

# How to Write a Condolence Letter: 5 Suggestions

*Who knows what to say when someone dies? Often, not knowing what to say, we put off writing the note and eventually don't say anything. The intention to write is there, but what to say isn't easy or obvious.*

**By**

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After my book *The Tiffany Box*, a memoir was released, I received many emails from readers expressing how grateful they were that I included several condolence letters that were sent to me after my mom passed away in my book. Each reader liked seeing examples of sympathy cards.

Who knows what to say when someone dies? Often, not knowing what to say, we put off writing the note and eventually don't say anything. The intention to write is there, but what to say isn't easy or obvious.

I decided to write a blog post on writing a condolence letter. This is a list of suggestions. I know each loss is specific and personal in tiny ways and big ways, and that it is impossible to capture the specificity of loss in a template condolence letter. I also know that it is far better for friends to say something to someone who is grieving than to not say anything.

Silence from friends can hurt too. Reaching out by writing a condolence letter is important to do, even if it feels awkward, even if you don't know what to say. I want to share with you that for me, it always feels awkward and hard to reach out to someone who has lost a beloved. The unthinkable has happened. Even if someone knew a beloved was dying soon, loss is profound. No one can know what pain someone else is in. But we all know enough about pain to want to stay away. This response is the opposite of what most people need. Reaching out through a note or a letter is a way of saying, I witness your loss and I see you. Often, when someone is in a dark hole, being seen is enough. An act of kindness is enough. A few sentences are enough. I'm thinking of how gentle rain can feel kind on hot skin.

1. Because of this, the first thing I say to myself when I sit down to write a condolence letter is that it's important that I get comfortable being uncomfortable.

Sometimes I get up and get a piece of chocolate and make tea, but then I remember that it's hard and important to do and so I take a breath and I begin. I date the letter. I start with "Dear" and then I write.

2. I try not to say that I am sorry someone has died. Instead, I say that I am sorry for the person's loss.

*I want you to know that I am sorry for your loss.*

I may even say something like -- *This is a hard note to write, but I want you to know that I am thinking of you even though I don't know what to say.*

3. Then I bring to mind the person who has passed and remember them in a joyful way. What was something I saw them doing that made me smile? What was something I saw them doing that made them smile? I begin a sentence with the phrase, *I will always remember...*

Here's a list of ideas and memory prompts:

\*Retell how they made us smile.

\*Retell a story of what they did that they loved.

\*Remember quirky details that made them uniquely them -- that one paper snowflake that no one else can replicate. This is exactly what makes the loss so hard and yet it is also what makes the loss poignant, specific, real, and irreplaceable.

That's the word I'm looking for, irreplaceable. What about that person was irreplaceable? This is the diamond at the center of grief, why it hurts so much and why we are richer for having been touched by that person.

If I don't know the person who passed, I may say something like:

*I will always remember your stories about \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_.* "

If I don't know stories, I will say, *"I will always remember how much you loved \_\_\_\_\_."*

Remembering someone who has passed doing something they love is my way of cheating death. In my heart of hearts, I try very hard to put aside as well as I can how someone died. I think we as a culture and people focus a lot of energy on illness or disaster. We retell and retell and retell how someone died. I am tired of that. I believe it is far more important to retell and retell and retell how someone lived.

4. I always end a condolence letter by telling the person that:

*My thoughts and prayers are with you and I wish you peace.*

5. The last thing I do is write the address on an envelope, pick out a pretty stamp and mail the condolence letter. I acknowledge to myself that there is absolutely nothing I can say that takes pain away, but that small acts of kindness are eventually how we make our way out of the dark hole into daylight -- hopefully carrying a diamond.

I hope these ideas help you write a sympathy letter. I like to focus on the joyful spirit of the person who passed and on offering kindness and love to the one who is grieving. The heaviness of grief is softened by small acts of kindness.

Be sure to comment on any phrases you have found helpful that I might have missed, and please share this article with your friends. Thank you.

Kathleen