

### 3 Private letters

#### Definition

A **letter** is a written message, usually sent by post.

#### Introduction

Wealthy individuals have written letters for many centuries, and personal letters from royalty and powerful individuals still exist, for example the **correspondence** between Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. As the number of people with the education to read and write grew, so letter writing became more widespread.

#### Letters in literature

Many of the first novels written in English are in the form of an exchange of letters, for example *Pamela* or *Clarissa* by Samuel Richardson. Novels written in the form of letters are **epistolary** novels.

The Romantic poets, such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge, wrote many long and detailed letters to friends and family; the letters of John Keats show his thoughts and imagination as vividly as many of his poems. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the writing, receipt and reading of letters plays an important part in the developing relationships between the main characters.

#### Postal service

At the start of the 19th century, letters were delivered by courier, coach or horse rider. Postage rates were high, designed as a tax to raise revenue. The **recipient** (person receiving the letter) paid for it, with the cost dependent on the distance travelled and the number of pages. There were a lot of local services, many charging one penny for delivery within a defined area.

In 1840, the first **national delivery service**, with prepaid stamps, was introduced in Great Britain, and similar systems followed in other countries.

Many letters were sent to and from the battlefields during the First World War: men in the trenches had the time to write, and although letters were **censored**, many contain moving accounts of their experiences.

The increasing popularity of alternatives to letter-writing, the telephone, emailing and other messaging services, means that written letters no longer have the central place in family communication they once occupied.

#### Conventions of the genre

- Private letters are written by and to individuals who know one another, or wish to make contact.
- They will begin with a **salutation** (greeting), and use a simple layout, with the writer's address and date in the top right-hand corner.
- They are often part of a sequence, so that one letter responds to what has been written previously.
- The writer will often refer to the thoughts and feelings of the reader.
- They may make reference to things only the writer and reader would understand.
- Letters often **describe events** in sequence, as a diary would, but with the intention that they are read and understood by someone else.
- Letters often mark key events, and reassure family and friends that the writer is well and thinking of them.
- Because thoughts have been committed to paper they often have **emotional and symbolic significance**. A writer may think they are writing their last letter, because a relationship is ending, or they face a particular danger.
- Sometimes a letter writer will think carefully about what they are saying and how they express themselves; sometimes they will experiment with ideas and phrases that we later find in other writing.
- Often people will save and collect the letters they have received, and sometimes keep a copy of the letters they send.
- Sometimes a writer, or a member of their family, will ask for the letters to be returned, possibly so that they may be **published as a record** or **kept in an archive**.
- The writer will use the first person, 'I', to describe their experiences, thoughts and feelings, or the first person plural, 'we', to include others.
- The writer will often use the second person, 'you', and refer to the thoughts and feelings of their reader. They may anticipate their reaction.
- Because the letter is intended to be **private and personal**, the language may be less formal than that used in a speech or public letter. The writer may use language to amuse or entertain, to flatter or deceive, but the effect may be of spontaneous writing.
- Sometimes the writer's thoughts and feelings will develop as they write. The tone and content may change, from reporting or describing to passionate explanation or justification.
- The writer may use **rhetorical techniques**, including repetition and other ways of patterning language, or metaphor and simile.
- The writer may use a range of different **discourse markers**: often these will be to do with the sequence of time, but may show the logic of the sequence of thought.
- If the letter is written in haste, it may contain false starts, sentences that show a change of mind or second thoughts.

- A private letter may contain a PS or 'postscript', a brief comment added after the letter has been completed.
- A private letter will end with a valediction, which may be a variant of 'love' or 'Best wishes'.

#### Conventions checklist

- ✓ Think about the person to whom you are writing.
- ✓ Use a simple layout, with your address in the top right.
- ✓ Put the date below the address.
- ✓ Refer to your reader, and ask about them.
- ✓ Write clearly and not too formally.
- ✓ End with a phrase like 'Love' or 'Best wishes'.

#### Before you write

Many private letters are used to build a relationship, or to share thoughts, feelings and experiences with a friend or family member. Writing a letter is often seen as an act of courtesy. If you are writing a private letter from your own point of view, think carefully about what your reader would like to know. If you are writing from the perspective of a real or imagined character, before you begin, answer the following questions:

- 1 What is the relationship between the writer and reader? Why are they writing a letter? Is there a reason why they are apart?

**TIP** You may wish to refer to a particular event or occasion, something the person receiving the letter has not witnessed.

- 2 What emotions do you want to express? Are there also emotions your writer wants to hide?

**TIP** You may want to express emotions very clearly, or you might want to hide your feelings to avoid upsetting your reader.

- 3 What matters most to the writer and reader?

**TIP** You are more likely to start with your strongest emotion and reason for writing, unless you are deliberately keeping information back. You might want to build up to a point that could be difficult to explain without preparing your reader beforehand.

- 4 What kind of language is appropriate for your writer and reader?

**TIP** Try to use words and ideas that would be familiar to your writer and reader. Do not use modern ideas or ways of speaking if you are trying to capture the point of view of a character in history.