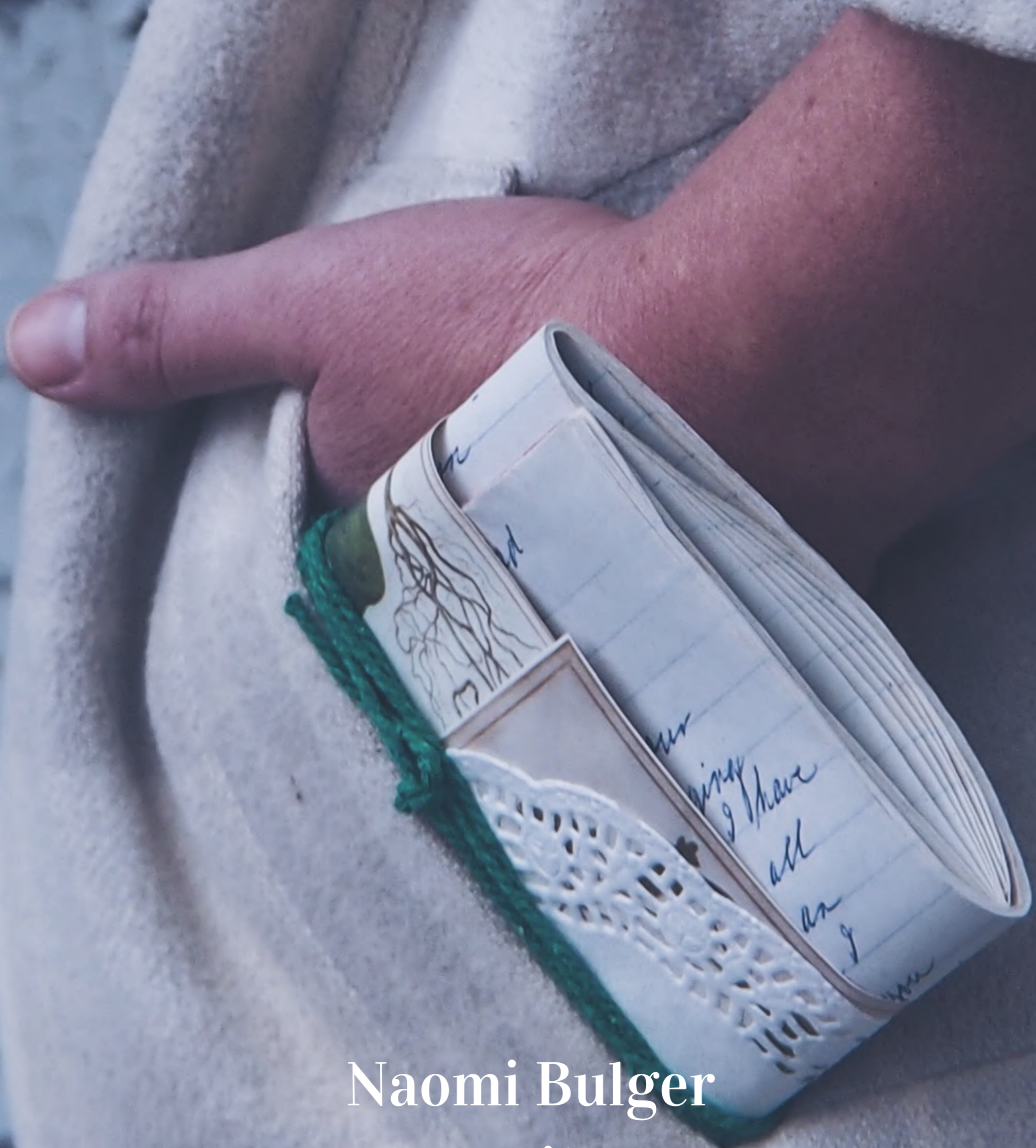


Making Mail

10 steps to writing letters that become keepsakes



Naomi Bulger

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A lot has been said about the dying art of letters and post. People like to complain that the Internet has rendered snail-mail redundant. But you and I know better, don't we.

