

A Sequel to “An Epistolary Essay”

More on Complimentary Closes

Last year, the *SJLW* ran an “epistolary essay” on a question raised by James D. Maugans of Philadelphia: Is it incorrect to end a letter with “Sincerely,” as so many writers do? In his popular column “The Grammatical Lawyer,” which appears in each issue of *The Practical Lawyer*, Maugans had contended that it is ungrammatical to end a letter with “Sincerely.” Charles Alan Wright and Bryan A. Garner argued that it is entirely acceptable.

This piquant exchange prompted even more publishable letters. What follows is a sampling of our incoming and outgoing mail — several letters exemplifying, though not discussing, the distinctive sign-off at issue. We gratefully acknowledge the writers’ permission to quote their letters.

—The Editors

Hon. Nathan L. Hecht, Justice, Supreme Court of Texas,
Austin, to Bryan A. Garner, 18 March 1992 [excerpt]

I enjoyed the CLE program last week, as usual; but the new *Scribes* was the best part of the week, *sincerely*. My own objection to “sincerely yours,” which I consciously considered and sustained when I came to the bench (the matter is not entirely frivolous!), was that a judge should always write sincerely, but should never be any *one’s*, sincerely or otherwise. I might have taken up my old habits of adding “yours” to correspondence at some point in a nonjudicial future, but having had the benefit of the debate, I am, I assure you, far less likely to do so.

Whatever,

Nathan L. Hecht

Hon. William J. Brennan, Jr., Washington, D.C., to the *Scribes Journal*, 20 March 1992

Thank you for sending me "The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing." I very much appreciate your thinking of me.

Sincerely,

Wm. J. Brennan, Jr.

Dr. Robert W. Burchfield, retired editor of the *Supplements to the Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford, England, to Bryan A. Garner, 23 March 1992 [excerpt]

I particularly enjoyed the article about end-of-letter conventions. I first encountered the Sincerely yours formula in the 1950s when I became secretary of the Early English Text Society and had much correspondence with American members. The convention in Britain was strictly Yours sincerely, or, in formal letters, Yours faithfully. Nowadays I receive letters from British people using a wide variety of signing off formulas, but Yours faithfully, Yours sincerely, Yours ever, and Yours (by itself) seem to be the most usual (in ascending order of friendliness and informality).

Bob

Michael H. Cardozo, attorney, Washington, D.C., to Bryan A. Garner, 23 March 1992 [excerpt]

After reading pages 83 to 99 of the *SJLW*, I will continue to use the single word "Sincerely."

Marianna S. Smith, attorney, Bethesda, Maryland, to Bryan A. Garner, 24 March 1992 [excerpt]

You have no idea how self-conscious I am, writing to you after reading your article. To make matters worse, I can't figure out how to sign this damned note.

Marianna

Hon. Hans Linde, retired Justice, Supreme Court of Oregon, Salem, to Charles Alan Wright, 28 March 1992

As happens to the best of us even with ALI texts, you and your dogged correspondents are chasing the wrong cat. You need help from a literalist (or logical positivist) who has tried to make sense of English as a foreign language, not as the incoherent growth of adaptations and social conventions that its native apologists admire. But unfortunately, I am not French.

The real problem is with "yours." One can say or write anything "sincerely," or insincerely claim to do so. Only fanatics about using sentence fragments have trouble with a note that reads (well, that states, not "reads"): "I apologize. Sincerely." Or: "We very much hope you can join us. Sincerely." Or: "I promise to pay you next week. Sincerely." (Or should that be "Faithfully"?)

But "yours"? Your what? Obviously something has been omitted already. Once it was "obedient servant," and who would write that sincerely today? More likely "yours" now implies "friend," but of course the writer may be the addressee's parent or child or spouse, and what questions do the phrases stir then? Truly your father? Sincerely your son? Faithfully your wife?

A real search would extend to languages and sources beyond our reporters of usage, who are as lax as *Webster's*

Third. Where did German get the same forms as English, ending in “Ihr” (though sometimes preceded by “With the most preferential high respect”)? Do the French use an unexplained “votre”? What about Russians? I believe the clues to this, as to all European usage, must be sought in Greek and Latin. Sincerely.

