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## Writing love letters to yourself

Can you remember the last time you sat down with a pen and paper to handwrite a letter to your significant other? If the answer is no, you’re definitely not alone. Living in the era of DMs and heart emojis, it’s easy to forget how one of the most treasured ways to say I love you is still a good old fashioned letter. Whether you’re dating, engaged, or have been together forever, letting your partner know how much they mean to you with a tangible note is always a swoon-worthy move. “The vulnerable authenticity of a love letter is what will take [your partner’s] breath away,” explains couples counselor and writer Donna Keehn. We caught up with her to learn how to write a love letter from the heart and find inspiration. Meet the Expert Donna Keehn is a marriage and family therapist and published author based in San Diego, CA. “Remember,” she says, “your love letter is not meant to compete with all of the other love letters that exist ... [and] as long as the words expressed are sincere, it will be absolutely perfect for the person lucky enough to receive it.” Ready to get started? Below is everything you need to know to write a love letter. “With a love letter, the greeting can immediately reflect the depth of your connection and love,” shares Keehn. “But just because you’re being vulnerable and romantic doesn’t mean your tone has to be strictly formal.” Addressing your partner with a cherished nickname like “Sweetie Pie,” “Love Nugget,” or “Buttercup” can be just as touching as something like “My Love.” Also, when in doubt, simply starting with your partner’s first name is intimate in its own way. Reflecting on and sharing specific moments when you “knew” you loved someone is a beautiful start to the heart of the letter. Keehn suggests asking yourself, “Did you experience a moment where you realized all of the ways having this human being in your life has changed you [and] your life for the better? Think about these shared moments in a timeline fashion, and capture the experiences and emotions in free-flow writing.” Instead of going vague with statements such as “I love your personality,” Keehn encourages digging deeper and exploring the “why” behind what it is you love about someone. Without filtering yourself, try to articulate “why you love their personality, their character, their kindness, their generosity, their touch...” Capture that magic! This is the time to express how it really feels now that this person is in your life. “Don’t be shy!” laughs Keehn, “Put yourself fully out there at the end and toss insecurities to the wind!” As for the final line itself, you can of course never go wrong in baring it all through a simple, powerful “I love you.” Don’t know where to start, or having trouble finding a creative flow? “Take a deep breath, close your eyes and think about your partner” advises Keehn, “[and] let your heart and head fill up with their presence.” By creating a safe space for yourself, thoughts, feelings, and words will start to bubble up without judgment. When they do, just write without worrying about how it sounds. Poetic phrases, concrete statements, and sweet nothings are all perfect! “If you’re feeling stuck,” she adds, “turn to outside inspiration such as existing love letters, marriage vows, and of course, Shakespeare, to guide the way.” For a love letter that doesn’t feel trivial or forced, Keehn suggests going slow and piecing it together a bit at a time. “The vast majority of us want to rush through something when it feels awkward or outside of our comfort zone,” she says, “but when you think about it, just about everything we do, even really big things, are done in small steps...” “Yay, you’ve written the contents of your letter! A fun and, often overlooked, component of the letter itself, is what you write it on. “Let yourself have fun!” says Keehn, “The love letter doesn’t have to be on a fancy piece of stationary to be special.” As for a few example ideas? If your partner is a teacher, consider writing the letter on notebook paper and hiding it in their binder. Or maybe a chef? Create a “menu” front page that opens up to the letter inside... The possibilities are, truly, endless. To leave you feeling inspired, we’ve rounded up some of the most iconic love letters of all time. “Happy Birthday Princess, We get old and get used to each other. We think alike. We read each other’s minds. We know what the other wants without asking. Sometimes we irritate each other a little bit. Maybe sometimes we take each other for granted. But once in a while, like today, I meditate on it and realize how lucky I am to share my life with the greatest woman I ever met. You still fascinate and inspire me. You influence me for the better. You’re the object of my desire, the #1 Earthly reason for my existence. I love you very much. Happy Birthday Princess - John” “Today is beautiful and I am dreaming of you and enigma and how we are together today; your words in my ears making [me] limp and taut by turns with delight. Oh, I am sure we could use each other today. I like to believe that you are writing my music now; God knows I’m not doing it, because it simply seems to happen. The prettissimo is incredible the way you are and is perhaps a song and description about you ... Pardon the