

Eight or Nine Wise Words About Letter Writing by *Charles Dodgson*

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1. On Stamp-Cases

Charles Dodgson

Some American writer has said “the snakes in this district may be divided into one species--the venomous”. The same principle applies here. Postage-Stamp-Cases may be divided into one species, the “Wonderland”. Imitations of it will soon appear, no doubt: but they cannot include the two Pictorial Surprises, which are copyright.

You don’t see why I call them “Surprises”? Well, take the Case in your left-hand, and regard it attentively. You see Alice nursing the Duchess’s Baby? (An entirely new combination, by the way: It doesn’t occur in the book.) Now, with your right thumb and forefinger, lay hold of the little book, and suddenly pull it out. *The Baby has turned into a Pig!* If *that* doesn’t surprise you, why, I suppose you wouldn’t be surprised if your own Mother-in-law suddenly turned into a Gyroscope!

This Case is *not* intended to carry about in your pocket. Far from it. People seldom want any other Stamps, on an emergency, than Penny-Stamps for Letters, Sixpenny-Stamps for Telegrams, and a bit of Stamp-edging for cut fingers (it makes capital sticking-plaster, and will stand three or four washings, cautiously conducted): and all these are easily carried in a purse or pocket-book. No, *this* is meant to haunt your envelope-case, or wherever you keep your writing-materials. What made me invent it was the constantly

wanting Stamps of other values, for foreign Letters, Parcel Post, etc., and finding it very bothersome to get at the kind I wanted in a hurry. Since I have possessed a “Wonderland Stamp-Case”, life has been bright and peaceful, and I have used no other. I believe the Queen’s laundress uses no other.

Each of the pockets will hold 6 Stamps, comfortably. I would recommend you to arrange the 6, before putting them in, something like a *bouquet*, making them lean to the right and to the left alternately: thus there will always be a free *corner* to get hold of, so as to take them out, quickly and easily, one by one: otherwise you will find them apt to come out two or three at a time.

According to *my* experience, the 5*d.*, 9*d.*, and 1*s.* Stamps are hardly ever wanted, though I have constantly to replenish all the other pockets. If your experience agrees with mine, you may find it convenient to keep only a couple (say) of each of these 3 kinds, in the 1*s.* pocket, and to fill the other 2 pockets with extra 1*d.* stamps.

2. How to Begin a Letter

Charles Dodgson

If the Letter is to be in answer to another, begin by getting out that other letter and reading it through, in order to refresh your memory, as to what it is you have to answer, and as to your correspondent’s *present address* (otherwise you will be sending your letter to his regular address in *London*, though he has been careful in writing to give you his *Torquay* address in full).

Next, Address and Stamp the Envelope. “What! Before writing the *Letter*?” Most certainly. And I’ll tell you what will happen if you don’t. You will go on writing till the last moment, and, just in the middle of the last sentence, you will become aware that “time’s up!” Then comes the hurried wind-up--the wildly-scrawled signature--the hastily-fastened envelope, which comes open in the post--the address, a mere hieroglyphic--the horrible discovery that you’ve forgotten to replenish your Stamp-Case--the frantic appeal, to every one in the house, to lend you a Stamp--the headlong rush to the Post Office, arriving, hot and gasping, just after the box has closed--and finally, a week afterwards, the return of the Letter, from the Dead-Letter Office, marked “address illegible”!

Next, put your own address, *in full*, at the top of the note-sheet. It is an aggravating thing--I speak from bitter experience--when a friend, staying at some new address, heads his letter “Dover”, simply, assuming that you can get the rest of the address from his previous letter, which perhaps you have destroyed.

Next, put the date *in full*. It is another aggravating thing, when you wish, years afterwards, to arrange a series of letters, to find them dated “Feb. 17”, “Aug. 2”, without any *year* to guide you as to which comes first. And never, never, dear Madam (N.B. this remark is addressed to ladies *only*: no *man* would ever do such a thing), put “Wednesday”, simply, as the date!

“That way madness lies.”

