

Dear Sincere

Charles Rembar

Our epistolary habits are wasteful, specifically our openings and closings. And, since our planet has limited resources, they are dangerous. I refer to person-to-person written communications generally, whether typed or handwritten and whether sent by post or private carrier or facsimile transmission (all, in that nicely cadenced lawyers' phrase, hereinafter spoken of as "letters"). This does not have to do with our use of thick paper on one side only, an ostentation that the British manage to do without. It has to do with words.

Our openings and closings unnecessarily deplete our stores of paper, and therefore trees; ink, and therefore metals; fuel for airplanes and trucks, increasing our dependence on small-time despots made big by the oil beneath their sandy wastes; electricity, thus exacerbating the pain of the choice between further toadying to these unlovely tyrants and relying on perilous atom-driven generators; and mail carriers' shoe leather, giving further outrage to Animal Rightists. To balance these diminutions, we get enhancement — of illogic and hypocrisy.

On the number of letters and their content, we are helpless. As to content, little can be done about verbosity. Teaching terseness to the population at large would require a governmental effort that the deficit will not allow, and would be about as effective as college courses that undertake to teach creative writing. (Some attempts to inculcate brevity have been made at the better law schools. You can judge the level of success by the legal documents you see.) As to number, restraints on sending letters that are unnecessary, irritating, or downright harmful come up against the First Amendment, as now interpreted by an eager, vogue-susceptible Supreme Court. The Court's recent solicitude for unbound expression, after almost two centuries of ignoring the First Amendment, has been independent of conservative-liberal differences. The Justices have extended the protections of the

amendment even to advertising, including the snake-oil offerings of certain surgeons and the seduction to litigation by certain law firms. That the Bill of Rights was meant to guarantee a right to peddle is a proposition that would have astounded John Adams, James Madison, and the other Founding Parents. (How's that last for staying out of trouble?)

There is, however, some saving that can be made, in salutations and valedictions. The changes will not need legislation or governmental force of any kind. Just making people aware of the foolishness will result in its reduction. And do not think the saving will be negligible. It is tiny, of course, in any single letter. But consider the hundreds of millions of letters that go forth each day, the number of days in the year, and the years as they march by.

First, let us consider openings. By far the commonest is "Dear _____." How many addressees are actually dear to the person sending the letter? There are, of course, letters expressing emotional attachment in which the word is appropriately used by the writer and pleasurably welcomed by the recipient, but they are a minuscule portion of the letters in which the word appears. Almost always, the writer has no such feeling and the recipient doesn't care. So let us dispense, except infrequently, with *Dear*.

Dear, of course, is better than *My dear*. At the very least, it is two letters and a space better. Fortunately, the longer form is obsolescent. For a while, it was used as a more formal alternative to *Dear*. Then it added a negative connotation, a sort of "See here. Don't imagine we are friends." Then an even haughtier suggestion: "I hardly know you. I answer your letter only out of a sense of noblesse oblige. Don't get any ideas."

Sir and *Dear Sir* are utterly inappropriate. We have no knights on this side of the Atlantic. In fact, this form of address may be unconstitutional. Article I, Section 9 forbids the granting of any "title of nobility." Strictly speaking, knights are not nobles, but there exists a vague impression in America that they are.

That leaves us with the name alone. But does the name as part of the salutation serve any purpose? If the letter comes by

mail, the one to whom it is sent can tell from the envelope that he or she is the person it is meant to reach; if by facsimile, from the cover sheet. There is no reason why the writer should not immediately launch into whatever needs to be said. If the envelope bears someone else's name, of course, you should not open it; you are possibly committing a violation of the law, and certainly a violation of manners. If it bears no name, if it is addressed to "Occupant" or "Resident," it should be discarded unopened; we have a duty to discourage the odious practice.

So, except in the rarest cases, there should be no salutation at all. How, then, about the valedictions? Consider *Very truly yours*, *Sincerely yours*, and the recent elliptical *Yours*. *Yours* should not be used in any form, except perhaps where a special relationship justifies it. Ordinarily, I am not yours. I am not your child, your parent, your spouse, your lover, or your serf. If I am your employee, I should not engage in such groveling. If I am your employer, you should not expect it. It may be acceptable when a pastor is writing to a member of the flock, or a doctor to a patient, or a teacher to a student, or a lawyer to a client. Never the other way around.

Then how about omitting the *Yours* and just saying *Sincerely* or *Truly*? It then appears to relate not to the relationship, but to the content of the letter. This creates two difficulties. One is that it is very often untrue. Letters are rarely written in the innocent, earnest, and firm belief that justifies the words *truly* or *sincerely*. The second difficulty is the implication that other letters you may send are not sincere or true. If you are usually honest in what you write, why say so in this instance?

Regards and *Best regards* appear frequently. What do they mean? *Regard* as a noun, of course, means aspect or esteem. But the plural makes no sense, and never appears except in the ugly *as regards* or at the end of letters. If, stretching the meaning, it suggests you are examining the addressee from several different angles, it is rude.

Then there is the laconic *Best*. Does it modify what precedes it, so as to say, "This is the best I can offer"? Or what follows it, which is the name of the writer — an unseemly boasting?

You may write *Cordially* when you feel cordial to the person to whom you are writing. Often, however, the writer who closes with *Cordially* has precisely the opposite feeling. It is a favorite among those who are engaged in adversary, even bitter, negotiations.

Respectfully is called for in certain situations. One — where it is least often used — is where real respect exists. Another is a lawyer addressing a judge; nobody likes to be held in contempt of court.

His Eminence Fowler (he of *Modern English Usage*) favors *Faithfully yours*. It is bad enough when the writer pretends to belong to the addressee. To add that the writer will remain in that role — "faithfully" denotes unswerving and enduring devotion — is worse. Elsewhere, Fowler seems also to advocate *Faithfully* without the *yours*. Toward whom or what is he full of faith? To the Queen? To the Church of England? That won't do in the United States. It might have been appropriate at one time, when the Dodgers were in Brooklyn, then not winners, and the letter went from a fan to the team or to another fan and had to do with the clasped-to-the-bosom notion that next year would be better. But that was special.

The sensible, honest closing for the usual letter is a simple signing of your name. We should rid ourselves of all those others — at best useless and wasteful, at worst smarmy and hypocritical.

The current usages, however, are not the worst in history. Beginning in the period of the Rococo, and continuing into the Age of Enlightenment, closings reached turgid levels not seen since. People of the same social class, writing to each other, used valedictions such as this:

I remain, Sir, Y^r Humble
and Obed^t Ser^{vt}

And so, dear reader (an appropriate *dear*: every writer has fond feelings for any reader who stays through the end), I remain

Y^r Arrost & Rebellious Ser^{vt},

Charles Rembar

