to write: to thank them, to tell them your news, or because you thought of them.

2. Jot three or four notes. Single words are fine: the thing you want to thank them for, one detail from your week, a question.

3. Put the date at the top, then the greeting on its own line: "Dear Grandma," or "Hi Sam,".

4. Open with why you're writing. "I've been meaning to write to say thank you for" or "I was thinking about you this week because".

5. The middle: one or two things in detail. A specific memory or a small scene from your week says more than a list of news.

6. Ask something. A question gives them something to write back about.

7. Close warmly, and sign. "I hope to see you soon," then a sign-off on its own line, such as "Love," or "With best wishes,", and your name.

8. Read it once, then fold it and put it in the envelope.

9. Address the envelope, add a stamp, and post it.

One side of paper is plenty. Writing it takes about 30 minutes, and a rough draft first takes another 20 or so. The sections below go through each part: the layout, what to say when you don't know what to say, handwriting, the envelope, and twelve letter ideas, one for each letter in the plan.

How the plan works

Twelve letters, written by hand and posted, one at a time. Each letter has an idea, from a thank-you letter to a letter to your future self, so you never sit down to a blank page wondering who to write to.

Each letter goes in three steps. First you choose who it's for, check you have their address and jot a few notes. Then you write a rough draft. Then you copy it out neatly, address the envelope and post it.

The two levels.

- One a month, over a year: 52 weeks. Each letter takes a week for notes, a week for the draft and a week to write it out and post it. The fourth week of each month is a light week with one small task, such as handwriting that's easy to read or answering a reply. You spend 15 to 40 minutes a week.
- One every two weeks, in six months: 26 weeks. Notes and a rough draft in the first week, the finished letter in the post in the second. You spend 45 minutes to an hour a week.

The plan follows the four steps on your board: One letter (week 4, or week 2 if you write every two weeks), Three letters (week 12, or 6), Six letters (week 25, or 13) and Twelve letters (week 51, or 26).

Catch-up weeks come after Three, Six and, in the monthly level, Nine letters. Use them to finish a letter that's running late. If you're on track, answer a reply or send a short note. A shorter plan leaves out the catch-up weeks first, then the light weeks, never a week when a letter goes in the post, and never the last weeks.

Why bother, when a message is quicker? Because a letter takes more effort to write and to send, it tends to show that more time and care went into it. And people underestimate how much a letter means: in experiments at the University of Chicago, people who wrote letters of thanks underestimated how pleased the person reading it would be and overestimated how awkward they'd feel.

Which level to pick

- One a month, over a year: you'd like a steady, gentle habit, with a little to do every week. 52 weeks.
- One every two weeks, in six months: you'd like to finish sooner, or you already write the odd card and want to go further. 26 weeks.

If you're not sure, pick one a month. If you get ahead, you can always post the next letter early.

Before you start

Make your list. Read the twelve letter ideas below and write a name next to each one you can. Gaps are fine: you'll fill them as you go. You can swap any idea for one that suits your life better, and if someone writes back, your reply can count as one of the twelve.

Gather addresses. You need a full address for each letter, including the postcode or ZIP code. If you're missing one, a quick message to a relative or friend usually sorts it.

Pick a letter time. A regular slot, such as Sunday afternoon, makes the plan easier to keep than finding time each week.

Choose people you want to hear from you. You don't need to write to anyone who hurts you, and you don't owe anyone a letter. For a letter idea that brings up someone you'd rather not write to, such as a parent, choose someone else.

Keep personal details safe. With a pen pal you don't know yet, follow the scheme's rules about what to share, such as your home address.

What you need

▪ Paper. Lined paper is easiest. If you'd like plain paper, put a sheet of lined paper or a ruled guide underneath so your lines stay straight.

▪ A pen that doesn't smudge, in black or dark blue, so it's easy to read.

▪ Envelopes and stamps for the first few letters. A basic letter stamp covers a letter of a few sheets in a standard envelope; anything heavier or bigger needs more postage.

▪ Scrap paper for notes and rough drafts.

▪ Your list of people and letter ideas, and their addresses.

▪ A folder or box to keep your kit together, along with the letters you get back.

Laying out a letter

Many personal letters have four parts: a heading, an opening, the body and a closing.

The heading. For a personal letter, the date is enough, at the top right or top left. Write it in full, such as "Sunday 6 December 2026": people keep letters, and a date tells them, years later, when it came. Your own address can go at the top too if you'd like a reply and they might not have it.

