

# How to Write a Condolence Message

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## Expressing Sympathy

Although a condolence note can be difficult to write, it can also be one of the most important—and valued—messages you'll ever send. These guidelines can make this challenging writing task a little easier.

A condolence message serves three purposes: to express sympathy to the bereaved about the death of a loved one, to share your affection or regard for the deceased, and to let the bereaved know you are thinking about them and are willing to help. Sincerity in these letters is prized above all things, so don't worry too much about whether your writing is at its finest—write from the heart, and your message will be heard and appreciated.

### Do

- Express your sorrow at the death, and your heartfelt sympathy for the reader.
- Relate an anecdote about the person who has passed. Sharing a story lets the reader know that people appreciated their beloved, and that there is a community of remembrance and continuation.
- Let the reader know that they are not alone: tell them that they are in your thoughts (and in your prayers, if you pray).
- Handwrite the card or letter to make your message more personal.

### Don't

- Don't put it off. A timely expression of sympathy is best, so write as soon as you can.
- Don't send an e-mail. A condolence letter is one of those cases where an e-mail simply won't do: you must send a paper letter or card.
- Don't dwell on how bad you feel about the loss. Remember that the purpose of the message is to offer sympathy and support to the reader, not to make a display of your own grief.
- Don't allude to religious or other spiritual or philosophical views of death, unless you're quite sure the reader shares those views.

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- Don't offer advice. This is not the time to help the reader "move on" or achieve "closure." The purpose of your letter is to acknowledge the loss and to express condolence and support in the here and now, not to push the reader along into the future.
- Don't say anything to suggest that the death was a blessing or a relief. Even if the deceased suffered for a long time before death, this is not the time to say "he's better off now" or "at least he is no longer in pain." Your message should be an unqualified expression of sympathy and condolence.

## Model Outline

Three paragraphs is a good length for a condolence message. This simple outline can help guide you:

**Paragraph 1:** Express your sorrow at the news and your sympathy for the bereaved.

**Paragraph 2:** Demonstrate your regard for the deceased, perhaps by telling a story or describing how special he or she was to you.

**Paragraph 3:** Express your concern for the wellbeing of the bereaved, and offer any help you are genuinely willing to provide.

Excerpted from *How to Write Anything: A Practical Guide to Everything You'll Ever Have to Write—at Work, at School, and in Your Personal Life*, by Laura Brown, Ph.D., coming from W.W. Norton in spring of 2014. To sign up for advance notice of publication and to explore other writing resources, please visit [www.howtowriteanything.com](http://www.howtowriteanything.com).

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