

Deliver Post Haste!

Writing and Sealing Renaissance Correspondence

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In this modern age, there are many efficient modes of communication; they are fast, accurate, and easy to distribute. However, as a Society that seeks to recreate the lives of those who came before us, a handwritten letter is an opportunity to experience a little of what our forebears knew.

The letters used as references for this class came largely from the collection of Bess Hardwick's letters (1550-1608) and the Corpus of Scottish Correspondence (1500-1715), and so there may be variations found elsewhere in Europe that are not covered here.

What Do I Write About?

There are many opportunities to write letters. Here are a few examples to get you started:

- Invitations
- Award recommendations
- Thank you notes
- Letters of introduction
- Poems and love notes

It's an easy way to make a memorable impression on the recipient of your correspondence.

How Do I Structure My Letter?

Letters during the Medieval period were often written using a set of rhetorical guidelines known as *ars dictaminis*, coming into its full form during the 11th and 12th centuries. This structure follows the following pattern:

- *salutatio* - the greeting, with the recipient always named before the sender, except in the case where a superior is writing to a subordinate
- *exordium* - the building of goodwill, either by praising the recipient or humbly extolling the virtues of the sender
- *narratio* - an explanation of the matter in question
- *petitio* - a request for action on the part of the recipient
- *conclusio* - an explanation of the benefit produced by the requested action
- the letter is then ended in a fashion that does not mention the subject again.

With the coming of the Renaissance and wider literacy among the emerging middle class, this structure began to be abandoned in favor of a more familiar style. Letters written by notable personalities of the Roman era were studied and emulated as examples of this less restrictive mode.

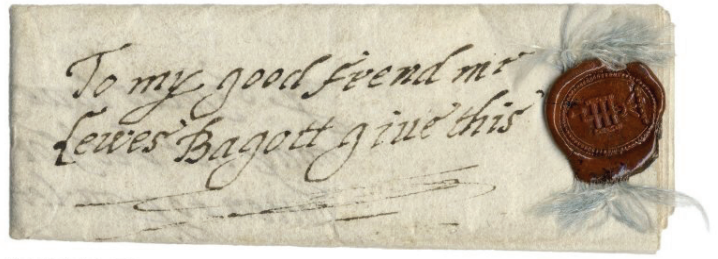


Fig. 1: A letter that has been folded into a tiny packet by "pleating" the paper, and then secured with silk floss and seals on either side of the packet. (Folger Shakespeare Library L.a. 852)

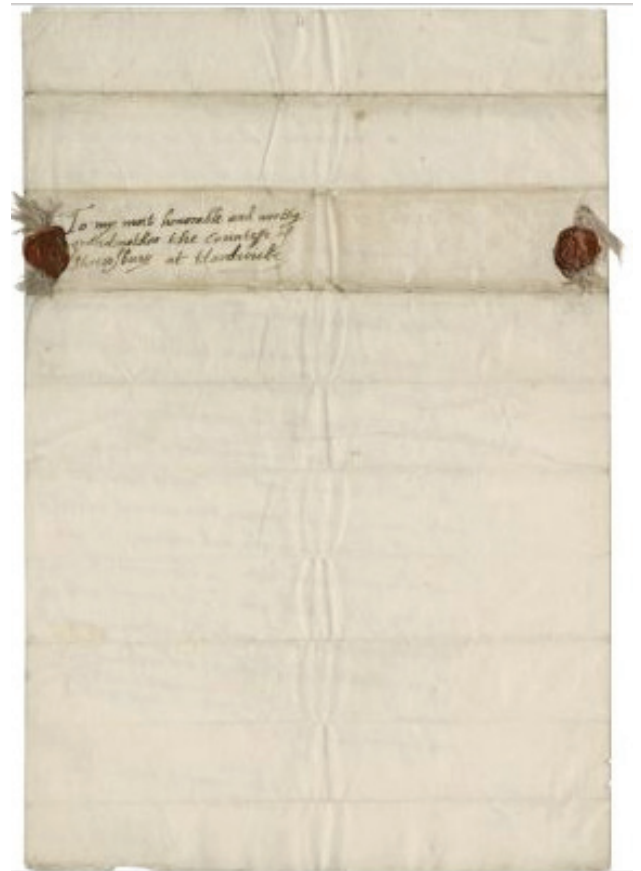


Fig. 2: Bess of Hardwick's Letters, ID 004, from Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel to Bess of Hardwick (1607)

While you can use historical forms as a guide for your own correspondence, you can also use your own judgment and voice to guide your writing. Obviously, a letter aiming for a historical physical appearance would be best served by form and language that evokes the same feel, but don't feel that you have to force yourself to write "forsoothly".