The opening. The greeting goes on its own line. "Dear" works for anyone, from a great-aunt to someone you've never met, and doesn't sound too close or too formal. "Hi" or "Hello" are fine for friends and children. Follow it with their name and a comma: "Dear Mr Okafor," "Dear Nan," "Hi Priya,".

The first lines. Say why you're writing. Don't start by apologising for not writing sooner: one line at most, then move on.

▪ "I've been meaning to write to thank you for"

▪ "I was thinking about you this week because"

▪ "I wanted to write rather than text, because"

▪ "It's been far too long, and I'd love to hear how you are."

The body. One or two things, told in detail, are better than a list of news. Start a new paragraph for each new subject.

The closing lines. End warmly and look ahead: "I hope to see you in the spring," "Do write back and tell me about," "Thinking of you."

The sign-off. On its own line, then your name underneath. Match it to how close you are:

▪ Close family and friends: "Love," "Lots of love," "With love,"

▪ Warm but less close: "With best wishes," "Warmly," "All the best,"

▪ Someone you don't know well, or a teacher from years ago: "Kind regards," "With thanks,"

P.S. A postscript after your name is a nice place for one last thing: a joke, a reminder, or "Write back soon".

What to write when you don't know what to say

Be specific. "Thank you for everything" is kind but easy to forget. "Thank you for driving me to every swimming lesson the winter I was nine" is a letter they'll keep. Say what they did, why you're grateful, and how it changed things for you.

Tell them about an ordinary day. What you had for lunch, the walk to work, the weather, what's growing in the garden. To someone far away, the everyday is the interesting part.

Share a memory of them. "I still think of the time we" is one of the easiest ways to start the middle of a letter.

Ask a question. Something they'll enjoy answering: about their life, their garden, a recipe, a place they've been. It gives them a reason to write back.

Don't worry about perfect words. In the University of Chicago studies, the people writing letters of thanks worried about choosing the right words, but the people reading them were happy simply with the warmth of the gesture. Don't worry about grammar or spelling either: write the way you'd speak to them.

Short is fine. A thank-you letter can take as little as five minutes to write. One side of paper is plenty.

If you're still stuck, write the rough draft as if you're talking to them across a table, then tidy it when you copy it out.

Handwriting that's easy to read

Your writing doesn't need to be pretty. It needs to be easy to read.

- Slow down. Hard-to-read writing is often rushed writing. Copying out a rough draft lets you go slowly, because you're not thinking about what to say.
- Print if your joined writing is hard to read. Plain, separate letters are fine for any letter.
- Leave clear gaps between words and between lines.
- Keep your letters the same size, and make sure tall letters, such as b, d, h and l, stand clearly above the rest.
- Write a little larger for older readers, and larger still for young children.
- Use capitals for addresses on the envelope, so every letter and number is clear.
- Cross out neatly. A single line through a mistake is fine in a personal letter. You don't need to start again.

In the first light week of the monthly level, you copy one paragraph twice, once at your usual speed and once slowly, and ask someone which is easier to read.

Addressing the envelope and postage

Where things go. The address you're sending to goes in the middle of the front of the envelope, a little below centre. The stamp goes in the top right corner. Your own address, so it can come back if it can't be delivered, goes in the top left corner, or on the back if that's the custom where you live.

The address, line by line. In many countries it's the person's name on the first line, then the house number and street, then the town or city with the postcode or ZIP code, each on its own line. For a letter abroad, the country goes in capitals on the last line.

Write it clearly. The US Postal Service suggests printing addresses neatly in capital letters, so every letter and number is clear. Formats differ a little between countries, so check your national postal service's addressing guidance, or the destination's, if you're unsure.

Postage. The price of a letter mostly depends on its weight, size and shape. In the US, one ounce, about four sheets of ordinary paper in a standard envelope, goes for one First-Class stamp. A thick card, a lumpy envelope or a square one can cost more, and a letter abroad costs more too. If you're not sure, take it to the post office counter and ask them to weigh it.

Seal it, then add the stamp last, so a mistake on the envelope doesn't waste a stamp.

Twelve letter ideas

One idea for each letter in the plan. Use them in this order, or swap them around to suit the people on your list.

