Writing is not between machines. It is communication between human beings. This article is about writing the messages that humans need most: thank you notes, congratulations, and condolences—why, how, and what.

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During the holiday season, many of us take time to connect with friends and business associates, often sharing cards, gifts, and get-togethers. We reestablish personal and business relationships.

But the season for being human runs 12 months a year. People need to hear from us often. They need thank you messages for their hard work, creativity, and generosity. They enjoy congratulations for their achievements and special recognition. They appreciate messages of condolence when illness or death touches their lives.

Pointers on Writing
These pointers apply to all three types of messages:

1. Keep the message brief—usually 100 words is enough to carry your sentiments.
2. Don’t dilute your message by referring to other topics.
3. Write promptly.
4. Feel free to handwrite or type your thank you’s and congratulations. Condolences are typically handwritten, but typing is acceptable when necessary.
5. Use regular mail or email, whichever suits the occasion. Regular mail allows you to handwrite, to use special stationery or a card, and to convey a personal feeling. Email offers speed, but it is less formal and may seem less personal.

Thank You Messages
Thank you notes and letters can have a long-lasting positive impact. Some people display them on their office bulletin board or in a notebook of favorite letters. These messages are always welcome and—unfortunately—too seldom written.

- **Do** use the reader’s name—never “Dear Customer.”
- **Do** be specific about what you are thanking the reader for and why.
- **Don’t** ask for anything.
- **Don’t** sound canned: don’t write a message that could be sent to thank anyone for anything.
- **Don’t** use passive verbs. For instance, avoid, “Your generous gift is appreciated.” Instead write, “We appreciate your generous gift.”

**Example:**

Dear Diane,

Thank you for the creativity, patience, and hard work you brought to designing our website. The site is exactly what we wanted—in fact, it is much more.

We especially appreciated your feedback on our content, and the way your design complemented it. We are also very grateful for the marketing and search engine insights you shared. We had not realized that a web designer could offer so much solid advice, and we know your efforts will pay off in a site that brings us business.

Thank you for your beautiful work.

Warm wishes,
Notes of Congratulations

When starting a new job, venture, or phase in life, people appreciate notes of congratulations. These notes can remind them of their strong qualifications and their own excitement—reminders that are especially helpful as they face the intimidating aspects of starting something new.

- Do mention the specific achievement.
- Do share a compliment that ties to the achievement, if possible.
- Don’t use sarcasm.
- Don’t use humor unless you are certain it will be taken positively.
- Don’t state anything that will detract from the positive message.

Example:

Dear Bill,

Congratulations on your new job as a copy editor! I am so glad you have landed a job that is a good fit for your editorial strengths. Having benefited from your editing skills and excellent proofreading eye, I know you have much to offer.

I wish you a rewarding, enjoyable experience in your new position. Again, congratulations.

Best regards,

Condolence Messages

Although many people keep their private lives separate from work, communicating in times of illness and sorrow is still appropriate in business relationships. For those who are ill or injured or who have experienced a profound loss, receiving notes and cards helps to reduce isolation and helplessness. These messages are the hardest to write but the most important to receive.

- Do acknowledge the other person’s illness, injury, or loss of a loved one.
- Do mention that you are thinking of the reader.
- Do share, when applicable, a brief mention of a similar situation you experienced.
- Do remember that your role is to offer support and comfort—not to preach.

- Don’t make philosophical or theological comments about illness, death, or dying unless you are certain that they will comfort the reader.
- Don’t use humor unless you are certain that it will be understood the way you intend.

Examples:

Dear Mr. Graham,

Joan told me today about your hospital stay and that you are now at home recuperating. I was very sorry to learn of your accident and back injury. Please accept my condolences and warm wishes for your healing.

Please know that I am thinking of you as you rest and heal. I hope that as each day passes you will continue to feel better.

Sincerely,

Dear Clare,

Please accept my deep sympathy on the passing of your father. From all you told me about him, he was a wonderful man. I know your loss is great.

When my father died, it was hard to get used to the fact that he was not there to ask me about whether I had changed the antifreeze in my car and whether I was saving money. I was most aware of his absence in the little things of daily life. As you adjust to your own father’s absence, you may be certain that I am thinking of you in your bereavement.

Again, you have my sincere sympathy.

We are all human. Along with reports, proposals, and email, remember the human side of communication: thank you’s, congratulations, and condolences.

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