

# The Role of Ancient Letter Writing in Contemporary Business Correspondence

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## Introduction

The art of letter writing, or *ars dictaminis*, is a practice that has endured throughout centuries as an important component of learning. Poster (2007) describes the development of the practice when she writes, "Letter-writing instruction has existed in a well-attested tradition from the earliest known literate Western cultures to the present. If people participated in any form of formal verbal composition at all, they were likely to have written letters or to have had letters written for them" (p. 1). Despite this tradition, letter-writing instruction has drastically declined during the last seventy years, leaving a gap in the history of the practice. Letter writing was a rather prominent teaching strategy until the first half of the twentieth century, but it is not utilized to a large extent today.

Although letter-writing instruction continued after the mid twentieth century, it has steadily lost favor except for a few sporadic examples. This dramatic decline can largely be attributed to advances in telecommunication: "Affordable long-distance telephone has undoubtedly reduced the volume of family letters and correspondence between friends committed to sustaining relationships over distances that prevent regular meeting" (Decker, 1998, p. 233-34). Conversely, letter writing is now encountering growth because of further innovations like email.

During the last two decades, the overall practice of letter writing has experienced resurgence with the advent of email as one of the preferred methods of communication in the business world, and now the role of this writing genre in the classroom should be reevaluated. As Walker (2007) states, "Fortunately, the explosion in the use of e-mail and instant messaging for business and personal communications has returned the letter's potential for flexibility and creativity to the forefront, and necessitates further exploration of many of the issues that have been under discussion throughout the letter's evolution" (p. 239). When considering many of these major issues, I suggest we start a conversation about letter writing's usefulness in preparing students for their professional communication needs during their future careers.

Fredericksen (2000) briefly addresses the role of letter writing by describing the practice as "a form which links the ancient and the post modern" (p. 283). However, during the 13 years since the publication, the potential to incorporate letter writing into the classroom has not been realized. We need to seriously consider the possible benefits the historical art of letter writing could provide to today's students, especially in the digital age. The use of email in the workplace provides a clear connection to letter writing, encouraging the revival of the ancient writing genre. Studying the historical purposes of letter writing ultimately reveals prevailing teaching techniques that should be considered in regards to current methods. In fact, many of the medieval exercises can be adapted to fit into the current business communication curriculum, while being more applicable to modern students. By reflecting on its earlier use, we are able to better understand the relevance of letter writing today.

## Historical Letter Writing Instruction

Even though letter writing received notable emphasis in the late middle ages, it has been taught since ancient times. Lanham (1992) explains, “The earliest extending treatment of rules for writing letters occurs in a work on style, *Peri hermêneias*, by one Demetrius” (p. 119). Additionally, Cicero “alludes to types of letters” and Quintilian “is the first Latin rhetorician to characterize epistolary style in general terms” (Lanham, 1992, p. 119). With these notable scholars foregrounding the tradition of letter writing, a solid foundation for the art is established.

However, as Murphy (1974) claims, “the *ars dictaminis* is a truly medieval invention” (p. 194). Demonstrated by the numerous letter-writing manuals published between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, the study of letter writing was especially prevalent (Richardson, 2007, p. 52). These historical manuals allow us to examine the texts used to teach letter writing to students, as they describe the required aspects and components of letters.

One letter-writing manual from 1135, which was translated by Murphy (1971), defines a letter as “a suitable arrangement of words set forth to express the intended meaning of its sender. Or in other words, a letter is a discourse composed of coherent yet distinct parts signifying fully the sentiments of its sender” (p. 7). This definition stresses the importance of the writer (sender) in the composing process while referencing the expected format of a letter and its “coherent yet distinct parts.” An anonymous Bologna scholar wrote the twelfth century manual, titled “The Principles of Letter-Writing” (*Rationes dictandi*), which lists the five major components of a letter as “the Salutation, the Securing of Good-will, the Narration, the Petition, and the Conclusion” (Murphy, 1971, p. 7). These five distinctions were referred to as “*salutatio, exordium, narratio, petitio, [and] conclusio*” respectively (Henderson, 1983, p. 92). Specifically, the salutation or *salutatio* was one of the most distinct features of a letter as Henderson (1983) describes: “In both theory and practice, the medieval letter has assumed many of the functions, and therefore many of the formal characteristics, of the classical oration. Only the *salutatio* identified it as a distinct genre” (p. 93).