1. A thank-you letter. Think of someone who did something for you that you never properly thanked: a relative, a friend, a teacher, a colleague, a neighbour. Write as if you're talking to them. Say what they did, why you're grateful, and how it changed things for you, then tell them a little about your life now. If you can, give it to them in person and read it to them: in research on gratitude letters, delivering the letter and reading it aloud brought bigger benefits than writing it alone.

2. To a grandparent or an older relative. Tell them about your week in detail, share a memory of them from when you were younger, and ask one thing you'd like to know about their life. Enclose a photo. Write a little larger than usual.

3. To a friend who lives far away. Describe an ordinary day where you live: the view from your window, the walk to the shops, the weather. Tell them something local they'd like, or remember.

4. To a teacher who made a difference. A teacher, coach, tutor or mentor. Say when they taught you, one moment you remember, what it taught you and where it led. If you don't have their address, send it to the school or college with their name and "Please forward" on the envelope.

5. To a child in your life. A grandchild, niece, nephew, godchild or a friend's child (ask the parent first). Tell them something you've noticed they're good at, something funny from your week, and ask a question or set a riddle. Keep it short.

6. To someone going through a hard time. An illness, a death, a move, a break-up, a lost job. If someone you know has been bereaved, even months ago, this is the letter to write to them. See "Writing to someone who's grieving" below.

7. To your future self. What your days are like now, what you're worried about, what you're hoping for, and a question for the person you'll be in a year. Seal it, write "Open on" and the date, and give it to someone you trust to post back to you, or put it where you'll find it.

8. To an old friend you've lost touch with. Say why you thought of them, share a memory, give a little of your news, and say how they can reach you. Don't spend the letter explaining the gap.

9. To a pen pal. Your first letter to someone through a pen-pal scheme run by a charity. See "Pen pals" below. Apply a few weeks ahead, because matching takes time.

10. To someone who brought you up. A parent, or someone who looked out for you as you grew up. Something they did that you only understood later, something of theirs you've kept, a time you were glad they were there.

11. To a neighbour or someone in your community. A welcome to a new neighbour, a thank-you to the person who delivers your post, a nurse who cared for you, the volunteers who run a local group. If you don't know a name, "To our neighbours at number 12" is fine.

12. A letter to keep, to someone you love. A partner, a best friend, a sister or brother, a son or daughter. Three moments you'll always remember, and what they mean to you now. Say the things you'd normally leave unsaid.

Writing to someone who's grieving

Many of us struggle to find the right words for a sympathy card or a condolence letter. You can't make it better, and that's not what the letter is for. It shows them you're thinking of them, and that they're not alone.

- Say what happened, plainly. "I was so sorry to hear that your dad died."
- Use the name of the person who died. It tells the grieving person that the one they loved mattered and hasn't been forgotten.
- Share a memory, even a small one. This is often the part that means a lot. If you didn't know the person, say something you've heard about them, or how much they clearly meant to the person you're writing to.
- Keep the focus on them. Don't compare your own loss, and avoid "I know how you feel": every grief is different.
- Don't try to explain it or look on the bright side, and don't give advice.
- Offer something specific, if you can, such as "I'll ring you next week" or "I'll bring a meal on Thursday", rather than "Let me know if you need anything". Only offer what you'll really do.
- Write in your own voice. If you'd never say "my deepest condolences" out loud, don't write it.
- Keep it short. A few honest lines are enough.

Late is fine. If you didn't write straight away, write now. A note a few months after a death can mean even more, because by then the cards have often stopped.

Keep in touch afterwards. Put a reminder in your calendar to check in after a few weeks, again later, and around the first anniversary, when people often stop offering support. Birthdays and the first holidays can be hard too.

Writing to older relatives

A letter can be a real event for an older relative, especially one who lives alone. It can be read again and again, and kept.

- Write clearly and a little larger, on lined paper, with dark ink and clear gaps between lines.
- Tell them about your days in detail. Who you saw, what you cooked, what the children said. Small news is the kind they can picture.
- Enclose something. A photo of you, your home or the children, a newspaper cutting, a child's drawing.
- Ask about their life, and leave room for them to answer in their own time. Old photos can help: in a pen-pal scheme between students and older residents in Yorkshire, historic photos of the area gave the letters something to talk about, and the older pen pals explained how their communities had changed.
- Make replying easy, but don't expect it. Some older people find writing hard. Enclose a stamped envelope with your address on it, and tell them a phone call is just as welcome as a letter back.

If they're far away or you'd like to talk too, the Call my family every week plan goes well alongside this one.

Letters to children

Children rarely get letters, so a real one in the post, with their name on the envelope, is exciting.

