

LESSON MATERIALS

How to Speak and Write Eighteenth-Century Style

Use contractions for *it is*, *it was*, and *it will*.

Say:

'Tis a fine, warm day.

'Twas a very trifling rain.

'Twill be an honor, Sir.

Not:

It's a fine, warm day.

It was a very trifling rain.

It'll be an honor, Sir.

Call men *Sir* and Women *Madam* or *Mistress*. Use *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, or *Mistress*, and *Miss* along with the person's last name.

Address people according to their relationship to you:

Husband

Neighbor

Brother

Sister

Wife

Friend

Cousin

Uncle/Aunt

Say:

To be sure, Brother, you know these matters better than I.

I am glad to see you, Cousin.

If you are a young child, call your parents *Papa* and *Mama*.

An older daughter may call her father *Daddy* or *Papa*, and a boy or man should say *Father*.

Greet people with *How do you do?* Ask about the person's family or express pleasure at seeing the other person.

Examples:

How do you do, Mr. Harrison? I'm glad to see you.

How do you do? How does all at home?

Gentlemen may say, *Your servant*, *Your humble servant*, or *Your most obedient servant*, as part of a greeting.

Example:

Sir, I am your most obedient servant. I am heartily glad to see you.

Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, and *good day* are appropriate greetings.

Use *you was* instead of *you were*. “You were” was used when speaking to more than one person.

Use some of these good eighteenth-century verbs:

to amuse
to astonish
to conclude
to endeavor
to expect
to propose (as ‘to propose a scheme’)
to protest
to repent (as ‘to repent of an action’)
to retire (meaning ‘to leave the room’)
to want (meaning ‘to lack’ as well as ‘to desire’)
to weep

Use some folk expressions in your speech:

to put on (or give oneself) airs
to make the best of a bad bargain
to beat about the bush
not worth a button
poor as a church mouse
to be in the dark
to fit like a glove
to be true blue
as clear as day
to be in a pickle
to forgive and forget

Letter 1
Edmund Dickenson Letter from Valley Forge

Dear Girl

I embrace this opportunity to communicate a few sentiments to you as well as inform of the Joy circulating through our Camp at the Glorious news from France which I make no doubt has reached your City by this time 'tis no less than an offer of Alliance from France & Spain on the most Honourable terms possible. I make not the least doubt but it will cause a Peace before the leaves (which now are just buding out here) falls from their tinder Sprigs.

Understand by Billy Nicolson my shirts are comeing on which I thank you most kindly for have desired him to supply you with cash when you may want it as well as your Sister Agnes your provider will direct the proper use of it give my compliments to Mrs. Craig & Husband &c &c &c

When you write to your York correspondent you will present my compliments to her & Family while I subscribe myself

Your [lov]ing Brother
Edmund B. Dickinson
Camp Valley Forge
May 9th 1778

Dickinson, Edmund. Letter to Lucy. May 9, 1778. Dickinson Family Papers, 1778–1845. Manuscript 2001.9, the John D. Rockefeller Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia.

Notes: When Dickenson wrote this letter, France and Spain had just offered to help the colonists fight for their independence from Britain. Dickenson says he believes that by fall there will be peace.

Dickenson thanks Lucy for sending clothing, which was much needed at Valley Forge, the Continental Army's winter camp. He tells her Billy Nicolson would provide her and her sister, Agnes, with cash, when they needed it.

Letter 2

Letter from Bernard Moore to John Norton July 25, 1770

Virginia 25th July 1770

Dear Sir

I hope you will excuse me giving you the trouble of the Inclosed Bill, My unhappy situation obliged me to fall on this method to maintain my numerous family, indeed when this is settled I am in hopes to satisfy all my Creditors and Law where with all to support us, but it is a more saving way then we poor Virginians have been used to, This I don't mind, as a little with comfort, is much better then much with the trouble I have gone threw for some years past. I have made free with you so knowing your kind intentions was always to serve me, and now my Dear friend let me beg of you to extend yourself in my favor till then I shall be at a loss how to act, and indeed, I am afraid if its not returned to me soon that most of my Negroes will be taken away, which I intend to settle, My Friend Mr. Robt. Carter Nicholas has promised to write you and he will pay the expense but if any accident should happen to his letter I hope you'll credit me for this small sum, for which you shall be most punctually paid. As intended to move to the Mountains. I hope to make some good Tobacco and all that I ship shall go to you what little I have made these several years has been sold in the Country to Cloath my Negroes and the rest my creditors has got. Mrs. Moore joins with me in our kindest compliments to Mrs. Norton and family. I believe me sincerely Your Affectionate Bern. Moore PS Please let me hear from you by first opportunity

Bernard Moore to John Norton, July 25, 1770. John Norton and Sons Papers, Folder 31. Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Notes: Moore is writing to Norton to borrow some money. Moore has a large family and is intending to move to the mountains. He also has some debts, and some of his slaves will be sold to pay for these debts if he does not pay them soon.

Moore promises to pay Norton back with the profit from this year's tobacco crop. He complains that most of the money he made the past few years by growing tobacco has been used already to pay debts and to clothe his slaves. Moore says Norton should talk to their mutual friend, Robert Carter Nicholas, who can reassure him that Moore is trustworthy. Robert Carter Nicholas was a well-respected man, and he promises to pay Norton back if Moore does not.

Lesson Extension

This letter is the book *American Instructor* and is an example of how a young man should write a letter asking for financial help. Compare this to the real letter written by Benjamin Moore to John Norton, his London merchant, asking for financial support.

Discussion Questions

1. Using the template from *American Instructor*, did Mr. Moore write a good letter? Why or why not?
2. What words or phrases appear in both letters?
3. Why do you think letter templates like this one were published?

Letter by Way of Petition to a Friend

Honoured Sir,

I am uncertain whether my late Misfortunes have come to your Knowledge; however, I most humbly presume on your good Nature, being assured by sundry Examples of your Compassion, that you will think of and take Pity on the Distressed; therefore, as an object truly deserving Compassion, I humbly implore, and petition you to consider the many Losses and Disappointments that I have met with in my unlucky and wayward Fortune, which have reduced me to such necessitous Circumstances, that I cannot possibly proceed in my Affairs; You was pleased once to stile me your Friend, and so I was indeed; and so I would most certainly be now, and shew it by a signal Proof of Kindness, if our Circumstances were changed, by standing between you and Misfortune, and screening you from the malevolent and inauspicious Influences of cross-grain'd Stars. I doubt not, Sir, but your Generosity and Goodness is as great; and I hope with all Humility, you will be pleased to interpose your good Offices &c. between unlucky Fortune, and, Sir, Your very humble Servant, Lawrence Luckless

George Fisher. "Letter by Way of Petition to a Friend." *American Instructor: or, Young Man's best Companion*. Anne Fisher, New York, 1770. Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.