intrusion, but when in September will you be back? I would like to measure my breath in relation to the air between us.” “Diego, Nothing compares to your hands, nothing like the green-gold of your eyes. My body is filled with you for days and days. You are the mirror of the night. The violent flash of lightning. The dampness of the earth. The hollow of your armpits is my shelter. My fingers touch your blood. All my joy is to feel life spring from your flower-fountain that mine keeps to fill all the paths of my nerves which are yours.” Published on May 18, 2021 We have two ears and one mouth for a reason—effective communication is dependent on using them in proportion, and this involves having good listening skills. The workplace of the 21st century may not look the same as it did before COVID-19 spread throughout the world like wildfire, but that doesn’t mean you can relax your standards at work. If anything, Zoom meetings, conference calls, and the continuous time spent behind a screen have created a higher level of expectations for meeting etiquette and communication. And this goes further than simply muting your microphone during a meeting.Effective workplace communication has been a topic of discussion for decades, yet, it is rarely addressed or implemented due to a lack of awareness and personal ownership by all parties.Effective communication isn’t just about speaking clearly or finding the appropriate choice of words. It starts with intentional listening and being present. Here’s how to improve your listening skills for effective workplace communication.Listen to Understand, Not to Speak There are stark differences between listening and hearing. Listening involves intention, focused effort, and concentration, whereas hearing simply involves low-level awareness that someone else is speaking. Listening is a voluntary activity that allows one to be present and in the moment while hearing is passive and effortless.Which one would you prefer your colleagues to implement during your company-wide presentation? It’s a no-brainer. Listening can be one of the most powerful tools in your communication arsenal because one must listen to understand the message being told to them. As a result of this deeper understanding, communication can be streamlined because there is a higher level of comprehension that will facilitate practical follow-up questions, conversations, and problem-solving. And just because you heard something doesn’t mean you actually understood it.We take this for granted daily, but that doesn’t mean we can use that as an excuse.Your brain is constantly scanning your environment for threats, opportunities, and situations to advance your ability to promote your survival. And yet, while we are long past the days of worrying about being eaten by wildlife, the neurocircuitry responsible for these mechanisms is still hard-wired into our psychology and neural processing.A classic example of this is the formation of memories. Case in point: where were you on June 3rd, 2014? For most of you reading this article, your mind will go completely blank, which isn’t necessarily bad.The brain is far too efficient to retain every detail about every event that happens in your life, mainly because many events that occur aren’t always that important. The brain doesn’t—and shouldn’t—care what you ate for lunch three weeks ago or what color shirt you wore golfing last month. But for those of you who remember where you were on June 3rd, 2014, this date probably holds some sort of significance to you. Maybe it was a birthday or an anniversary. Perhaps it was the day your child was born. It could have even been a day where you lost someone special in your life.Regardless of the circumstance, the brain is highly stimulated through emotion and engagement, which is why memories are usually stored in these situations. When the brain’s emotional centers become activated, the brain is far more likely to remember an event. And this is also true when intention and focus are applied to listening to a conversation. Utilizing these hard-wired primitive pathways of survival to optimize your communication in the workplace is a no-brainer—literally and figuratively.Intentional focus and concentrated efforts will pay off in the long run because you will retain more information and have an easier time recalling it down the road, making you look like a superstar in front of your colleagues and co-workers. Time to kiss those note-taking days away! Effective Communication Isn’t Always Through Words While we typically associate communication with words and verbal affirmations, communication can come in all shapes and forms. In the Zoom meeting era we live in, it has become far more challenging to utilize and understand these other forms of language. And this is because they are typically easier to see when we are sitting face to face with the person we speak to.Body language can play a significant role in how our words and communication are interpreted, especially when there is a disconnection involved. When someone tells you one thing, yet their body language screams something completely different, it’s challenging to let that go. Our brain immediately starts to search for more information and inevitably prompts us to follow up with questions that will provide greater clarity to the situation at hand. And