

## Writing a Letter of Sympathy (or Condolence) - Lastingpost.com

---

### Introduction

Writing a sympathy letter (sometimes called a letter of condolence) is one of the hardest tasks we face. It is a struggle to set down our thoughts and express our emotions. You should persevere as your letter will provide great comfort and heartfelt support to a bereaved person. These letters are very often reread many times and saved for years.

### The letter has 2 purposes

A sympathy letter has two purposes; to pay tribute to the life of the deceased person and to provide support to the bereaved.

### Style of a sympathy letter

The style should be simple and steady. Dramatic or elaborate prose should be avoided. You should put yourself in the shoes of the person receiving your letter and draft it accordingly.

A hand written letter is best. A sympathy card from a shop is not going to be as personal. If you want to send a card then one solution is to send a hand written letter inside.

The letter can be addressed to a single bereaved person or to the family as a whole. It should be reasonably short in length (under one page) and should generally be sent promptly; usually within two weeks of the death.

### Some guidelines on content

Although there are no hard and fast rules regarding content of the sympathy letter, there are some generally accepted guidelines on the structure that you may find helpful.

These guidelines are as follows:

1. A good place to start is to acknowledge the loss. You should note how you heard of the death and how you reacted when you heard the news. This sets the tone and purpose of the sympathy letter at the outset. It is also a good idea to refer to the deceased person by name and don't embark on a charade of avoiding words like death.
2. Express your condolences. A sincere and heartfelt expression of your sympathy will be much appreciated.

3. Reflect on the special qualities of the deceased that you admired. It will be a great comfort to the bereaved person if you remember the deceased person's good qualities and the specific qualities that made them special.

4. Share a fond memory of the deceased. The bereaved will find it very helpful to hear that the deceased positively affected the lives of others. They will be reassured and proud to know that the deceased was held in high regard by people they came across in the course of their life.

A personal story that positively illustrates a characteristic or that pays tribute to an aspect of the person's life will be cherished.

Although the overall tone of a sympathy letter should be sombre, humour should not be completely avoided. When used appropriately it can provide the best possible tonic.

In the same way if you have a favourite photo of the deceased, then you might want to include it with your letter. The family will be very appreciative especially if they haven't seen it before.

5. Emphasise the bereaved person's own personal strengths and give them encouragement.

An appropriate reference to the bereaved person's own strengths and fortitude may help them to strengthen their resolve to cope with their bereavement.

6. Offer assistance and help to the bereaved person. Instead of a general offer of help which may be taken to be simply a social platitude; make a specific offer of assistance. It may be an offer to do the weekly shopping or take care of the children one afternoon. The person will be much more likely to take you up on it.

You should repeat the offer subsequently to ensure that the person realises that you are serious and not just being polite. At the same time you should not make an offer to help that you are unable to fulfil. The bereaved person could feel very let down.

7. Close the letter with some thoughtful and sympathetic words along the following lines:

'My prayers and thoughts are with you at this time'

'You are in my thoughts and prayers.'

As an alternative, you may want to end the letter with a quote or an extract from a favourite poem that you think is appropriate to the bereaved person or the deceased.

8. Finally, sign off with an appropriate expression of affection and support; such as:

'With my affection and deepest condolences.'

# LASTING POST

'With all my love and sympathy.'

'With my deepest sympathy.'

'My love and thoughts are with you.'

Please note that information which we provide through Lasting Post is in outline for information or educational purposes only. The information is not a substitute for the professional judgment of a Solicitor, Accountant or other professional adviser. We cannot guarantee that information provided by Lasting Post will meet your individual needs, as this will very much depend on your individual circumstances. You should therefore use the information only as a starting point for your enquiries.

**END**

Last updated: 14<sup>th</sup> July, 2009