- Ask the parent first, if the child isn't yours, and send it to the family's address.
- Keep it short: a few lines for a young child, a side of paper for an older one.
- Write in big, plain, printed letters so they can read it themselves, or a grown-up can read it to them.
- Notice something good. "Your mum told me you swam a whole length. That's brilliant." Children remember being noticed.
- Add something: a drawing, a sticker, a joke, a riddle or a puzzle to solve.
- Ask a question, and enclose a stamped envelope with your address on it if you'd like a reply. A drawing back counts.
- Teenagers too. Ask about what they're into rather than their school results, and don't mind if they don't write back.

Pen pals: writing to someone who's lonely

Some charities match volunteers with people who are lonely or isolated, often older people, to write to each other by post.

- In the UK, Omega's Letterbox is a free pen-pal befriending service for people who are lonely or socially isolated. Clients are carefully matched with volunteer befrienders and exchange friendly, supportive letters. You can apply to be a volunteer, or refer yourself or someone else as a client.
- Locally, some Age UK branches and other older people's charities run pen-friend schemes. Your local library or volunteer centre may know of one.
- Students may find a scheme through their university. At the University of Leeds, the Writing Back scheme pairs students with older residents across Yorkshire. It now runs by email, so for this plan look for a scheme that writes by post. When its pen pals wrote letters, about every two weeks, 95% of the older pen pals said writing to their student pen pal had been good for their mental wellbeing.

Apply early. Schemes check and match volunteers before the first letter, which takes time. The plan has you apply at letter 7, ready for letter 9. If you haven't been matched by then, write to an older person you know and use your pen pal for a later letter.

Follow the scheme's rules about what personal details to share, such as your surname and address. Keep the first letters light: who you are, where you live, what you like doing, and a question or two. The friendship builds over several letters.

Common mistakes

- Waiting until you have something big to say. An ordinary week, told well, is a good letter.
- Writing everything at once. One or two things in detail beat a page of news.
- Writing it in one go when you're stuck. Notes first, then a rough draft. Copying out is easy once you know what you're saying.
- Rushing the handwriting. Slow down, leave gaps, and print if you need to.
- Apologising for not writing. One line at most, then get on with the letter.
- Waiting for the perfect words. The people you write to care about the gesture far more than the wording.
- Not posting it. A letter in a drawer isn't a letter. Address it, stamp it and post it the same day you finish it.
- Expecting a reply. Some people will write back, some will call, and some won't do either but will keep your letter for years.

Keeping it up

After the twelfth letter, there are no new tasks. Keep three things going:

- Your letter time, once a month, in your calendar.
- Your list of people to write to next, with anyone who wrote back at the top.
- A short note when something happens: a birthday, a new baby, an exam, a loss. A two-line card counts as keeping in touch.

When you run out of ideas, go back to the twelve ideas and start again with different people. A thank-you letter is a good one to repeat: write another every month or two. If you'd like to keep writing for yourself, the Keep a journal plan is a good next step. The Be happier plan and the Make a new friend plan go well with this one too.

If you fall behind

Missed 1 week: Missed your letter week? Carry on from where your letter is and finish that step this week. A letter a week late is still a letter.

Missed 2 weeks: Skip the rough draft for this letter: write it straight out from your notes and post it. Then carry on with the next letter, or use the next catch-up week.

Missed 4 weeks: Write the next letter short and easy: a few lines of thanks to someone who'll be glad to hear from you. Then count the letters you've posted, find the week in the plan where that count is, and carry on from there.

Missed 8 or more weeks: Start again from where you are, not where the calendar says. Count your letters, pick the level that fits you now, and set a new date on the plan page. Every letter you've already posted still counts.

Sources

Greater Good Science Center, University of California, Berkeley
`https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/gratitude_letter`
“Describe in specific terms what this person did, why you are grateful to this person, and how this person’s behavior affected your life.”

Greater Good Science Center, University of California, Berkeley
https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/gratitude_letter
“In different studies, participants have taken as little as 5 minutes or as long as 30 minutes to write their letters; spending more time to deepen and enrich the practice could be a good thing, but you can also reap benefits from a short practice.”

Greater Good Science Center, University of California, Berkeley
https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/gratitude_letter
“Research suggests that while there are benefits simply to writing the letter, you reap significantly greater benefits from delivering and reading it in person.”