I think a lot of us are feeling nostalgia for a time when letters from loved-ones were hand-written, something to be kept and treasured; when friendships were formed by post; and when correspondence had personality and emotions were shared without emoticons.

If that sounds like you, then this e-book is also for you.

And I have some good news. Internet didn't kill snail-mail any more than video killed the radio star, but it HAS transformed it. Sure, we no longer rely on the mail for bills and business, but freedom from these practicalities has left the postal network open to be used for a groundswell of creative, quirky, kind and community-based activities.

Last year I asked my blog readers, "What's so special about snail-mail?"

"Snail-mail is a return to slow living. It is an exercise in mindfulness," one reader told me. Another wrote, "Every letter is unique." One told me "Your personality bleeds into your letter from your pen, it is something private and special between only you two." Another simply said "Snail-mail is tactile, tangible, practical, lasting."

I think that if mail can do all of this, then it will truly survive its transformation in the new Internet era, because it offers something for everyone:

Are you ready to get started? I've filled this book with the answers to all the questions I get asked the most: How do I create mail-art? And how do I get it through the postal system? Where can I find a pen-pal? How should I start my letters? How long should I wait for a reply? When oh when will the next season of Outlander drop? (And more).

Pens ready? Let's write!

Armen den Jungen
wo denn freilich sel
Aufgeben des Geliebten for
gefühl ging fast in Feindsch
Natürlich durften die heimlich

wo Maria zurück
zu g
Sch
K
v
zu
und
Roh
best
Fäme.
die

Sammenkünfte seht,
ttfinden; das war
daß Katharina die
aber
sich
Beger
ater
dra
ein
efahr
ein,
achten oder warten

17

monument de Jeanne d'Arc
par Frémiet, place de Rivoli M. J.

HOT
REC

“How wonderful it is to be able to write someone a letter! To feel like conveying your thoughts to a person, to sit at your desk and pick up a pen, to put your thoughts into words like this is truly marvellous.”

Haruki Murakami, Norwegian
Wood



OPEN WITH A STORY

Sometimes it's hard to know how to start. We are so used to the immediacy of telephone and digital communications, that we rarely know how to open a correspondence without our old standbys, "How are you?" and "What's new?"

But these quickly become empty questions when separated by the distance of the two or more weeks it takes for your letter to reach the recipient, and another two or more for their reply to come back, not to mention all the words you wrote that followed those questions in the rest of your letter. Often I find the best way to start my letters, whether I am writing to a complete stranger or a dearly-loved friend, is simply to tell a story. **Like this one.**

Launch straight in! Tell them about something you saw on the walk to work or school, about a new hobby you're learning,

something funny that happened to you last week, a new TV show you've been watching. Describe a storm. Recall a special memory from your childhood, or recount one from just last week.

One of the best openings to a letter I ever read was from a stranger. I'd written to her via my blog, and she wrote back, describing the scene at her home when my letter arrived:

The family was all outside in the garden in the sunshine. They heard a shout, and her son came running towards them, brandishing my letter in his hand. They all gathered around to take a look at my very inexpertly painted decoration on the front, and then opened the envelope with care, all reading the letter together in that sunny garden.

She outlined the scene so beautifully that I felt I was there with them, and it has stayed with me, years later.

Telling a story instantly invites the reader into a corner of your world, shares a piece of your life with them. And it is a wonderful way to shrug off writer's block and those awkward, mostly-empty introductory questions. Save them for the telephone.

After that, I think you'll find the rest will flow. Ideas will come to you, more stories to tell. If they don't, simply end it there! A little story in the mail. Wouldn't you like to receive that too?



"Other letters simply relate the small events that punctuate the passage of time: roses picked at dusk, the laziness of a rainy Sunday, a child crying himself to sleep. Capturing the moment, these small slices of life, these small gusts of happiness, move me more deeply than all the rest. A couple of lines or eight pages, a Middle Eastern stamp or a suburban postmark . . . I hoard all these letters like treasure. One day I hope to fasten them end to end in a half-mile streamer, to float in the wind like a banner raised to the glory of friendship."