The salutation is also one of the major aspects of a letter and email that helps us continue to identify the genre today. However, even though it indicates the intended recipient and impacts the way a letter is composed, the salutation does not hold the same degree of importance as in medieval times. In the anonymous letter-writing manual, the salutation is stressed because the manual covers this specific section of the letter for nearly one-third of the entire manual’s content. When addressing “What Should be Included in a Salutation,” the author of the manual explains, “we must consider carefully how somewhere in the Salutation we want some additions to be made to the names of the recipients; above all, these additions should be selected so that they point to some aspect of the recipient’s renown and good character” (Murphy, 1971, p. 8). Today, we are concerned with the inclusion of appropriate titles; however, we do not feel the same pressure to overtly compliment the letter recipient, as was customary in the past.

When letter writing was historically taught, certain aspects were highlighted as the main expectations and outcomes of the genre. Specifically, scholars like Demetrius emphasized features such as the consideration of voice. He appreciated the presence of a writer’s voice, explaining, “A letter is a reflection of the writer’s own soul... and one can perceive the writer’s character (*êthos*) more clearly from a letter than from any other form of composition” (Lanham, 1992, p. 121). Demetrius thought the voice of a writer should be unique in contrast to other voices: “a young man should speak differently from an old man, a farmer from a soldier, a slave from a free man, and so on” (Lanham, 1992, p. 121).

According to Demetrius, personal differences such as age, occupation, and social standing influence the tone of a letter, emphasizing the varied expectations for each individual writer. Our own students can benefit from this discovery of voice, making them more accountable for their claims and ideas.

Echoing Demetrius' perspective, C. Julius Victor addresses audience and formality in regards to letter writing. Victor, a rhetorician from the fourth century, describes "the differences caused by the social status of sender and recipient" by stating, "If one writes to a superior, the letter should not be jocular; if to an equal, it should not be discourteous; if to an inferior, it should not be proud" (Murphy, 1974, p. 196). In order to develop an appropriate letter, the writer must consciously consider the role of the letter recipient. Depending on the level of relationship that exists between the two individuals, the writer must approach the correspondence differently. As more aspects of online communication become focused on informal relationships, today's students must realize that the language used when writing to their superior or coworker must be approached in a more professional manner.

Many of these characteristics of letters—voice, audience, and formality—were clearly emphasized in historical letter writing exercises. While most of the exercises were solely hypothetical, students were expected to apply these strategies to their writing outside of the classroom. Within the classroom, teachers continuously reinforced an ideal approach to letter writing. The Bolognese author of the twelfth century letter-writing manual firmly states, "For truly every letter must be arranged within the approved format as it is said above, or in accordance with circumstances" (Murphy, 1971, p. 25).

During the late 1100s, an example exercise by Peter of Blois demonstrates the use of letters to teach students about using style in different situations. First, the instructor had students write a letter, which he referred to as "low style" or *humilis stilus*, to their mothers to request money. Then, he assigned a "high style" letter that illustrated a request from a Bishop to the King (Camargo & Woods, 2012, p. 129). These two activities helped students consider the person and audience to whom they were writing, encouraged students to write in their own voice and the voice of a hypothetical individual, and demonstrated the difference in formality based on a specific situation.