University of Chicago News
https://news.uchicago.edu/story/people-underestimate-value-sending-letters-appreciation
“New research from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business finds that people significantly underestimate the positive impact a letter of gratitude has on its recipient.”

University of Chicago News
https://news.uchicago.edu/story/people-underestimate-value-sending-letters-appreciation
““Expressers significantly underestimated how surprised recipients would be about why expressers were grateful, overestimated how awkward recipients would feel, and underestimated how positive recipients would feel,” the researchers wrote.”

University of Chicago News
https://news.uchicago.edu/story/people-underestimate-value-sending-letters-appreciation
“While the writers worried about choosing the right words, the recipients were happy simply by the warmth of the gesture.”

Purdue Online Writing Lab, Purdue University
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/personal_correspondence/personal_letters.html
“Many personal letters have four basic parts, and the information contained in these parts varies greatly depending on context. These parts can include the heading, the opening, the body, and the closing.”

Purdue Online Writing Lab, Purdue University
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/personal_correspondence/personal_letters.html
“For example, Dear can be used in almost any situation, and it does not connote any real degree of intimacy between the reader and the writer.”

Purdue Online Writing Lab, Purdue University
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/personal_correspondence/personal_letters.html
“Given that letters take a greater effort to write and to send, they often create the sense that more time and concern went into them.”

United States Postal Service
https://www.usps.com/ship/letters.htm
“Write your address (the "return" or "sender" address) in the top left corner.”

United States Postal Service
https://www.usps.com/ship/letters.htm
“Write the delivery address (the "recipient" address) in the bottom center.”

United States Postal Service
https://www.usps.com/ship/letters.htm
“Postage for letters mostly depends on weight and size/shape.”

Penn State Outreach, Pennsylvania State University
https://www.outreach.psu.edu/news/speaking-grief-how-to-write-a-sympathy-card/
“Use the name of the person who died; it reminds the grieving person that their loved one mattered and hasn’t been forgotten.”

Penn State Outreach, Pennsylvania State University
https://www.outreach.psu.edu/news/speaking-grief-how-to-write-a-sympathy-card/
“If you didn’t send a card right away, that’s okay. In fact, sending a note a few months later might be even more meaningful.”

Penn State Outreach, Pennsylvania State University
https://www.outreach.psu.edu/news/speaking-grief-how-to-write-a-sympathy-card/
“Be careful not to compare your experience with theirs or shift focus to your own grief.”

Sue Ryder
https://sueryder.org/blog/what-to-write-bereavement-card
“Sending a bereavement card is one of the first things we think about doing when we know that someone has died. But so many of us struggle with finding the right words to say when we write it.”

Sue Ryder
https://sueryder.org/blog/what-to-write-bereavement-card
“Then - and this is the meaningful bit - share a brief memory of the person as well.”

Sue Ryder
https://sueryder.org/blog/what-to-write-bereavement-card
“Remember that grief is forever. Set yourself a calendar reminder to check in with them in a few weeks, and again after that, especially after the one-year anniversary when people often cease to offer support.”

Omega (registered charity)
https://www.omega.uk.net/letterbox
“Letterbox is a free penpal befriending service for socially isolated and lonely people. Our clients are carefully matched to volunteer befrienders, with whom they exchange supportive, friendly letters.”

National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (Writing Back, University of Leeds)
https://publicengagement.ac.uk/learn-others/case-studies/writing-back
“The participants exchanged letters approximately once every two weeks.”

National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (Writing Back, University of Leeds)
https://publicengagement.ac.uk/learn-others/case-studies/writing-back
“In order to kick-start the written exchanges, participants were encouraged to share their interests, and were also provided with archive photographs by partner agencies.”

National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (Writing Back, University of Leeds)
https://publicengagement.ac.uk/learn-others/case-studies/writing-back
“95% of older participants advised that writing to their student pen pal positively impacted their mental wellbeing and 5% did not respond to this question.”

University of Leeds
https://students.leeds.ac.uk/writingback
“The Writing Back programme is an award-winning pen pal project which pairs students with older residents across Yorkshire to help tackle loneliness and social isolation.”

University of Leeds
https://students.leeds.ac.uk/writingback
“The project will match you with a pen pal based on your interests and encourages you to exchange emails at least once a fortnight.”

This plan online	https://goaltodo.com/write-12-letters
Reach it with others on Welang	https://welang.com/goals/write-12-letters
Reach it on your own in HourLife	https://www.hourlife.com