3. How to Go On With a Letter

Charles Dodgson

Here is a golden Rule to begin with. *Write legibly*. The average temper of the human race would be perceptibly sweetened, if everybody obeyed this Rule! A great deal of the bad writing in the world comes simply from writing *too quickly*. Of course you reply, “I do it to save *time*.” A very good object, no doubt: but what right have you to do it at your friend’s expense? Isn’t *his* time as valuable as yours? Years ago, I used to receive letters from a friend--and very interesting letters too--written in one of the most atrocious hands ever invented. It generally took me about a *week* to read one of his letters. I used to carry it about in my pocket, and take it out at leisure times, to puzzle over the riddles which composed it--holding it in different positions, and at different distances, till at last the meaning of some hopeless scrawl would flash upon me, when I at once wrote down the English under it; and, when several had been thus guessed, the context would help with the others, till at last the whole series of hieroglyphics was deciphered. If *all* one’s friends wrote like that, Life would be entirely spent in reading their letters!

This Rule applies, specially, to names of people or places--and *most* specially to *foreign names*. I got a letter once, containing some Russian names, written in the same hasty scramble in which people often write “yours sincerely”. The *context*, of course, didn’t help in the least: and one spelling was just as likely as another, so far as *I* knew: It was necessary to write and tell my friend that I couldn’t read any of them!

My second Rule is, don’t fill *more* than a page and a half with apologies for not having written sooner!

The best subject, to *begin* with, is your friend’s last letter. Write with the letter open before you. Answer his questions, and make any remarks his letter suggests. *Then* go on to what you want to say yourself. This arrangement is more courteous, and pleasanter for the reader, than to fill the letter with your own invaluable remarks, and then hastily answer your friend’s questions in a postscript. Your friend is much more likely to enjoy your wit, *after* his own anxiety for information has been satisfied.

In referring to anything your friend has said in his letter, it is best to *quote the exact words*, and not to give a summary of them in *your* words. *A's* impression, of what *B* has said, expressed in *A's* words, will never convey to *B* the meaning of his own words.

This is specially necessary when some point has arisen as to which the two correspondents do not quite agree. There ought to be no opening for such writing as "You are quite mistaken in thinking I said so-and-so. It was not in the least my meaning, &c., &c.", which tends to make a correspondence last for a life-time.

A few more Rules may fitly be given here, for correspondence that has unfortunately become *controversial*.

One is, *don't repeat yourself*. When once you have said your say, fully and clearly, on a certain point, and have failed to convince your friend, *drop that subject*: to repeat your arguments, all over again, will simply lead to his doing the same; and so you will go on, like a Circulating Decimal. *Did you ever know a Circulating Decimal come to an end?*

Another Rule is, when you have written a letter that you feel may possibly irritate your friend, however necessary you may have felt it to so express yourself, *put it aside till the next day*. Then read it over again, and fancy it addressed to yourself. This will often lead to your writing it all over again, taking out a lot of the vinegar and pepper, and putting in honey instead, and thus making a *much* more palatable dish of it! If, when you have done your best to write inoffensively, you still feel that it will probably lead to further controversy, *keep a copy of it*. There is very little use, months afterwards, in pleading "I am almost sure I never expressed myself as you say: to the best of my recollection I said so-and-so". *Far* better to be able to write "I did *not* express myself so: these are the words I used".

My fifth Rule is, if your friend makes a severe remark, either leave it unnoticed, or make your reply distinctly *less* severe: and if he makes a friendly remark, tending towards "making up" the little difference that has arisen between you, let your reply be distinctly *more* friendly. If, in picking a quarrel, each party declined to go more than *three-eighths* of the way, and if, in making friends, each was ready to go *five-eighths* of the way--why, there would be more reconciliations than quarrels! Which is like the Irishman's remonstrance to his gad-about daughter--"Shure, you're *always* goin' out! You go out *three* times, for *wanst* that you come in!"

My sixth Rule (and my last remark about controversial correspondence) is, *don't try to have the last word!* How many a controversy would be nipped in the bud, if each was anxious to let the *other* have the last word! Never mind how telling a rejoinder you leave unuttered: never mind your friend's supposing that you are silent from lack of anything to

say: let the thing drop, as soon as it is possible without discourtesy: remember “speech is silver, but silence is golden”! (N.B.--If you are a gentleman, and your friend is a lady, this Rule is superfluous: *you wo'n't get the last word!*)