Similar to Peter of Blois' example, letter exercises were often assigned to emphasize the use of "style and characterization" (Lanham, 2012, p. 105). One specific exercise asked students to develop "an exchange between a pagan philosopher and a Christian" (Lanham, 2012, p. 105). Like the low and high style exercises, this exercise also caused the students to consider the voice of the author and the audience of the letter. Voice is especially emphasized here because the two individuals partaking in the letter correspondence differ so greatly in their religious views. Students had to carefully consider their tone when addressing the other individual, which concentrates on the formality of the piece as well.

Besides these historical in-class exercises, other evidence exists that relates to letter writing instruction. An especially remarkable set of letters from the eleventh century called "the worms letter collection" exemplifies the use of written correspondence between a student and a teacher (Lanham, 2012, p. 106). In one example, "A student has written to the cathedral schoolmaster seeking career advice; the master's reply contains an extended rhetorical analysis of the student's letter, beginning with its salutation" (Lanham, 2012, p. 106). This exercise, which was not confined to the classroom, demonstrates an interesting teaching moment. It reveals that students utilized letter-writing techniques outside of class. Additionally, when the student composed this individual letter, formality and audience were likely key concerns since he expected the schoolmaster to evaluate him.

## Early Twentieth Century Writing Instruction

Continuing the medieval tradition, letter-writing instruction was clearly prevalent during the early 1900s as evidenced by the amount of material published about the topic of teaching letter writing during that time. As demonstrated by the publications of numerous instructors, letter writing was recognized as a useful genre, especially in comparison to typical “themes.” After examining the perspectives of these past teachers, the overall function of letter writing during that time period becomes more apparent.

In her article, Bidwell (1913) proposes, “The whole high-school course in composition can and may be based on and consist of letter-writing” (p. 562). Bidwell views letter writing as such a valuable genre that she believes it should be the major focus of an entire writing class. She describes letter writing as one of the most useful types of writing: “All students write friendly letters and notes and many of them write business letters connected with their own purchases or inquiry” (Bidwell, 1913, p. 563). Bidwell’s reasoning, if translated to present day, suggests that we should teach letter writing because students are exposed to the practice through their nearly constant online communication.

A few years later, Magee (1919) discusses the use of letter writing for teaching exposition to freshmen. When describing the types of letters she assigned, she states, “They are real letters to home or friends, and they serve the triple purpose of making themselves... a part of their writers’ real lives; of revealing the writer to the teacher who is trying to find out how he can best deal with that writer through a course in expository writing; and of illustrating the varying degrees of organization of material which different letters exhibit” (Magee, 1919, p. 432). Magee, like Bidwell, focuses on the easy translation of letters from the classroom to real life and the unique usefulness of the distinctive forms of letters.

Cole (1934) also discusses a letter-writing unit from his high school English class: “In the assignment of eleven different types of letters or communications, we followed the experiences of an imaginary high-school graduate of last June” (p. 66). While describing his reasons for teaching letters, Cole (1934) states, “Although the chief aims in teaching letter-writing are ability to arrange the parts of a letter correctly and to express the message in clear, forceful English, it seems to me that the by-products of my assignment might be valuable also” (p. 66-67). While the letter writing tradition in the early twentieth century emphasizes the proper organization of a letter, Cole recognizes other important aspects of the exercises too. He states, “If these young people learned a bit more about social customs, or realized more than before the importance of a gracious letter, or appreciated some of the circumstances in life that call for letters in good taste, the series of letters had an additional value” (Cole, 1934, p. 67). Cole knew that the letter writing exercises would help students succeed in communicating effectively during the future.

Similar to Cole, McIntire (1936) required her class of high school juniors to create “a portfolio of letters,” stressing that the students “did not see the relation between the work which they were required to do and life-situations” (p. 315). To make classroom writing more approachable to students, McIntire assigned letters. In regards to her students’ understanding of the assignment, McIntire (1936) concludes, “All showed pride in their accomplishment, and incidental remarks confirmed the belief that the pupils were really beginning to see letter writing as a life-problem” (p. 316). The comparable “life-problem” for us today is email.