What Materials Should I Use?

Letters of this type would have most likely been written on paper made from linen or cotton rag fibers, using a quill and oak gall ink. Any type of lightweight white paper will do, however. The main things to be concerned with are how well it works with the pen and ink you are using and how well it will fold. Heavy paper will be difficult to fold and will make a bulky, unattractive packet.

As for pen and ink, whatever you are comfortable with will do. Quills, steel nibs, cartridge pens, even felt tip calligraphy pens will get the job done. This is an excellent opportunity to practice using tools that you are not yet comfortable with, as letters are not formal documents that demand great precision. There are many surviving examples of letters written with inexpert penmanship, so don't let that stand in your way.

For sealing the letter, any sealing wax will do. There are a variety of inexpensive sealing waxes that can be found at craft stores or online. Meltable waxes may have wicks or not. Most are relatively flexible to allow for the rough handling of the modern postal service, though you can find waxes that are more brittle, like the shellac-based waxes that would have been used in period.

Some sealing methods make use of silk floss, for which any embroidery floss (cotton or silk) will serve.

How Should I Write My Letter?

Letters may be written with a secretary or (in the latter part of the 16th century) italic hand, which are faster to write than older gothic hands. Typically educated men used the more businesslike secretary, while the less educated or women were more likely to use italic. As time progressed, italic became more common and secretary fell out of fashion. I usually use a 14th century French secretary hand (see Appendix A for an exemplar). While there is of course variation from person to person and across centuries and countries, the basic forms are similar enough that any hand of these types will do.

Most letters are written with a straight left hand margin (sometimes the paper is folded here to provide a guide) and running to the end of the paper on the right hand side. Sometimes the writer runs out of room and must continue writing into the left margin, or inside the folded page of the letter (more on that later). Typically there are no paragraph breaks and minimal punctuation, though you may make your own decisions here for the sake of your personal taste and readability. The text begins a distance from the top of the page not more than the width of the left hand margin. Wherever the text of the letter may end, the subscription and signature are placed toward the bottom right corner of the page.

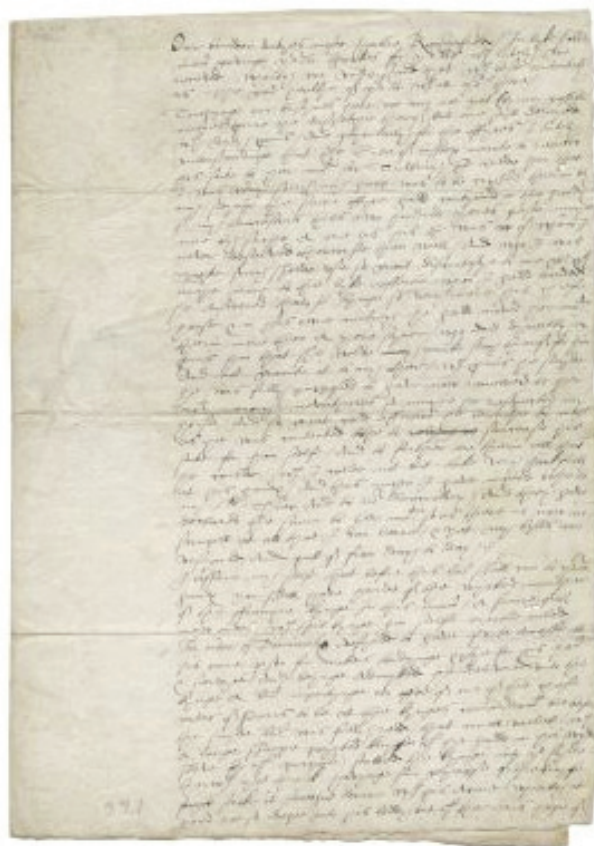


Fig. 3: *Bess of Hardwick's Letters*, ID 088, from Gilbert and Mary Talbot to Bess of Hardwick (1589)

Let's Write a Letter!

Before beginning, take your sheet of paper and fold it in half, short edge to short edge. This will create a bifolium with an inner and outer leaf. The letter will be written on the inner leaf, while the outer leaf will, once folded and sealed, protect the letter both from damage and prying eyes seeking to read the text through the back of the page.

Write whatever you like for the text of your letter. If you like, you can use the aforementioned folding technique to create a guide to line up the left hand margin. I often compose my letter beforehand and print out a copy to go by when I'm writing. If you have a light box you can use that and a sheet of ruled notebook paper to give you a cheat sheet for keeping your lines straight and evenly spaced. Not all extant letters have perfectly straight lines, though, so feel free to just eyeball it. I have not seen examples of guidelines being drawn on the paper itself, so I would advise against that.