My seventh Rule is, if it should ever occur to you to write, jestingly, in *dispraise* of your friend, be sure you exaggerate enough to make the jesting *obvious*: a word spoken in *jest*, but taken as earnest, may lead to very serious consequences. I have known it to lead to the breaking-off of a friendship. Suppose, for instance, you wish to remind your friend of a sovereign you have lent him, which he has forgotten to repay--you might quite *mean* the words “I mention it, as you seem to have a conveniently bad memory for debts”, in jest; yet there would be nothing to wonder at if he took offence at that way of putting it. But, suppose you wrote “Long observation of your career, as a pickpocket and a burglar, has convinced me that my one lingering hope, for recovering that sovereign I lent you, is to say ‘Pay up, or I’ll summons yer!’” he would indeed be a matter-of-fact friend if he took *that* as seriously meant!

My eighth Rule. When you say, in your letter, “I enclose cheque for £5,” or “I enclose John’s letter for you to see”, leave off writing for a moment--go and get the document referred to--and *put it into the envelope*. Otherwise, you are pretty certain to find it lying about, *after the Post has gone!*

My ninth Rule. When you get to the end of a notesheet, and find you have more to say, take another piece of paper--a whole sheet, or a scrap, as the case may demand: but whatever you do, *don't cross!* Remember the old proverb “*Cross-writing makes cross reading*”. “The *old* proverb?” you say, inquiringly. “How old?” Well, not so *very* ancient, I must confess. In fact, I’m afraid I invented it while writing this paragraph! Still, you know, “old” is a *comparative* term. I think you would be *quite* justified in addressing a chicken, just of the shell, as “Old boy!” *when compared* with another chicken, that was only half-out!

4. How To End a Letter

Charles Dodgson

If doubtful whether to end with “yours faithfully”, or “yours truly”, or “your most truly”, &c. (there are at least a dozen varieties, before you reach “yours affectionately”), refer to your correspondent’s last letter, and make your winding-up *at least as friendly as his*: in fact, even if a shade *more* friendly, it will do no harm!

A Postscript is a very useful invention: but it is *not* meant (as so many ladies suppose) to contain the real *gist* of the letter: it serves rather to throw into the shade any little matter we do *not* wish to make a fuss about. For example, your friend had promised to execute a commission for you in town, but forgot it, thereby putting you to great inconvenience:

and he now writes to apologize for his negligence. It would be cruel, and needlessly crushing, to make it the main subject of your reply. How much more gracefully it comes in thus! "P.S. Don't distress yourself any more about having omitted that little matter in town. I wo'n't deny that it *did* put my plans out a little, at the time: but it's all right now. I often forget things, myself: and 'those, who live in glass-houses, mustn't throw stones', you know!"

When you take your letters to the Post, *carry them in your hand*. If you put them in your pocket you will take a long country-walk (I speak from experience), passing the Post-Office *twice*, going and returning, and, when you get home, will find them *still* in your pocket.

5. On Registering Correspondence

Charles Dodgson

Let me recommend you to keep a record of Letters Received and Sent. I have kept one for many years, and have found it of the greatest possible service, in many ways: it secures my *answering* Letters, however long they have to wait; it enables me to refer, for my own guidance, to the details of previous correspondence, though the actual Letters may have been destroyed long ago; and, most valuable feature of all, if any difficulty arises, years afterwards, in connection with a half-forgotten correspondence, it enables me to say, with confidence, "I did *not* tell you that he was 'an *invaluable* servant in *every* way', and that you *couldn't* 'trust him too much'. I have a *precis* of my letter. What I said was 'he is a *valuable* servant in *many* ways, but *don't* trust him too much. So, if he's cheated you, you really must not hold *me* responsible for it!"

I will now give you a few simple Rules for making, and keeping a Letter-Register.

Get a blank book, containing (say) 200 leaves, about 4 inches wide and 7 high. It should be *well* fastened into its cover, as it will have to be opened and shut hundreds of times. Have a line ruled, in red ink, down each margin of every page, an inch off the edge (the margin should be wide enough to contain a number of 5 digits, easily: *I* manage with a 3/4 inch margin: but, unless you write very small you will find an inch more comfortable).

Write a *precis* of each Letter, received or sent, in chronological order. Let the entry of a "received" Letter reach from the left-hand edge to the right-hand marginal line; and the entry of a "sent" Letter from the left-hand marginal line to the right-hand edge. Thus the two kinds will be quite distinct, and you can easily hunt through the "received" Letters by themselves, without being bothered with the "sent" Letters; and *vice versa*.