Jean-Dominique Bauby, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*



NOT TOO LONG, FOLKS

When you are writing to someone new, don't feel the need to send them an epistle. A page or two is enough for you to tell your stories and to make them feel special, without expecting too much from them in return.

Some people love long, rambling letters. I do too, sometimes. And if you only write to one person and not all that frequently, or if you are wonderfully rich in time, then go right ahead and pen those fabulous, newsy missives, the kinds that would make Jane Austen proud.

But here is a secret. Sometimes when I receive a wonderful, six-page letter, while I love to read it, I also do so with a secret feeling of dread. All those stories I must respond to in my reply! All those questions to answer! Instead of a joy, letter-writing can become a burden. At times I even procrastinate

when it comes to replying to those long letters, because I feel I lack the time to do them justice, let alone to reply in kind.

Of course, there are exceptions. Letters to Nanna. Long-standing friendships. A new pen-pal relationship for which you have both agreed, "We like long letters." But in most cases, keep it to a page or two and let things build up from there.

UPDATE: As I read over all of the above, I began to feel like a bit of a traitor to the cause. I mean, snail-mail is supposed to be an antidote to digital communications. A slower, more deliberate and thoughtful way to reach out to people that harks back to the days when long-distance friendships could be measured and developed in much more tangible and meaningful ways than likes or views.

And yet here I was essentially saying, "people are busy so don't write too much." Once we start thinking about being time-poor, shouldn't we just give up and go back to the immediacy of email?

Please don't give up!

I guess what I'm trying to get at in this section is a mimicking of the gradual development of friendships, whether they are forged on paper or in person.

My two-page suggestion enables you to share genuine stories and snippets from your life with a new pen-friend, without emptying the entire contents of your day or heart into the lap of someone who doesn't know you well enough to respond appropriately. As your friendship grows, so, in time, can the length of your letters. Does that make sense?



"The art of art, the glory of expression and the
sunshine of the light of letters, is simplicity"

Walt Whitman



MAKE IT PRETTY

I'm not talking about creating major works of art here, but about making the effort to show your pen-pal you care. It's such a treat to open up a letter that someone has taken time in creating, just for you. It is a gift.

Here are some simple ideas for making your letter pretty:

✍ Write your letter by hand

I know, I know. Your handwriting isn't what it used to be. Your pen can't keep up with your thoughts. Your mistakes are all out there, visible in crossed-out words and thoughts added into the margins. But that is the beauty of a handwritten letter and, believe me, it is a hundred times more special than something you've typed into a computer and printed out. Every time.

✍️ Invest in nice stationery

This doesn't have to cost you a fortune, but a lovely letter-pad is a wonderful letter-writing tool. Back when I was a child, it was easy to find letter-writing sets in newsagents everywhere. These days they are a lot harder to find. I like to search Etsy and Instagram for beautiful paper sets.

✍️ Make your own stationery

If you can't find or afford nice stationery, simply decorate a plain sheet of paper. Use stickers, washi-tape and ink stamps. Sketch doodles into the margins. If you have the time, consider a light wash of watercolour over the paper to give it some colour, or something more organic, like tea-dye.

✍️ Don't just use note-paper

Other things I've used on which to write my letters include:

- * postcards bound together with string
- * paper bags
- * paint-chip cards
- * aerogrammes
- * the reverse side of wrapping paper
- * white space on torn-out magazine pages
- * even the insides of cereal boxes!

Use your imagination, and your pen-pal will enjoy the novelty.



"All my life I have written letters - to our mother, our relatives, a wide circle of friends and acquaintance, to my husband, to you. Correspondence has always been as necessary to my happiness as a well-cooked dinner, and I've found it more sustaining for its generosity: an act of charity that returned to me a hundredfold..."