Your faithful (if not obedient)
follower,

Hans

Sir Brian Cubbon, formerly Permanent Undersecretary of the Home Office, London, England, to Charles Alan Wright, 28 March 1992 [excerpt]

I wonder if “Yours whateverly” is a shortened version of “your obedient (or whatever) servant.” We have got ourselves into an awful mess here over how to end a letter. The *Times*’ letters today mostly end “Yours faithfully,” but there are three “Yours etc.” and other variants. Everyone is scared of appearing stuffy and unfriendly. Even the Gas Board signs off “Yours sincerely,” which you would not now use to anyone you know at all well. In Government there is much use of “Yours ever,” coupled with Dear [first name]. I have never been comfortable with it — it is so *insincere*. I often opt out with a barely legible “Yours . . .” You have rescued me. Henceforth —

Sincerely,

Brian

Hon. John Minor Wisdom, United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, New Orleans, Louisiana, to Charles Alan Wright, March 1992 [excerpt]

I eliminated the “yours” after “Sincerely” many years ago. It went the way of *supra* and *infra*.

David Elliott, attorney, Edmonton, Canada, to Bryan A. Garner, 26 March 1992

Thank you very kindly for sending me a copy of the *Scribes Journal*, which I enjoyed reading.

Sincerely (I will never again use this word without thinking of you!)

David

Elsbeth Rostow, Stiles Professor of American Studies, The University of Texas at Austin, to Charles Alan Wright, 30 March 1992

The splendid exchange on complimentary closes leaves me saddened. Trained in an old school, I resist indolent modernism. “Confined” by the need to use the “Y” word? For shame! (Or would you prefer simply “Shame!”)

Perhaps I may explain. My father, a punctilious man, wrote his annual reports over the summer, and, as soon as I could read, let me hold copy for him. Proof-reading was never fun — but of course I was flattered. On long Vermont afternoons we would also go over his correspondence, each letter ending in a fashion you would eschew. I was seven during the last summer he was well enough to work. After his death, I turned to more predictable activities.

So peace to Messrs. Wright, Garner, and Maugans — and may Judge Haynsworth rest in peace as well. Burke

gives me consolation: "It is not what a lawyer tells me I *may* do; but what humanity, reason, and justice tell me I ought to do."

Yours sincerely,

Elsbeth

Kevin R. Wolff, attorney, St. Simons Island, Georgia, to Bryan A. Garner, 30 March 1992 [excerpt]

I agree that a letter closing can imply *yours* with *sincerely* or another form suggested in the article. It shocks me that Maugans considers this a matter of right and wrong, rather than one of preference. While I do not question the existence of absolutes in the world of usage, a letter closing strikes me as a particularly personal arena.

Hon. Harry A. Blackmun, Washington, D.C., to Charles Alan Wright, 30 March 1992

Many thanks for your letter of March 25 and for sending along the new issue of *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing*. Justice White was talking of this at Conference the other day. I shall read it with interest.

The misuse of "viable" still annoys me, but I am afraid that battle has been lost long since. I still fight the war about "parameter" and shall not give up on that one. As an old mathematician, I shall fight to the end. My colleagues know that I shall join no opinion in which that word appears.

I hope all is well with you. Sincerely,

Harry A.B.

W. Dalton Tomlin, attorney, Houston, Texas, to Charles Alan Wright, 30 March 1992

Thank you for the copy of *An Epistolary Essay*. I could visualize the smile on your face as you fomented the ostensible combatants.

I have been interested in closings for some time. It is my observation that a number of people follow the lead of the party initiating the correspondence. Examples abound, including at least one from my "Charles Alan Wright Correspondence File." Susanne Kirk signs her letters to you "Cordially" in response to your solidly consistent "Sincerely" (not an example of the phenomenon of which I speak), but her response to Barry Cork's letter about Dead Ball adopts Barry's "All the best" closing. I would wager that constitutes a singular instance of her using that closing.

I am most certainly very
sincerely, and very truly, yours,

Dalton

Hon. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C., to Charles Alan Wright, 30 March 1992 [in full]

Dear Charles

As ever, affectionately yours.

