



*The power of a simple,  
handwritten note.*

Remember the last time you went to your mailbox — not the virtual one on your computer, the *other* one — and discovered a letter from a friend or a loved one? After flipping mindlessly through impersonal mailers and supermarket circulars, you pause. You recognize the penmanship on the envelope, hand-addressed with a real ink-pen, and a genuine stamp. What a sense of joy and anticipation, right?

Personal notes and letters have that kind of power. It's the paper; the private nature of the message; the choice of words; the personal handwriting; the surprise held in an envelope; all these elements add up to a very special experience between the sender and the receiver. Handwritten notes are uncommon these days, that actually receiving one can make an indelible impression. In a nod to the popular retro movement, your handwritten note will get noticed — versus shooting off a *thanks* email — as a gesture of good taste and style from another era. After all, business relationships are based on impressions, and a brief note can help build positive ones.

## Who has time anymore for handwritten notes?

We have so many cool gadgets that make keeping in touch with colleagues and clients both immediate and expedient. We love our instant communication devices – our iPhones, Blackberrys and Droids with access to Facebook, Twitter and countless MIM tools. But do our quick texts and e-notes lose something in translation? Do we think enough about our messages to make them meaningful forms of communication?

"Our indulgence in the pleasures of informality and immediacy has led to a narrowing of expressiveness and a loss of eloquence," writes Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (p. 108, W.W. Norton & Company, 2010). While Carr acknowledges concerns about abbreviation and the emoticons that have flourished in the digital era of texting and instant messaging, he contemplates the larger effects on the range and expressiveness of language. He wonders if our vocabularies are shrinking and becoming more hackneyed, if our syntax is becoming less flexible and more formulaic. How quickly we fall prey to the slapdash habits of impersonal email communication. We're so out of practice writing full sentences that even the thought of sitting down with paper and pen seems daunting to some.

## Keystrokes replacing pen strokes?

Remember the days of cursive and hours spent each week in grammar school perfecting your p's and q's? It seems that letter writing and handwriting itself are fast becoming arts of the past.

Tom Breen's article, "Some fear technology is erasing need for students to learn cursive," *Buffalo News*, Sept. 21, 2009, explains that the decline of cursive is related to the demand for greater computer skills. Breen

reports that beginning next year "the writing test of the National Assessment of Educational Progress will require 8th and 11th graders to compose on computers, with 4th graders following in 2019."

In his interview with Cheryl Jeffers, a professor at Marshall University's College of Education and Human

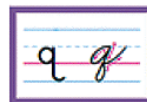
Services, she confides that she worries handwriting will eventually become obsolete. "I am not sure students have a sense of any reason why they should vest their time and effort in writing a message out manually when it can be sent electronically in seconds." Jeffers values cursive writing as a lifelong skill "one she fears could become lost to the culture, making many historic records hard to decipher and robbing people of a gift."

## Stand out amidst the clutter

So, when was the last time you sent a client or associate a personal, handwritten note? Occasionally, out of a sense of duty or obligation, we might send a sympathy card or a holiday greeting – but even those increasingly have taken the form of an e-greeting. Aside from the simple grocery list or occasional phone message, text messaging, e-mail, and word processing have virtually replaced handwriting. Yet none of these provokes the personal connection as effectively or endures like the simple,

Circle *q* and *q* in these words.

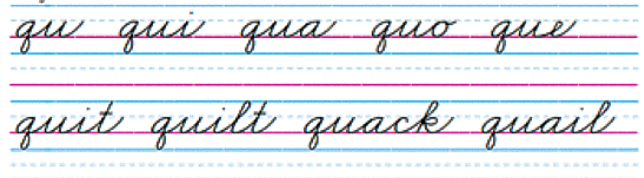
quails running quickly  
*quails running quickly*



Trace and write.



Join *q* and other letters.



Source: Zaner-Bloser Handwriting Educational materials, "Introduction to cursive handwriting"

handwritten note. When you take the time to send a handwritten note, it will stand out for all the right reasons.

In his February 2010 presentation at the TED Conference (TED, Technology, Entertainment, Design, is a U.S. private nonprofit foundation devoted to what it calls "ideas worth spreading"), Omar Ahmad, an Internet infrastructure maven and member of the San Carlos, CA City Council, spoke of the "power of the pen" with respect to influencing elected officials and the political process. He claims that no other medium – not email, telephone calls, contributions, or even one-on-one meetings, is as effective as a personal, handwritten letter campaign. "Letters actually work," he says. "Even President Obama reads 10 letters every day," he says, covering a range of issues from Americans across the country that are chosen for him by his staff.