Delia Sherman, *The Porcelain Dove*



ENCLOSE A GIFT

This doesn't need to be anything expensive, in fact it doesn't need to cost you at all. Found items, ephemera, and handmade gifts all make for wonderful inclusions in a letter. Use them to give personality and colour to your words.

Sometimes I like to package up my gifts into multiple smaller envelopes, or wrap them in string or decorative paper, to give the recipient lots of presents to open. It lends a sense of theatre and generosity to the mail.

Take yourself on a scavenger hunt around your home and the streets that surround it.

Keep an eye out for anything flat and light that you think your pen-pal might enjoy, to enclose with your letter.

- ✿ Leaves
- ✿ Feathers
- ✿ Pressed flowers
- ✿ A packet of seeds
- ✿ Avant Card postcards
- ✿ Your favourite recipe
- ✿ Magazine clippings
- ✿ Paper cutouts
- ✿ Stickers
- ✿ Polaroid photographs
- ✿ Tea bags
- ✿ Inspirational quotes
- ✿ Pieces of cloth
- ✿ A crocheted granny-square
- ✿ Origami
- ✿ Coasters
- ✿ Maps
- ✿ Confetti
- ✿ Used stamps
- ✿ Ticket stubs
- ✿ Doilies and embroidery
- ✿ A business card from your favourite café



"The kind of life I want is to be a person who would get a personal note every day."

Sara Zarr, *How to Save a Life*



MEASURE & WEIGH

In Australia, the cost of postage is calculated on three things: the weight and size of your letter, and the distance it has to travel. It's much the same in most countries. It's best to know how much your letter will cost to send you before you seal it up.

This could save you from a nasty and expensive surprise when you reach the end of the line at the post office.

For example, if you're sending a letter from Australia to the USA, a missive weighing 49 grams will cost you \$2.95 to send, but a letter weighing 50 grams will cost \$8.

Now consider: if that 49-gram letter is 2 centimetres thick it will still cost you \$2.95 to send. However, if your 49-gram letter is 2.1 centimetres thick, the price will skyrocket to \$23.72.

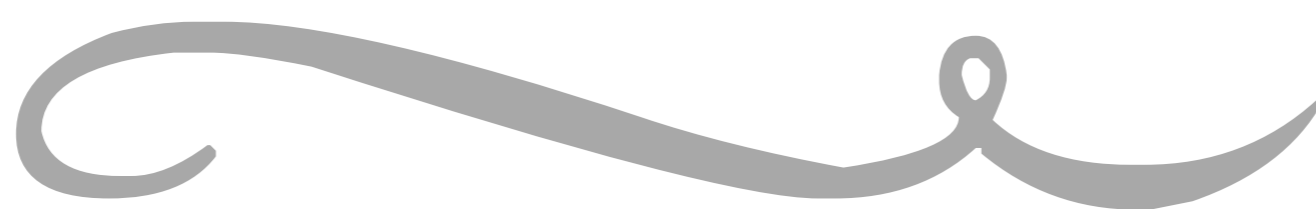
For the difference of a gram or a millimetre, it's wise to do your homework!

To find out how much your letter will cost, choose a time when your local post office is not busy and ask them about mailing prices, or search "postage costs" for your country online. Here's the **Australia Post calculator**.

These days, I'm pretty good at assessing how much a letter will cost to send just by eye. But if you're unsure, use a ruler and a set of food scales to be certain.

A few more tips for sending mail in or from Australia:

- ✉ The international post prices quoted by Australia Post are for special International stamps. If you want to use the usual domestic stamps you may do so, but you need to add an additional 10 percent worth of stamps, to cover GST. So when using domestic stamps to send mail overseas, I put \$8.80 worth of stamps on my \$8 letter
- ✉ If you are sending your letter overseas, affix a "via airmail" sticker (free at the post office) to the top left corner
- ✉ If your overseas letter is considered a parcel and contains anything other than stationery, you will need to sign a customs declaration form, which you'll also find at the post office. This is a decent-sized label that will adhere to your envelope, so be sure to leave room for it on the back
- ✉ Lines at the post office can get long! If you plan on posting a lot of letters, you'll save a lot of time by buying stamps and collecting airmail stickers and customs forms ahead of time.