Once the ink is dry, it's time to consider how to secure it for delivery.

Folding And Sealing

This is, of course, the best part of the whole letter writing process. While the letters we write will not likely contain sensitive information or go on long journeys across the country by foot and horseback, it is still good to consider the purpose of the letter packet while creating it. First, the folding creates a protective layer around the text of the letter in the same way that a separate envelope does for modern letters. Second, the method of sealing using a personal seal matrix ensures that the letter has not been read or tampered with so long as the seal remains intact. This is why the period sealing waxes were designed to be brittle; if they were too flexible, it would be possible to carefully remove the seal and then re-attach it afterward. Depending on the type of seal (or, to use Dambrogio's term, "letterlock") used, there may be a paper strip or string that may be cut or broken instead of breaking the wax seal itself. In any case, damage to the letterlock indicates that the security of the letter has been breached.

While there are no special tools required for folding the letter, a bone folder or other such implement may help to get crisp folds, and a cutting mat will make it easier to cut slits through the folded packet. A knife (an X-acto is excellent for this) or a pair of scissors may also be helpful depending on the technique you choose.

For sealing the letter, you will need your wax, a fire source, and a seal matrix. For melting the wax, a lighter will do the job, but a small candle (tea lights are quite portable) will be more convenient. The wax may be dripped onto the place to be sealed (this is easiest with wicked wax sticks), or the softened end of the wax stick may be pressed to the spot to create a puddle of wax. You may also use a small ladle or metal spoon to melt the wax and pour it into place.

Once the melted wax is where you need it to be, let it cool enough that it is not completely liquid, but is still malleable. This should not take long, but it may be helpful to practice with your particular wax to get a feel for how it should look. Too liquid and it will stick to your matrix, too solid and it won't take a good impression. If you wait too long, or if you have to go back and add more wax, it's usually possible to carefully re-melt the wax with a lighter.

To make the impression in the seal, there are many options for a seal matrix. A signet ring or stamp-type matrix are common. If you don't have the tools to make a metal matrix, you can carve one out of any number of materials. I have made seal matrices out of soapstone, though an easier way is to form a blank out of Sculpey and then carve your design in the flat face after it has been baked. The deeper you make your design, the clearer the impression in the wax will be. Remember that the impression will be the reverse of whatever is on the face of the matrix, so keep this in mind if you are incorporating any text or heraldry.

When you make the impression in the wax, it is helpful to moisten the matrix slightly to keep the wax from sticking. The easiest way to do this is to simply lick it, though you may use a damp sponge or towel if you prefer.

Letter Packet Types

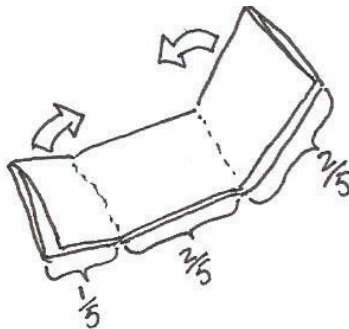
There are a wide variety of techniques that can be used to seal your letter packets. I have provided a few here as examples, though many more can be found at Jana Dambrogio's website (<https://letterlocking.org/categories/>). Bear in mind that some of the methods there may be based on out-of-period examples.

1 - Fold and Tuck

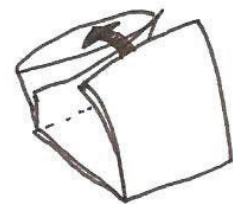
Based on the examples in the Bess of Hardwick archive, this was a very common method of sealing letters. It is quick and easy, and requires no special tools. To open the packet, break or cut the wax seal.



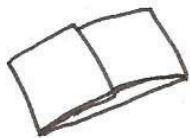
Step 1: Fold the letter in thirds, top to bottom



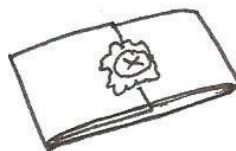
Step 2: Fold the ends in with the pictured proportions



Step 3: Tuck the longer end inside the shorter end, so the seam ends up in the middle of the packet



Step 4: Make sure all the folds are firm and flat



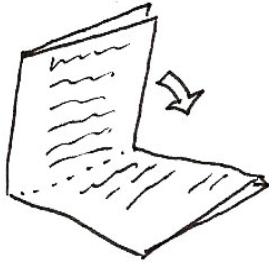
Step 5: Apply the wax seal over the seam



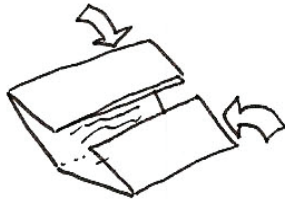
Step 6: Address the unsealed side

2 - Triangular Paper Lock

This method is based on a letter written by Queen Elizabeth in 1584 (<http://bit.ly/QEItriangle2>). It makes use of a triangular piece of paper folded over the open end of the folded packet. The wax is melted onto the packet and then the end of the paper laid on top of it and the matrix pressed on top. It is harder to get a well defined impression when sealing through paper, though a deep relief on the matrix or especially thin or moistened paper may help. Writing the address over the triangular lock helps ensure that the lock has not been tampered with. In some cases such a paper lock may be cut from a corner of the letter itself, since distinctive laid lines and other features of the paper can be used to verify that the lock is the original.