in all reality, not saying something might be just as important as actually saying something.These commonly overlooked non-verbal communication choices can provide a plethora of information about the intentions, emotions, and motivations. We do this unconsciously, and it happens with every confrontation, conversation, and interaction we engage in. The magic lies in the utilization and active interpretation of these signals to improve your listening skills and your communication skills.Our brains were designed for interpreting our world, which is why we are so good at recognizing subtle nuances and underlying disconnect within our casual encounters. So, when we begin to notice conflicting messages between verbal and non-verbal communication, our brain takes us down a path of troubleshooting. Which messages are consistent with this theme over time? Which statements aren’t aligning with what they’re really trying to tell me? How should I interpret their words and body language?Suppose we want to break things down even further. In that case, one must understand that body language is usually a subconscious event, meaning that we rarely think about our body language. This happens because our brain’s primary focus is to string together words and phrases for verbal communication, which usually requires a higher level of processing. This doesn’t mean that body language will always tell the truth, but it does provide clues to help us weigh information, which can be pretty beneficial in the long run.Active interpreting body language can provide you with an edge in your communication skills. It can also be used as a tool to connect with the individual you are speaking to. This process is deeply ingrained into our human fabric and utilizes similar methods babies use while learning new skills from their parents’ traits during the early years of development.Mirroring a person’s posture or stance can create a subtle bond, facilitating a sense of feeling like one another. This process is triggered via the activation of specific brain regions through the stimulation of specialized neurons called mirror neurons. These particular neurons become activated while watching an individual engage in an activity or task, facilitating learning, queuing, and understanding. They also allow the person watching an action to become more efficient at physically executing the action, creating changes in the brain, and altering the overall structure of the brain to enhance output for that chosen activity.Listening with intention can make you understand your colleague, and when paired together with mirroring body language, you can make your colleague feel like you two are alike. This simple trick can facilitate a greater bond of understanding and communication within all aspects of the conversation. Eliminate All Distractions. Once and for All As Jim Rohn says, “What is easy to do is also easy not to do.” And this is an underlying principle that will carry through in all aspects of communication. Distractions are a surefire way to ensure a lack of understanding or interpretation of a conversation, which in turn, will create inefficiencies and a poor foundation for communication. This should come as no surprise, especially in this day in age where people are constantly distracted by social media, text messaging, and endlessly checking their emails. We’re stuck in a cultural norm that has hijacked our love for the addictive dopamine rush and altered our ability to truly focus on the task at hand. And these distractions aren’t just distractions for the time they’re being used. They use up coveted brainpower and central processes that secondarily delay our ability to get back on track.Gloria Mark, a researcher at UC Irvine, discovered that it takes an average of 23 minutes and 15 seconds for our brains to reach their peak state of focus after an interruption. Yes, you read that correctly—distractions are costly, error-prone, and yield little to no benefit outside of a bump to the ego when receiving a new like on your social media profile.Meetings should implement a no-phone policy, video conference calls should be set on their own browser with no other tabs open, and all updates, notifications, and email prompt should be immediately turned off, if possible, to eliminate all distractions during a meeting.These are just a few examples of how we can optimize our environment to facilitate the highest levels of communication within the workplace. Actions Speak Louder Than Words Effective communication in the workplace doesn’t have to be challenging, but it does have to be intentional. Knowledge can only take us so far, but once again, knowing something is very different than putting it into action.Just like riding a bike, the more often you do it, the easier it becomes. Master communicators are phenomenal listeners, which allows them to be effective communicators in the workplace and in life. If you genuinely want to own your communication, you must implement this information today and learn how to improve your listening skills. Choose your words carefully, listen intently, and most of all, be present in the moment—because that’s what master communicators do, and you can do it, too! More Tips Improving Listening SkillsFeatured photo credit: Malchimp via unsplash.com

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