"Because thou writest me often, I thank thee...
Never do I receive a letter from thee, but
immediately we are together."

Seneca, Letters from a Stoic



DECORATE THE OUTSIDE

Have you heard of mail-art? It's the semi-official term for mail that is decorated. That might mean snazzing up your envelope, sending a handmade postcard, or even creating some kind of sculpture and sticking some stamps on it.

For friends, family and pen-pals, mail-art can be something truly special to find in the letterbox.

I stumbled upon mail-art a few years ago and it never fails to put a smile on people's faces when I send them one of my painted envelopes.

You don't need to be an artist to send mail-art, there are plenty of ways you can make your letter the kind of mail that gives joy to the recipient and the postie, without needing a degree in fine-arts.

If you feel confident, draw a picture with the address on the envelope. You could make this a picture that stands next to the address, or actually incorporate the address into your design. I find speech bubbles, signs, flags and oversized leaves are good design elements to incorporate into a drawing, on which to write the address. You may even want to colour or paint your design to make it extra special. Here is a link to a gallery of **my painted envelopes** if you're looking for ideas.

Of course, not everyone likes to draw, colour and paint, but there are plenty of other ways to make your mail look special. For example:

- ✂ Cut out pictures from magazines to create a collage around or incorporating the address
- ✂ Use rubber stamps or stickers to decorate your envelope
- ✂ Make mail colourful with stripes or patterns of washi tape
- ✂ Paste vintage stamps alongside real stamps to decorate your mail
- ✂ I also like to include a wax seal on many of my envelopes, if there is room for it. Buy sealing wax and seals at specialty stationery shops or order them online
- ✂ And that old favourite, "brown paper packages tied up with string," is still a crowd pleaser (although I'm told string is not accepted in the US mail so you might want to check first)

As long as the address is clear and you have enough postage, the only limit is your imagination!



"where was I? in remarking that me is the envelopes and not nearly so much so, the often foolish letters inside."

Edward Gorey, *Floating Worlds: The Letters of Edward Gorey* & Peter F. Neumeier



HANDMADE ENVELOPES

Rather than decorate your envelope, maybe you'd like to make your own. This is an easy way to make your mail both personal and beautiful. Pretty much any paper you like can be made into an envelope, as long as it is sturdy enough to survive the mail.

I've turned wrapping paper, kraft paper, magazine pages, old calendars, sheet music, old books and even my children's artwork into envelopes. Here's how to do it:

First, you'll need a template. If you want to get serious about this you can buy wooden or plastic envelope templates online for not very much, but it's pretty easy to make your own.

Find an envelope that is the size and shape you like, then gently break it open, trying not to tear anything.

Smooth out the envelope to make it flat, then trace around it onto the paper you've chosen for your envelope. If you accidentally tore the 'template envelope' when you were opening it up, just estimate where the line should go.

Now cut around the lines you made, then fold up your new envelope, copying the fold-lines of the original envelope.

There should be two 'flaps' at either side of your envelope: fold those in.

Now, fold the rectangular part of the envelope in half, to create a traditional front and back. Glue the back to the folded side-flaps, and you're done!

Pop in your letter, seal it up with glue, washi or even a wax seal.

ps. If you plan on making multiple envelopes, it might be a good idea to trace your original envelope onto cardboard, then cut that one out to make a more sturdy, reusable template.



"The reason I'm not on the e-mail list is because I thought it'd be cooler to write letters to somebody, since I can write e-mails to anybody."

Silas House & Neela Vaswani, *Same Sun Here*



MAIL THAT MAKES IT

One of the dangers of making mail-art is that anything 'not standard' runs the risk of not making it through the postal system. An artistically designed address can't be read by machines, so there's plenty of room for mistakes.