## Current Letter Writing Instruction

Despite the fact that letter writing does not seem to be utilized enough in contemporary classrooms, there are certain instances of its usefulness. Walker (2007) compares current letter writing to the medieval practice when she explains,

Although the advice given by modern stylists on such matters as whether it is more appropriate to use an informal or formal style, how much the relative social positions of the sender and recipient should dictate the letter's tone, and whether changes in the private and public nature of a letter require different methods of composition may have shifted dramatically in the intervening years, these issues play as important a role in present day *artes dictandi* as they did to the medieval *dictators*. (p. 230-231)

Therefore, specific aspects of letters, especially formality and audience, are still relevant when discussing current letters, even though the emphasis may have shifted slightly.

Recently, in comparison with earlier times, letter writing has not been readily assigned in writing classrooms. A few teachers have continued to use letter writing activities to help their students critically analyze written texts though. These activities utilize letter writing in a variety of forms, including both handwritten letters and email.

Nicolini (2008) describes a series of letter writing activities that she incorporated into her high school English class in reaction to a novel. She describes the unit as "a letter exchange between my two sophomore and one senior English classes" (Nicolini, 2008, p. 76). Reflecting on the activity, Nicolini (2008) suggests she noticed a change in voice when students wrote the letters: "students' language was more casual than it would have been in a structured essay, and they were able to write more naturally" (p. 76-77). During the activity, the adaption of voice was stressed because Nicolini required the students to use pseudonyms. By creating their own identities as writers, the students' voices were less guarded: "the anonymous nature of the correspondence was liberating for the students, allowing them to express their ideas freely without fear of reproach" (Nicolini, 2008, p. 78). They were able to adjust their level of formality between a typical writing assignment for the teacher and this more informal set of letters to their peers, acknowledging that the type of audience impacts the way they write.

Since technology has developed, letter writing no longer needs to be restricted to physical handwriting. Borsheim (2004), a high school English language arts teacher, also asked students to participate in a letter exchange in reaction to a novel, but conducted the exercise through email. According to Borsheim (2004), this particular activity, which connected high school students with college students, "taught my students to read deeply and think critically" while also providing "an outside audience that would respond to their ideas and contribute to the ongoing conversation about the novel" (p. 60). As with letters, the audience of the emails was an essential consideration during the composing process. Additionally, Borsheim (2004) noticed, "Email became a tool for the construction of meaning. The act of composing email messages helped my students to articulate their thoughts" (p. 63). The type of expression reinforced through the use of letters—written or electronic—demonstrates the continued usefulness of the genre as a teaching technique today.

Although these teachers have utilized letter writing to help explore the complexities of literature, the practice can also be expanded to business writing. In Fredericksen's (2000) article she explains, "Teachers can easily create situations calling for letter exchanges. Such experiments require no special equipment and very little expenditure of energy" (p. 279). In the article, she lists a few useful letter

writing assignments that could be incorporated into the classroom including “letters to editors, exchanges with students in other classes or other schools, requests for information, letters of complaint, job application letters, etc” (Fredericksen, 2000, p. 281). Additionally, Fredericksen (2000) mentions the presence of an author’s voice in a letter: “The two-way track of letter writing, that correspondence will not only be read but will also elicit response, gives young writers incentive to keep corresponding; thus they may write more frequently and add to their opportunities to fine tune their written voice” (p. 278). The numerous teaching opportunities available through letter writing, especially those to be implemented in business communication classes, should be carefully considered as the practice of letter writing instruction is renewed.

### **Letter Writing in My Classroom**

As I prepare to teach business and professional writing at my university, I am consciously including numerous letter-writing assignments and activities in my syllabus. During previous semesters, when I taught freshman composition courses, I noticed that letter writing helps make certain characteristics of writing easier for students to understand. Similar to the aspects addressed by Demetrius and Victor, the use of letters encourages students to discover their own voices as writers, identify their target audience as the letter recipient, and recognize necessary changes in formality. When I teach business and professional writing, I will also focus on these characteristics, in particular, because they are all essential when pursuing effective business communication.

