



## **Eighteenth-Century Letter Writing**

### **Introduction**

Without phones, computers, or the various electronic devices we have today, letter writing was the primary form of communication with people in the next town, another colony, or across the ocean. While letter writing is becoming a lost art with the evolution of texts and social network posts, the language and style of colonial writing is often rich in its use of language and detail. In this lesson, students will read and respond to real letters from eighteenth-century correspondents using eighteenth-century words and phrases.

### **Objectives**

Students will:

- Explore the differences between written communication now and in the eighteenth-century.
- Read for context and infer appropriate responses.
- Practice writing a letter using eighteenth-century words and phrases.

### **Materials**

- Handout - How to Speak and Write Eighteenth-Century Style
- Letter 1: Edmund Dickenson Letter from Valley Forge
- Letter 2: Letter from Bernard Moore to John Norton July 25, 1770
- Writing paper
- Letter template from the *American Instructor* (for lesson extension)
- Wax and seal (for lesson extension)

### **Strategy**

1. Lead a discussion about writing in the twenty-first century. Ask students:
  - a. how people communicate in writing (email, text, letters, notes, etc.)

- b. why people communicate (thank you notes, invitations, requests for services or payment, offers of goods/services, legal documents, birthday or holiday greetings, etc.)
- c. what is used for written communication

Write student responses on the board or overhead projector. Add any answers students may not have thought of (like letters to and from soldiers, acceptance letters for colleges, etc.).

2. Ask for student volunteers to come up to the front of the room and cross out (but not erase, so the answers can still be read) any answers that would not apply to the eighteenth century (for instance, the first student might cross out email. The next student might cross off computers.)
3. Distribute the handout *How to Speak and Write Eighteenth-Century Style*. Answer any questions and clarify unfamiliar vocabulary.
4. Give half the students Letter 1 and half the students Letter 2. Explain to students that they will be responding to their letter as if they are the intended recipient (Lucy Dickenson responding to her brother Edmund, for example). Students should use eighteenth-century words and phrases in their letters.  
[Note: Students could also work on their letters in pairs.]
5. Ask for student volunteers to share their letters.

### **Lesson Extensions**

1. Compare the Lawrence Luckless form letter with that of Bernard Moore (see discussion questions).
2. Students bring to class a recent e-mail, text, or social network post and translate it into the form of a colonial letter.
3. If materials are available, have students fold their letters and address the back. Then carefully burn a candle and drip the wax onto the folded letter to seal it. Have students stamp the hot wax with an object that would leave an imprint. (Sealing wax and seals can be ordered online.)

This lesson was written by educators Dee Besl, Cincinnati, OH, Sharon Sobierajski, Buffalo, NY, for the September 2011 *Teacher Gazette*.

## How to Speak and Write Eighteenth-Century Style

Use contractions for *it is*, *it was*, and *it will*.

Say:

*'Tis* a fine, warm day.

*'Twas* a very trifling rain.

*'Twill* be an honor, Sir.

Not:

It's a fine, warm day.

It was a very trifling rain.

It'll be an honor, Sir.

Call men *Sir* and Women *Madam* or *Mistress*. Use *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, or *Mistress*, and *Miss* along with the person's last name.

Address people according to their relationship to you:

Husband

Neighbor

Brother

Sister

Wife

Friend

Cousin

Uncle/Aunt

Say:

To be sure, Brother, you know these matters better than I.

I am glad to see you, Cousin.

If you are a young child, call your parents *Papa* and *Mama*.

An older daughter may call her father *Daddy* or *Papa*, and a boy or man should say *Father*.

Greet people with *How do you do?* Ask about the person's family or express pleasure at seeing the other person.

Examples:

How do you do, Mr. Harrison? I'm glad to see you.

How do you do? How does all at home?

Gentlemen may say, *Your servant*, *Your humble servant*, or *Your most obedient servant*, as part of a greeting.

Example:

Sir, I am your most obedient servant. I am heartily glad to see you.

*Good morning*, *good afternoon*, *good evening*, and *good day* are appropriate greetings.

Use *you was* instead of *you were*. “You were” was used when speaking to more than one person.

Use some of these good eighteenth-century verbs:

to amuse  
to astonish  
to conclude  
to endeavor  
to expect  
to propose (as ‘to propose a scheme’)  
to protest  
to repent (as ‘to repent of an action’)  
to retire (meaning ‘to leave the room’)  
to want (meaning ‘to lack’ as well as ‘to desire’)  
to weep

Use some folk expressions in your speech:

to put on (or give oneself) airs  
to make the best of a bad bargain  
to beat about the bush  
not worth a button  
poor as a church mouse  
to be in the dark  
to fit like a glove  
to be true blue  
as clear as day  
to be in a pickle  
to forgive and forget

**Letter 1**  
**Edmund Dickenson Letter from Valley Forge**

Dear Girl

I embrace this opportunity to communicate a few sentiments to you as well as inform of the Joy circulating through our Camp at the Glorious news from France which I make no doubt has reached your City by this time 'tis no less than an offer of Alliance from France & Spain on the most Honourable terms possible. I make not the least doubt but it will cause a Peace before the leaves (which now are just budding out here) falls from their tender Sprigs.