Nothing can be guaranteed, but here are some tips for creating mail-art that is more likely to survive its journey through the post.

- ⇒ Make sure all elements of the address are clearly visible to the postie. Sometimes I leave messages for the postie, along the lines of "Kindly deliver to," to draw attention to where the address starts.
- ⇒ My local postie once told me to make sure the country was in the same place as the rest of the address to be sure it

wouldn't be missed. Postal workers are busy, they don't always have time to search all over a busy picture.

⇒ If you're using paint, be aware that water-based paints might run if your letter is delivered in the rain. I still use watercolours and gouache in the mail I send, but I outline everything – especially the addresses – in waterproof felt-tip pen, so that the details are clear no matter what.

⇒ Depending on how bulky or heavy my letter is, sometimes I reinforce each of the corners with sticky-tape so that it's not so likely to become torn in the mail.

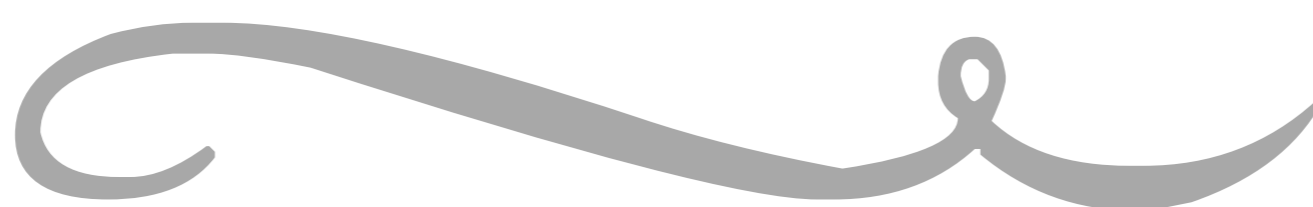
⇒ Make your return address bold and clear so that if the postie does get confused, at least they can send the letter back to you.

⇒ If you're using stamps rather than postal labels and they won't all fit on the front of your envelope without ruining your design, it's ok to put more on the back. Just leave a note for the postie: "more stamps over" with a little arrow pointing them in the direction of the extra stamps.

⇒ If you do put stamps on the back of the envelope, write "Sender" above your return address, so they don't confuse it for the recipient's address (that actually happened to me!).

Despite all this care, sometimes your letter will still arrive bruised and battered, or even torn. Don't let it distress you overly. See any wear and tear as marks of the journey, of the great adventure that your mail has taken across land and sea.

The original mail-artists of the 60s and 70s believed this was a kind of participatory art process: a collaboration between the original artist (you) and the entire postal system!



"To find out your real opinion of someone,
judge the impression you have when you first
see a letter from them."

Arthur Schopenhauer



LET IT GO

After you have sent your letter, it is quite literally out of your hands. You can't speed up the post, you can't guarantee delivery, and you can't force the recipient to write back quickly, or even at all!

It's tempting, though, to try to wrest back some of that control, isn't it.

After all, you put all that thought and love and creativity and time into your letter. You want to know it arrived and, secretly, perhaps you were hoping for a little bit of praise or recognition? I understand. Let's be truthful: I can relate!

But I would encourage you to resist the urge to take control. At least, please do your best to avoid doing these two things in particular:

1. Don't chase up the recipient online, asking, "Did you receive my letter yet?"

Why not? First of all because if they haven't received it yet, you'll ruin the surprise and put pressure on them to be always watching the post and be at the ready to reassure you when it does arrive.

I am lucky to receive a lot of letters from a lot of people, but when one of them asks, "Did it come yet?" I sometimes feel a burden. Especially if that person isn't someone I know.

For example, when @letter_fan (I made that up) asks "Did my letter arrive?" on Instagram, I have to go into their profile, sometimes follow a link to their blog, find out their real name, then search through recent letters to see if I've received any by that name. And if I haven't yet, I then have to remember to be hyper-aware of any letters from that person arriving in the post and tell them immediately, to relieve their anxiety. It kind of saps the fun!