Love,

Ruth

Hon. Sandra Day O'Connor, Washington, D.C., to Charles Alan Wright, 1 April 1992

The *Scribes Journal* is always good reading. But you have made me self-conscious about how to end my letters! Like you, I think I'll stick with just

Sincerely,

Sandra

Dr. Yvonne Cripps, Director of Legal Studies, Emmanuel College, Cambridge, England, to Charles Alan Wright, 6 April 1992 [excerpt]

I agree absolutely with you and Bryan that much is implicit in complimentary closes and it is not necessary to set out the whole sentence or phrase which the close abbreviates. I think that these things also develop over time in different ways in different English speaking countries so that in England one almost invariably uses "yours faithfully" at the end of a letter addressed to "Dear sir" and "yours sincerely" to close a formal letter which has been addressed to an individual by name.

Hon. Hale McCown, retired Justice of the Nebraska Supreme Court, Lincoln, to Charles Alan Wright, April 1992 [excerpt]

I belatedly wanted you to know how much Helen and I enjoyed your lively complimentary-closes piece. Helen says it should be in the *New Yorker* magazine, but from the size of the reprint I think it's destined for *The Practical Lawyer*.

As always,
(*very* complimentary)

Mac

Phil Knight, Executive Director of the Plain Language Institute, Vancouver, British Columbia, to Bryan A. Garner, 27 April 1992 [excerpt]

After reading your “epistolary essay,” I sign off with extreme self-consciousness.

Yours truly,

Phil Knight

Hon. Eugene A. Wright, United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, Seattle, Washington, to Bryan A. Garner, 26 May 1992

One of my law clerks has shared with me his copy of *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing*. I write to inquire how I may be added to the mailing list of this fine publication. Must I apply for a Scribes membership?

Sincerely or Sincerely yours,

Eugene A. Wright

Bryan A. Garner to Judge Eugene A. Wright, 2 June 1992 [excerpt]

Joining Scribes is the best way to ensure that you get a copy of each issue of *The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing* — I hope you’ll consider doing just that. West Publishing Company mails several thousand copies to lawyers and judges throughout the country and, though I’m editor-in-chief of the publication, I’m not exactly sure how the list is assembled.

Splitting the baby was a brilliant suggestion in Solomon’s circumstances, but I wonder about the way you split your complimentary close — “Sincerely or Sincerely

yours.” On the one hand, I’m tempted to request a decision, hoping that you’ll sign off with “Sincerely” (as most of the U.S. Supreme Court Justices do); on the other hand, I think I’d better not tempt fate, and if you’ve suggested that “Sincerely” alone would be acceptable, I’ll consider the battle won. Besides, one shouldn’t ask a federal judge to decide something that’s not even a genuine case or controversy — especially since you may be called upon someday to address this very issue in a case before the Ninth Circuit. If that happens, I trust (without asking you now to decide) that you’ll impose severe sanctions on any lawyer who suggests that “Sincerely” alone is a grammatical error.

Thank you for your charming letter. With best wishes,

Sincerely,

Bryan A. Garner

**His Honour Judge David Wild, Fotheringhay, England, to
Charles Alan Wright, 17 October 1992 [excerpt]**

Your Epistolary Essay amused me. You are all right or all wrong as the case may be. Whether you use sincerely or truly or faithfully or respectfully or humbly or any other word to suit your mood or the context and whether you put yours before or after, the justification is in custom and usage not grammar. You will have noticed that I usually write “Yours ever” which is often seen as “ever yours” — your what? Letters to the Editor of the Times usually end with “yours etc.”

The origin of the practise is surely to be found in the more leisurely days gone by when a correspondent would have closed with the words “I am Sir your Honour’s most

faithful and obedient servant . . .” or “believe me to be your most sincere friend . . .” With the passage and want of time these words have been reduced to two or in your case one! This has become correct usage but not grammar. There is a word that describes a single word which stands for a whole sentence such as “yes” or “no” but I have now completely forgotten it. But that is what your “sincerely” really is. But whatever it is you like it and no one can say it is wrong. I suppose you knew all this really and had tongue in cheek!

Yours ever,

David

