

How to Write a Condolence Note

At this particular moment, email is fine.



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By Katherine Rosman

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Unfortunately, many people are likely to have occasion in the days and weeks ahead to write a letter of condolence to a friend, relative, colleague or acquaintance who has suffered the death of a loved one to Covid-19.

These are tough letters to write. Here are some suggestions for expressing sympathy clearly and supportively to the bereaved.

- **Email is fine, but avoid texting.** In typical circumstances, a letter of condolence should be written by pen on paper and sent in the mail. But there is little that is typical about current circumstances.

First, you may not have stamps available, though you can download postage from websites such as stamps.com, and print it from your personal computer.

Or you may want to be sensitive to fears, justified or not, that paper sent through the U.S. Postal Service might be contaminated. (“After collecting mail from a post office or home mailbox, wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use a hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol,” the [C.D.C.](#) advises.)

In this case, the act of sharing your sentiments is more important than the medium you choose. Still, if you opt for digital communication, email is preferable to text or direct messages. Many mourners save condolence letters and turn back to them at anniversaries and other times of reflection. Emailed letters are easily printed, filed and saved.

- **Let them know how to reach you.** Even if you send an email, you might include your mailing address or phone number so the mourner can get in touch at a later date if they want to.
- **Consider tone carefully.** Avoid emoji and other digital flourishes. You don't want to be stuffy or stiff, but it's OK to convey an air of solemnity, even as you express personal warmth. Instead of just stating the name of the recipient, as you might while dashing off a quick email or text, open the letter with a formality (*Dear Katie* instead of *Hey there* or *Katie*) that matches the seriousness of the occasion.
- **Be direct.** This isn't the time for small talk or meandering introductions. Start with the reason you are writing. *I was so sorry to learn of the death of your mother.*
- **Be gentle.** This leads to an important consideration, which is whether to use the word "death" or to instead choose a phrase like "passed away." Guides to effective writing encourage avoiding euphemisms but your recipient might belong to a culture or religion where they are customary. "Loss" can be a good compromise.
- **Be specific.** If possible, explain how you knew the person, how well you knew the person and the role that the person played in your life. This is important both for notes sent to people who don't know who you are (*Your brother was my 5th grade teacher, and he is a big part of the reason that I became interested in science and went to nursing school*) and to those who already know you (*Your son was my best friend since high school and there will not be a day when I will not miss his optimism*). If there are poignant memories and anecdotes you wish to share, go with the instinct. Don't shy away from funny stories. The reader likely could use the laugh and will cherish the memory.
- **Acknowledge unfamiliarity.** Some of the most comforting condolence notes are sent not because we knew and loved the deceased but because we care about the survivor. In this case, reflect on your affection for the person you are writing to as it relates to the death of their loved one. *I have no doubt but that you made your father proud. As your friend, I so admire your sense of compassion and humor, and can only imagine how much joy you brought to your dad.*
- **Be forthright.** If you and the person who you are writing to have had a complicated or adversarial relationship, it's not a bad idea to nod to the existing tension and move on. *I know we didn't always agree on the way things worked at the office, but I respected and admired the obvious love and closeness you and your daughter shared.*
- **Acknowledge current circumstances.** Given the extraordinary ways that Covid-19 is interfering with end-of-life interactions and mourning rituals, it is appropriate to recognize this if you're moved to do so. *It is always terrible to lose a loved one but the fact that you could not be at your husband's bedside to comfort him, and now can't benefit from being surrounded and supported by your extended family and community in your grief, is truly unfair.*
- **Brevity is fine.** Don't be afraid to keep the message short.
- **Emphasize ongoing mindfulness.** To conclude, you might offer a wish for the future and if you intend to reach out again, let the person know. *I am sending you and your whole family my wishes for peace. I will be in touch in the weeks ahead to see if you might be up for a phone call or even a visit, when we once again can indulge in simple gatherings.*
- **Sign with the same care as you began.** Use whatever term of farewell which feels commensurate to your relationship. But a simple and sincere "Sincerely," helps to

convey the authenticity of your sympathy, and perhaps even your empathy, in this time of communal, global grief.

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