Step 1: Fold the letter in half, top to bottom and open it back up



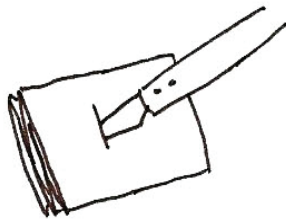
Step 2: Fold the top and bottom in toward the center (gate fold)



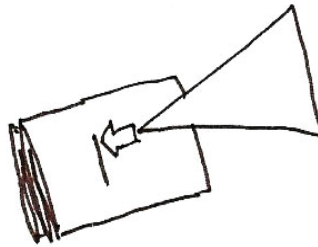
Step 3: Fold in the center again and make sure all folds are flat and crisp



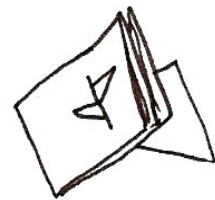
Step 4: Fold the packet in half horizontally



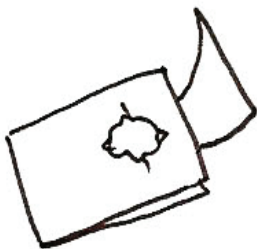
Step 5: Use a sharp knife to make a slit near the center of the packet



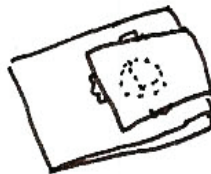
Step 6: Cut a triangular piece of paper and feed the point through the slit



Step 7: Cut the tip of the triangle in half and fold the halves down in opposite directions



Step 8: Melt the wax on top of the triangle tips



Step 9: Fold the wide end of the triangle over the open end of the packet and press it into the wax with your seal matrix



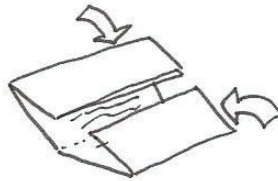
Step 10: Turn the packet over and address it on the other side

3 - Pleated and Flossed

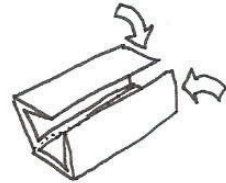
This method produces a small packet that is easily concealed in the hand, making it appropriate for secret communications. The end of the packet is wrapped with silk floss (and sometimes also hair) and then sealed with wax on both sides. For greater security, an awl can be used to poke a hole through the packet and then the floss can be sewn through the hole around the sides and end of the packet. In this case it only needs to be sealed on one side.



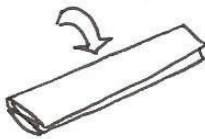
Step 1: Fold the letter in half, top to bottom and open it back up



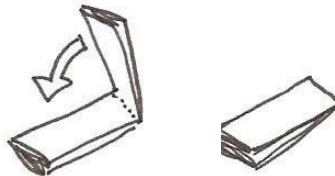
Step 2: Fold the top and bottom in toward the center (gate fold)



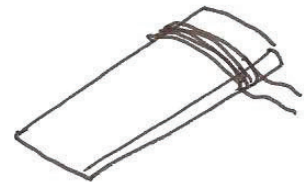
Step 3: Fold the top and bottom in toward the center again



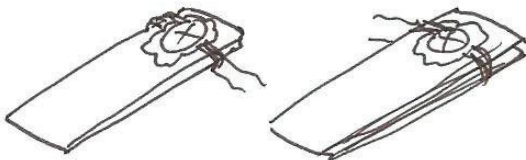
Step 4: Fold in the center and make sure all folds are flat and crisp



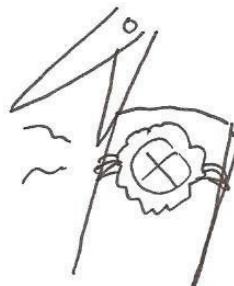
Step 5: Fold the packet in half horizontally



Step 6: Wrap floss around the open end of the packet



Step 7: Seal over the floss on both sides



Step 8: Trim the ends of the floss






























Step 9: Address the packet

Bibliography

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Appendix A: Exemplar for a 14th Century French Secretary Hand

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