Another reason not to chase them for confirmation is because if the person has received your letter, there can be many reasons why they haven't let you know yet.

Maybe they have been too busy to reply, or someone in the house has been unwell, or they are simply still trying to find the right words or papers on which to reply. Maybe they're hand-making you a gift, and it takes some time. Now, you have tainted their experience of your beautiful letter with the unwelcome emotion of guilt, for failing to reply sooner. I'm sure that was not what you had intended when you first wrote to them.

"But," I hear you protesting, "surely a simple 'thanks for the letter'" message to acknowledge receipt of the letter isn't too much to ask."

Of course it's not too much but still, don't ask. You sent the letter to them and what they do about that is now their choice, not yours. It's time to let go.

2. Don't ask the recipient to feature your letter online

Sometimes, people contact me after they've sent me mail, asking me to feature their letter on my blog or on Instagram. This is something I do often, to celebrate the generosity of those who write to me, but it's not something I promise or guarantee. And honestly, the request feels a little bit pushy.

Maybe you see this recipient featuring incoming mail all the time, and you're thinking, "Why not me?" You never know, maybe they still will. Maybe, like me, they like to spread out posts of 'incoming mail' with other posts on other subjects, so that their readers don't grow bored with repetitive content.

Maybe they're aiming for a cohesive colour palette on their Instagram feed and your letter, while lovely, simply doesn't fit within that palette.

While it's lovely to have your work publicly praised or celebrated, it's a bit gauche to ask for it or worse, to expect it. Like giving someone a gift of bread and then insisting that they make you sandwiches.

You will enjoy this whole snail-mail process a lot more if you simply let go the moment you drop your letter into the letterbox.

Let go of expectations as you let go of the envelope, and let your letter be a true act of generosity without expecting return. Instead, start thinking about the next letter you will write!



"We write each other three or four letters a week. And we never wait for a return letter before beginning another."

Mary Potter Kenyon,
Mary & Me: A Lasting Link Through Ink



FIND A PEN-PAL

If you are looking to find a new pen-pal, there are many organisations and websites that will help you find someone like-minded, and who is looking for the same sorts of things from this friendship as you.

A bit of a caveat: I am so far behind on the mail I already have to send, that I haven't gone searching for any new pen-pals, so I can't give you personal recommendations on any of these websites.

That said, here's what they all promise their users:

League of Extraordinary Pen Pals

An online club for snail-mail pen-pals that prides itself on being welcoming and inclusive, regardless of the interests or lifestyles of its members.

The Postal Society

A free website community where you can find pen-pals, take part in mail forums and mail swaps, and find inspiration for your mail.

Swap Bot

An online service that organises mail swaps among strangers. You can join swaps directly on Swap Bot and if you have a blog, you can also use Swap Bot to help you host your own swaps.

The Letter Writers Alliance

With more than 10,000 members worldwide, this community is a fantastic place to find a like-minded pen-pal.

Post Crossing

Post Crossing is pretty simple: every time you send a postcard, you'll get a postcard. Yours could go anywhere in the world, and another will arrive for you, from anywhere in the world.

Snail Mail Ideas

This website was created to seek inspiration from other snail-mail projects, and to connect people who loved writing letters. There is now a dedicated portal for finding pen-pals as well, which you can join for free.



"Letters are like wine; if they are sound they ripen with keeping. A man should lay down letters as he does a cellar of wine."

Samuel Butler

NEXT STEPS

Take things to the next level with **my signature letter-writing and mail-art e-course**, "Your Beautiful Letter"



Coming soon

My new book with dozens of kind, quirky, crafty, mindful, playful, slow-living and communal mail-projects to try

As an email subscriber, you'll be among the first to know about it.

Make mail

Use my **downloadable mail-art colouring books** to delight friends and family with lovely letters

Instagram

Come say hi to me on Instagram, and show me what you create. I'm

@naomibulger

