

CORRESPONDENCE IN A FRIENDLY MANNER

The following article is from a memorandum written by Newton B. Drury in December, 1947 during his Directorship of the National Park Service. It was directed to the attention of all Service personnel whose business it was to correspond with those outside the Service. We believe it is as timely today as it was when it was written and is therefore presented here with Mr. Drury's permission.

Each year, on thousands of occasions, we project our own personalities and the personality of the Service to those, both within and without the Service, to whom we address the written word. That personality, varying as it does with individual writers, must nevertheless possess certain qualities, no matter who the writer may be, if we are to perform our jobs to the satisfaction of the people of the Country. If I were to name any single element which should be stressed in preparing correspondence, I would choose unhesitatingly that of friendliness.

My purpose in addressing this memorandum to all those who are called on to prepare or to sign National Park Service correspondence is to urge that each of you place primary emphasis on friendliness in the performance of that task as in the performance of all other tasks that involve service to, or association with, either the public we serve or our fellow employees.

I have been trying to determine for myself what are the qualities of a friendly letter—the product of a genuinely friendly attitude. Here are some of them. Perhaps some of you who read this will have others to suggest—and, if so, I hope you will do so.

1. The first is one which, for want of a better name, I would call "humanness". A letter is just a substitute for conversation between courteous and friendly human beings. I cannot think of any good reason why they should not be much the same. In conversation, most of us do not find it difficult to avoid cold phrases, worn cliches, and stiltedness—all those qualities which have given Government correspondence a not-too-good reputation. Let's try to be as "easy" in the letters we write.

I should like to say a good word here for the occasional judicious use of colloquialisms—those words and phrases which are generally accepted in conversation, but which haven't yet gained full literary acceptance. Our written language has been vastly enriched by such words and phrases, which have shown themselves effective tools for the speaker and writer. I am not, of course, advocating "slangy" letters; and I repeat "judicious use". Avoid the colloquial, unless you are certain that it will not give offense or create an unfavorable reaction.

2. Accuracy. This refers not only to the information we give and the opinions we express but also, rather importantly, to the spelling of names. It is especially important that the name of the person to whom a letter is addressed be correctly spelled. Considering the illegibility of many signatures, I know that isn't always easy. It is a good idea, by the way, to keep one's eyes open to a not infrequent stenographic lapse—the use of different names in the address at the head of a letter and in the introduction. Discovery, after mailing, that a letter to Mr. Wheeler Jones has started out “Dear Mr. Wheeler” is bound to produce a feeling of chagrin.

3. Completeness. What constitutes a complete letter is a matter of individual judgment. The same letter, addressed to one person, might be incomplete which, for another, would be unduly long. It is necessary to gauge the recipient and the degree of interest he possesses or that we are anxious for him to have. It is better, however, to err on the side of too much than too little. If there is any doubt as to whether enough information has been given, an invitation to come back for more should be extended.

Every once in a while I discover that letters have gone out which have completely failed to answer a question that has been asked. This is a matter of carelessness, and it is discourteous carelessness. It is a desirable habit, after dictating your reply, to reread the letter which is being answered to make certain that all inquiries have been correctly interpreted and adequately covered.

4. Ease of reading. Letters containing reasonably brief paragraphs and free of unduly long and complicated sentences, help to create a favorable impression. The English Language is rather abundantly supplied with words, such as “however”, “nevertheless”, “also”, and many others, which bridge the gap between sentences. It is a good idea to make more use of them. It is perhaps interesting to note that, by application of this advice to this memorandum, three different sentences have been broken into six without weakening them.

The use of long words may flatter the recipient of a letter by its assumption that he knows their meaning; however, I recommend shorter, less learned-sounding words, if they will convey the meaning as well. If long words are used, it is a good idea to be certain of their meaning. We should not, for example, say “mitigate against” when “militate against” is meant.

5. Fairness. There are doubtless occasions where the composition of an angry or impatient letter is good for the soul as a safety valve. I would not decry these, within limits, so long as the product is torn up and put in the wastebasket instead of in the mail.

It is virtually impossible to be angry or irritated and at the same time preserve one's sense of fairness; and no angry or irritated letter ever made a friend for either a person or an organization. I think of the quality of fairness particularly in connection with correspondence within the Service in which it is necessary to call attention to, or to comment upon, some failure of performance. There seem to me to be two guiding principles to be observed in composing such correspondence. One is that, in the absence of unmistakable evidence to the contrary, it should assume that the failure was one of judgment or lack of thought rather than deliberate intent; the other, that the possibility of justifying or extenuating circumstances must always be kept in mind. A corollary to both of these should be at least as great a readiness to acknowledge devoted and intelligent action; as great eagerness to praise as to blame. I know of nothing more certain to engender just such action and to heighten loyalty to persons and the Service.

6. Promptness. "Who answers quickly, answers twice" to paraphrase a proverb. Three days should be the limit; and, if that is too short a time for a full answer, reply anyway to acknowledge and to give assurance of a complete reply later.

In an effort to make our correspondence outstanding in friendliness and courtesy, I bespeak the hearty cooperation of all of you.