Use the *right-hand* pages only: and, when you come to the end of the book, turn it upside-down, and begin at the other end, still using right-hand pages. You will find this much more comfortable than using left-handed pages.

You will find it convenient to write, at the top of every sheet of a "received" Letter, its Register-Number in full.

I will now give a few (ideal) specimen pages of my Letter-Register, and make a few remarks on them: after which I think you will find it easy enough to manage one for yourself.

29217		/90.		

(217)		Ap. 1. (Tu) Jones, Mrs. am		27518
sendg,		as present from self and Mr.		
J., a		white elephant.		225

(218)		do. Wilkins & Co. bill, for		28743
grand		piano, £175 10s. 6d. [pd		221, 2

(219)		do. Scareham, H. [writes from		
"Grand		Hotel, Monte Carlo"] asking		
to borr		ow £50 for a few weeks (!)		

		(220) do. Scareham, H. would		like to
		know <i>object</i> , for wh loan is		asked
		and <i>security</i> offered.		

218		(221) Ap. 3. Wilkins & Co.		in pre-
		vious letter, now before me,		you
		undertook to supply one for		£120:
246		decling to pay more.		

23514		(222) do. Cheetham & Sharp.		have
218		written 221 -- enclosing previo	us	let-
228		ter -- is law on my side?		[

(223)		Ap. 4. Manager, Goods Statn,		
G. N.		R. White Elephant arrived, ad-		
dressed		to you -- send for it at once --		
'very		savage.'		226

29225		/90.		

217		(225) Ap. 4 (F) Jones, Mrs. th		anks,
		but no room for it at present, am		sendin-
230		ing it to Zoological Gardens.		

223		(226) do. Manager, Goods Sta		tn, G.
		N. R. please deliver, to bearer		of this
		note, case containing White Ele-		phant
		addressed to me.		

		(227) do. Director Zool. Garde		ens. (en-

223	closing above note to R. W. Ma	nager)
	call for valuable animal, prese	nted to
229	Gardens	
(228)	Ap. 8. <i>Cheetham & Sharp</i> , you	222
	misquote enclosed letter, limit named	
	is £18	237
	0	
(229)	Ap. 9. <i>Director, Zoo. Gardens.</i>	227
	case de livered to us contained 1 doz.	230
	Port-- consumed at Directors' Ban-	
	quet-- many thanks.	
225	(230) do. T <i>Jones, Mrs.</i> why	call a
	☒ doz. or Port a 'White Elephant'?	
(231)	do. T <i>Jones, Mrs.</i> 'it was a	☒
	joke.'	
29233	/90.	
	(233) Ap. 10 (Th) <i>Page & Co.</i>	orderg
	Macauley's Essays and "Jane	Eyre"
242	(cheap edtn).	
(234)	do. <i>Aunt Jemina</i> -- invitg for	
	2 or 3 days after the 15th. [236
(235)	do. <i>Lon. and West. Bk.</i> have	
	recevd £250, pd to yr Acct fm Parkins	
	& Co. Calcutta. [en	
234	(236) do. <i>Aunt Jemina</i> -- can	not
	possibly come this month, will	write
239	when able. [
228	(237) Ap. II. <i>Cheetham and</i>	Co. re-
240	turn letter enclosed to you. [x
	(238) do. <i>Morton, Philip</i>	Co uld you
	lend me Browning's "Dramati	s Per-
245	sonæ" for a day or 2?	
(239)	Ap. 14. <i>Aunt Jemina</i> , leav-	236
	ing hou se at end of month: address	
	"136, Royal Avenue, Bath." [
(240)	Ap. 15. <i>Cheetham and Co.</i> ,	237
	returng letter as reqd, bill 6/6/8. [244
29242	/90.	
(242)	Ap. 15. (Tu) <i>Page & Co.</i> bill	\ 233
	for boo ks, as ordered, 15/6 [
(243)	do. ¶ do. books	
		/ 247
240	(244) do. <i>Cheetham and Co.</i> c	an un-
248	derstand the 6/8 -- what is £6	for?

