

THE GRATITUDE PROJECT

It was the last time I saw her but I heard from her after that because she always writes great thank-you notes, the kind you keep out on the kitchen counter until you spill something on them and then you throw them in a drawer so you can stumble across them sometime and read them again and crack up. Davis was the only person I met who also knew the rule about thank-you notes: don't start them with "thank you." Start them with something else and save "thank you" for later and the note writes itself. Amanda Davis knew how to write well and she knew how to thank people and she knew how to fill a room with people laughing their asses off.

— Daniel Handler (a.k.a. Lemony Snicket), remembering Amanda Davis at <http://www.mcsweeneys.net/davis.html>

Writers of thank-you notes tend to fall into two categories: those who have never experienced any trouble sitting right down and crafting heartfelt expressions of gratitude and those who have never written a thank-you note without a parent standing sternly nearby insisting that they drag a pen across their Pokemon stationery because failure to do so in a timely fashion will hurt grandma's feelings and likely provoke her never to send another gift in the future!

"Gratitude is a quality similar to electricity: it must be produced and discharged and used up in order to exist at all." — William Faulkner

We all know that a sincere, well-written personal expression of gratitude usually guarantees that its recipient will think even more highly of its author. On the level of enlightened self-interest, remember that people like feeling appreciated, and if they feel that you have noticed the nice things they do for you, they're more likely to give you additional reasons to thank them in the future!

"Gratitude to gratitude always gives birth." — Sophocles

More importantly, we all want to be good people, and good people make appropriate efforts to express their appreciation to those who have been good to them!

Working together, we can revive the art of the thoughtful and well-written thank-you note!

Before you write, assemble your materials. Find some stationery, plain note cards or a selection of attractive postcards and sufficient postage. Choose paper you like. Note cards are best, as your message will be brief, and would look silly stranded on overly large sheets of papyrus. You'll also need a pen: even if your handwriting tends toward the illegible, you must still hand-write your notes. Do not type them or, worse, use a word processor. No excuses: the personal touch matters. Since the expression of gratitude can effectively come only from you, it should be in handwriting that is distinctly yours.

"Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others." — Marcus Tullius Cicero

While no single form will suffice for all thank-you notes, effective expressions of gratitude will include these seven (?) parts:

1. Greet the Giver

Begin with a heartfelt salutation, employing the most affectionate language appropriate to your relationship with your intended audience.

"Gratitude is the sign of noble souls." — Aesop

2. Start with Words Other Than “Thank you” (Recall a Past Shared Moment?)

Note Daniel Handler’s praise for his friend, Amanda Davis, and follow her example. This approach will make your notes sound less like acts of obligation and more like genuine expressions of gratitude. One very effective strategy is to recall a past shared moment: “I was so glad you were able to help me to think of a solution to my dessert dilemma” or “Our excursion to the baking supply shop was full of moments I’m sure I’ll never forget.”

“I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder.”

— G.K. Chesterton

3. Express Your Gratitude

Avoid the “just writing” clichés, such as “I’m just writing to say. . .”. In general, do not write about your writing!

If you’re writing to thank someone for a service or other intangible gift, first define what the gift is, and then make the gift sound as attractive as possible. For example, “Thanks for teaching me how to bake a cherpumple, a skill that will save me future worries about what to bring to pot luck gatherings!”

While we all aspire to become the sort of people who craft expressions of gratitude for all sorts of gifts, if you are writing in response to a gift of money, avoid mentioning the money directly. Thank your audience for “generosity” instead of “money”: you’ll sound less crass.

“We can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures.”

— Thornton Wilder

4. Discuss Your Use Of or The Effects Of the Gift

For example: “Because I am now able to bake and construct a cherpumple, I will save countless hours that I would have spent just trying to figure out what to contribute to pot luck dinners. In addition, cherpumple preparation has lent new definition to my arm muscles!”

If you are writing about an item, write something nice about the item and how you will use it. Don’t lie or exaggerate; just write the nicest compliment you can offer sincerely. If the gift was moolah, allude to how you will use the money, but do not specify to the point of making a line item shopping list.

5. Allude to the Personal Relationship and Comment upon the Future

Consider why the audience gave you the gift. How does the gift reveal your relationship to the giver? Emphasize your relationship with your audience, or what the gift means to you, by writing about how the audience fits into your life (“I don’t want to sound hokey, but I think I’m lucky to have you as a big sister”) or how the gift has improved your future (“I’m going to bring a cherpumple to my holiday office party next week to impress my dessert-loving boss! I’m betting I’ll be rewarded with a raise and promotion!”) or both.

6. Restate the Key Point

You can’t say “thank you” too many times, so write it again!

“Gratitude is heaven itself.” — William Blake

7. Offer a Warm Valediction!

Get out as quickly and affectionately as possible: “Love,” “Yours Truly,” “With Love”— even “Sincerely” will do in a pinch. Then sign your name neatly enough that it can be deciphered.

“Gratitude is the fairest blossom which springs from the soul.” — Henry Ward Beecher