### *Keep it brief*

Handwritten *notes* aren't *letters*. They're just simple but personal ways to convey to someone that you care about them, that they are special and worthy of your extra effort. Don't worry so much about what you say – just a few words or a couple of sentences are all you need to make your point. If your mind goes blank when you sit down to write, try speaking your thoughts out, first. The best approach is to keep your message simple – but warm and professional. Here's a guide to get you started:

- Tell the recipient why you're writing [e.g., *Dear Jane, just wanted to send you a quick note of thanks for joining me for lunch yesterday*].
- Acknowledge what it means to you – reference something about your meeting or experience incorporating specifics, as appropriate; [e.g., *I really enjoyed our conversation and appreciate what you're trying to accomplish with your new five-person team*].
- Close with a warm gesture, an invitation or next steps, as appropriate [e.g., *I look forward to seeing you at the conference in October. In the meantime, don't hesitate to call if I can be of further assistance. Regards,* ].

### **Other ideas to motivate your personal communications:**

- **Invest in quality stationery:** Visit your favorite local stationery store and buy the highest quality paper

## *Opportunities to connect*

### *Thank you* —

as a follow up to a meeting, a sales call or an event; to a client, a vendor, a colleague; nice to meet with you; for a job well done; for a favor, a gift or someone's time.

### *Congratulations* —

on your promotion; exceeding a sales goal; a new job; on your retirement.

### *I'm sorry* —

for failing to acknowledge an event; for ignoring a client; for failing to deliver a service as promised.

### *We miss you* —

for an inactive client; a former colleague.

and envelopes you can afford; you don't have to have personally printed stationery, but that's a nice touch.

- **Don't worry if your cursive isn't what it used to be:** It's okay to print – so long as your penmanship is neat and legible.
- **Make it a habit:** The more you write letters, the easier they are to write. Keep a supply of notecards and stamps with you at all times – you'll be more likely to use them if you don't have to search for supplies every time you think about sending a personal note.
- **Make it timely:** Your note will carry more punch if it's received within a week of your contact (a sales meeting, a conference, lunch) or the event you shared.
- **Appropriate occasions to send a note:** The most effective notes are the unexpected ones. Of course you'll want to acknowledge milestones (job moves, promotions, births, weddings, gifts, completion of a project) but don't hesitate to send a note when you think of that person, or have an experience you believe that individual might appreciate (an article you read, a colleague that might share a common goal,
- **Ping your database:** Develop a correspondence schedule to ensure that you reach out to your prospects, your best customers and your professional network several times each year.

The fact is we've come to rely on all the latest technologies — and need them to succeed in today's digitally connected world. But don't forget one of the most basic forms of communication: the old fashioned, handwritten note. Handwritten correspondence imparts a special feeling and seems to carry greater significance than printed messages. Successful professionals are always looking for ways to strengthen relationships — and the personal note remains one of the most effective sales and marketing tools available.

### *Want to explore the subject further?*

- Business Notes: *Writing Personal Notes that build Professional Relationships* by Florence Isaacs (Clarkson Potter Publishers; March 1998)
  - Hear Omar Ahmad's brief presentations about political change with pen and paper at: [http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/omar\\_ahmad\\_political\\_change\\_with\\_pen\\_and\\_paper.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/omar_ahmad_political_change_with_pen_and_paper.html)
  - *The Art of the Handwritten Note: A Guide to Reclaiming Civilized Communication*, by Margaret Shepherd [Broadway, January 2002]
- Hire a professional: *Handwritten Notes* is a small business that will write your notes for you on a routine basis; <http://www.handwrittennotes.com/home>
  - *What He's Poised to Do: Stories*, by Ben Greenman (Harper Perennial, June 2010). Each of the 14 fictional short stories by this *New Yorker* magazine editor involves letter writing.
  - Explore these sites for extraordinary papers, stationery and writing instruments:
    - [www.crane.com](http://www.crane.com)
    - <http://delphinepress.com/>
  - Listen to National Public Radio's host Liane Hansen as she speaks to Kitty Burns Florey about her book, *Script and Scribble: The Rise and Fall of Handwriting*, and the state of penmanship in the digital age: <http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=100731603&m=100732937>.

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