(245)	Ap. 17. · <i>Morton, P.</i> "Dra	238
mat	Personæ," as asked for. [retd	249

221	(246) do. <i>Wilkins and Co.</i> with	
250	bill, 175/10/6, and ch. for do.	[en

243	(247) do. <i>Page and Co.</i> bill,	15/6,
	postal J 107258 for 15/- and	6 stps.

(248)	Ap. 18. <i>Cheetham and Co,</i> it	244
was a	"clerical error" (!)	

245	(249) Ap. 19. <i>Morton, P.</i> retu	rng
	Browning with many thanks.	

(250)	do. <i>Wilkins and Co.</i> receiptd	246
bill.		

Transcriber's Notes:

- "ø" is actually a circle with a dot in the middle.
- "T" is actually a 'sans-serif' oversized "T".
- "x" is actually the crossed multiply 'X'.

I begin each page by putting, at the top left-hand corner, the next entry-number I am going to use, *in full* (the last 3 digits of each entry-number are enough afterwards); and I put the date of the year, at the top, in the centre.

I begin each entry with the last 3 digits of the entry-number, enclosed in an oval (this is difficult to reproduce in print, so I have put round-parentheses here). Then, for the *first* entry in each page, I put the day of the month and the day of the week: afterwards, "do." is enough for the month-day, till it changes: I do not repeat the week-day.

Next, if the entry is *not* a letter, I put a symbol for "parcel" (see Nos. 243, 245) or "telegram" (see Nos. 230, 231) as the case may be.

Next, the name of the person, underlined (indicated here by italics).

If an entry needs special further attention, I put [at the end: and, when it has been attended to, I fill in the appropriate symbol, *e.g.*, in No. 218, it showed that the bill had to be *paid*; in No. 222, that an answer was really *needed* (the “x” means “attended to”); in No. 234, that I owed the old lady a visit; in No. 235, that the item had to be entered in my account book; in No. 236, that I must not forget to write; in No. 239, that the address had to be entered in my address-book; in No. 245, that the book had to be returned.

I give each entry the space of 2 lines, whether it fills them or not, in order to have room for references. And, at the foot of each page I leave 2 or 3 lines *blank* (often useful afterwards for entering omitted Letters) and miss one or 2 numbers before I begin the next page.

At any odd moments of leisure, I “make up” the entry-book, in various ways, as follows:

1. I draw a *second* line, at the right-hand end of the “received” entries, and at the left-hand end of the “sent” entries. This I usually do pretty well “up to date”. In my Register the first line is *red*, the second *blue*: here I distinguish them by making the first thin, and the second *thick*.
2. Beginning with the last entry, and going backwards, I read over the names till I recognize one as having occurred already: I then link the two entries together, by giving the one, that comes first in chronological order, a “foot-reference” (see Nos. 217, 225). I do not keep this “up to date”, but leave it till there are 4 or 5 pages to be done. I work back till I come among entries that are all supplied with “foot-references”, when I once more glance through the last few pages, to see if there are any entries not yet supplied with head-references: *their* predecessors may need a special search. If an entry is connected, in subject, with another under a different name, I link them by cross-references, distinguished from the head- and foot-references by being written *further from the marginal line* (see No. 229). When 2 consecutive entries have the same name, and are both of the same kind (*i.e.* both “received” or both “sent”) I bracket them (see Nos. 242, 243); if of different kinds, I link them with the symbol used for Nos. 219, 220.
3. Beginning at the earliest entry not yet done with, and going forwards, I cross out every entry that has got a head- and foot-reference, and is done with, by continuing the extra line *through* it (see Nos. 221, 223, 225). Thus, wherever a *break* occurs in this extra line, it shows there is some matter still needing attention. I do not keep this anything like “up to date”, but leave it till there are 30 or 40 pages to look through at a time. When the first page in the volume is thus completely crossed out, I put a mark at the foot of the page to indicate this; and so with pages 2, 3, &c. hence, whenever I do this part of the “making-up”, I need not

begin at the beginning of the volume, but only at the *earliest page that has not got this mark*.

All this looks very complicated, when stated at full length: but you will find it perfectly simple, when you have had a little practice, and will come to regard the “making-up” as a pleasant occupation for a rainy day, or at any time that you feel disinclined for more severe mental work. In the Game of Whist, Hoyle gives us one golden Rule, “When in doubt, win the trick”--I find that Rule admirable in real life: when in doubt what to do, I “make-up” my Letter-Register!