In much of my students’ past writing, I have observed a drastic change in persona between their letters and their other written work. In most of the letters, I am able to clearly identify a writer’s voice because, compared to a typical essay assignment, students do not have to put on a mask to impress an evaluator of their writing. Therefore, they use more realistic word choices and focus on the content of the writing instead. Students practice a more conversational tone in letters, similar to the medieval practice when letters “were designed to make the prose sound pleasing when spoken” (Richardson, 2007, p. 56). I encourage this exploration of voice through hypothetical letter exercises where students take on the identities of imagined individuals. By experimenting with the voices of others, I reinforce the importance of the students’ own voices in all of their writing.

Also, the students know that one specific individual is the audience for each letter and they write the letter with that in mind. I have observed my students regularly use the term “you” in their letters, recognizing that they are talking to the person receiving the letter instead of the all-encompassing “you” typically used in student essays. When students write other papers, audience is often an afterthought; however, letters push the focus on audience to the forefront and force it to be considered throughout every section.

Additionally, I stress formality by explaining that the salutation and language used in a letter to an instructor, a community member, or even a classmate are not the same as the salutation and language used in a letter to a close friend. When considering the audience, letters tend to promote open communication between the students and their peers, the students and their teachers, and the students and others.

Every semester, my students participate in numerous letter-writing assignments. These letters are written from the students to a range of individuals. Each of the letter recipients has a different relationship with the student, which causes the students to consider the levels of voice, audience, and formality appropriate for each correspondence. First, the students write response letters with feedback

to their peers about the classmates' written drafts. Then, students write thank you letters to the community leaders they interviewed for their profile papers. Finally, at the end of the semester, students write letters to me that reflect upon the work they completed during the course. Additionally, I assign in-class writing exercises throughout the semester that involve letter writing. Many of the letter writing exercises I give my students are updated versions of exercises from medieval times. These exercises ask students to consider hypothetical situations and people to create an appropriate letter. However, I push my students to move beyond the hypothetical to employ the use of letters in real contexts. After the class ends, I expect that students will continue to utilize the letter genre outside of class during their professional careers, if not through written texts then through email correspondence.

### **Future Letter Writing Instruction**

Moving forward, it is imperative that we consider the usefulness and adaptability of letters in business correspondence. Although hand written letters are not as common as they once were, email has created a new demand for the study of letter writing. The same format, structure, and genre conventions of a letter are typically utilized in an email, and therefore provide a specific reason for the renewed study of letter writing today.

Since their introduction, emails have been closely connected to historical letters. Spooner and Yancey (1996) directly compare emails to letters: "Much like writing a letter, it [email] is signaled by greetings, emoticons, closings, and other conventions; sometimes the author composes online, sometimes uploads a prepared text; author and topic are not unique, but audience is (as in letters)" (p. 254). Since the genre of letters is often recognized by its use of certain conventions like a salutation, the presence of these same conventions in emails signifies an association between emails and letters. Also, Blase (2000), after formally incorporating email into his classroom, describes the writing medium: "A new type of literacy is emerging in American culture—one rich in voice and audience, one that values (even requires) clarity and conciseness, and one in which authors are immediately accountable for what they write" (p. 47). Through the practice of letter writing, our students will be able to recognize the importance of effective communication in all types of professional writing, while considering voice, audience, and formality.

Even though technology has been rapidly developing, the adaptability of letters into email demonstrates that letters continue to be valuable to our society, especially in regards to business communication. We should embrace this connection between letters and email and incorporate the use of letters in current writing instruction. Since ancient and medieval times, letters have been used to correspond with others; we must accept the transition to electronic communication and adjust accordingly.

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