Understand by Billy Nicolson my shirts are coming on which I thank you most kindly for have desired him to supply you with cash when you may want it as well as your Sister Agnes your provider will direct the proper use of it give my compliments to Mrs. Craig & Husband &c &c

When you write to your York correspondent you will present my compliments to her & Family while I subscribe myself

Your [lov]ing Brother  
Edmund B. Dickinson  
Camp Valley Forge  
May 9th 1778

Dickinson, Edmund. Letter to Lucy. May 9, 1778. Dickinson Family Papers, 1778–1845. Manuscript 2001.9, the John D. Rockefeller Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia.

**Notes:** When Dickenson wrote this letter, France and Spain had just offered to help the colonists fight for their independence from Britain. Dickenson says he believes that by fall there will be peace.

Dickenson thanks Lucy for sending clothing, which was much needed at Valley Forge, the Continental Army's winter camp. He tells her Billy Nicolson would provide her and her sister, Agnes, with cash, when they needed it.

## Letter 2

### Letter from Bernard Moore to John Norton July 25, 1770

Virginia 25<sup>th</sup> July 1770

Dear Sir

I hope you will excuse me giving you the trouble of the Inclosed Bill, My unhappy situation obliged me to fall on this method to maintain my numerous family, indeed when this is settled I am in hopes to satisfy all my Creditors and Law where with all to support us, but it is a more saving way then we poor Virginians have been used to, This I don't mind, as a little with comfort, is much better then much with the trouble I have gone threw for some years past. I have made free with you so knowing your kind intentions was always to serve me, and now my Dear friend let me beg of you to extend yourself in my favor till then I shall be at a loss how to act, and indeed, I am afraid if its not returned to me soon that most of my Negroes will be taken away, which I intend to settle, My Friend Mr. Robt. Carter Nicholas has promised to write you and he will pay the expense but if any accident should happen to his letter I hope you'll credit me for this small sum, for which you shall be most punctually paid. As intended to move to the Mountains. I hope to make some good Tobacco and all that I ship shall go to you what little I have made these several years has been sold in the Country to Cloath my Negroes and the rest my creditors has got. Mrs. Moore joins with me in our kindest compliments to Mrs. Norton and family. I believe me sincerely Your Affectionate Bern. Moore PS Please let me hear from you by first opportunity

Bernard Moore to John Norton, July 25, 1770. John Norton and Sons Papers, Folder 31. Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

**Notes:** Moore is writing to Norton to borrow some money. Moore has a large family and is intending to move to the mountains. He also has some debts, and some of his slaves will be sold to pay for these debts if he does not pay them soon.

Moore promises to pay Norton back with the profit from this year's tobacco crop. He complains that most of the money he made the past few years by growing tobacco has been used already to pay debts and to clothe his slaves. Moore says Norton should talk to their mutual friend, Robert Carter Nicholas, who can reassure him that Moore is trustworthy. Robert Carter Nicholas was a well-respected man, and he promises to pay Norton back if Moore does not.

## Lesson Extension

This letter is from the book *American Instructor* and is an example of how a young man should write a letter asking for financial help. Compare this to the real letter written by Benjamin Moore to John Norton, his London merchant, asking for financial support.

### Discussion Questions

1. Using the template from *American Instructor*, did Mr. Moore write a good letter? Why or why not?
2. What words or phrases appear in both letters?
3. Why do you think letter templates like this one were published?

### Letter by Way of Petition to a Friend

Honoured Sir,

I am uncertain whether my late Misfortunes have come to your Knowledge; however, I most humbly presume on your good Nature, being assured by sundry Examples of your Compassion, that you will think of and take Pity on the Distressed; therefore, as an object truly deserving Compassion, I humbly implore, and petition you to consider the many Losses and Disappointments that I have met with in my unlucky and wayward Fortune, which have reduced me to such necessitous Circumstances, that I cannot possibly proceed in my Affairs; You was pleased once to stile me your Friend, and so I was indeed; and so I would most certainly be now, and shew it by a signal Proof of Kindness, if our Circumstances were changed, by standing between you and Misfortune, and screening you from the malevolent and inauspicious Influences of cross-grain'd Stars. I doubt not, Sir, but your Generosity and Goodness is as great; and I hope with all Humility, you will be pleased to interpose your good Offices &c. between unlucky Fortune, and, Sir, Your very humble Servant, Lawrence Luckless

George Fisher. "Letter by Way of Petition to a Friend." *American Instructor: or, Young Man's best Companion*. Anne Fisher, New York, 1770. Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.