

The dying art of letter writing

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Christine Witkowski doesn't write letters.

The 43-year-old sociology instructor remembers mailing two personal notes this past year, one an expression of sympathy, the other a thank-you note.

"People have filled in the gaps with so many other types of communication," Witkowski said, checking her email on her laptop the other day at a Lexington coffee shop.

Christine Witkowski checks her e-mail at a Lexington coffee shop. For many like Witkowski, letter writing is a thing of the past, being replaced with e-mail.

About this series

The State examines the bonds between communities and post offices: the significance and beauty of post office buildings, the work of a neighborhood mail carrier and the delight of getting personal mail.

There's email, texting, video conferencing and, of course, cellphone conversations — all shorter, faster and more convenient than writing a letter.

But with a decline in letter writing, people are losing an intimate and enduring form of communication, historians and cultural observers said.

Sentimental love letters may become a thing of the past.

Documenting historical events has become more of a challenge.

Michael Montgomery, professor emeritus of English and linguistics at USC, draws a distinction between communication and interaction. "Because people are just having — particularly with text messaging — five-second interactions. It's all instantaneous.



“People don’t stop and say, ‘I’m going to think about this for awhile.’ There’s too much pressure for instant response and instant contact for communication to be very substantial.”

There’s a big difference between writing with pen and paper and writing on a computer, too.

“On the internet, there’s much more of a sense that you’re in a semi-public situation and anything you say might be passed on,” said Karen Lystra, who teaches American studies at California State University in Fullerton. “That really affects what people write.”

Lystra is interested in a specific form of written communication, the love letter.

She suspects they are rare among young couples today.

Lystra said no one has studied the effect of email on love. But judging from the reaction of students to the 19th century letters Lystra brings to class, they are uncomfortable exploring their emotions through letters.

“They find them inauthentic,” Lystra said. “They’re suspicious about that intense, almost over-the-top emotional, unrestrained conversation.”

But love letters lead to a deeper understanding of each other, Lystra said.

Writing a love letter — any letter — involves self-exploration and reflection. It allows nuance and precision.

Randy Akers, director of the S.C. Humanities Council, said penmanship is part of the self-expression that goes into letter writing, too.

“They’re not teaching kids cursive writing anymore, and when you lose your handwriting ability, I think you’re actually losing part of yourself,” Akers said. “Your writing is an extension of yourself.”

Eric Emerson, a military historian and director of the S.C. Department of Archives and History, said today’s soldiers are more likely to communicate with their families using internet phone service.

“Why would you email your family when you can sit in front of your laptop and see them?” he asked.



But the downside is, “That communication will be lost except in the memories of people who were there, looking at each other through a computer screen.”

The documenting of history is a concern for a lot of people.

“I just hate to see the demise of good letters, having read so many over the years and known so many people who have written such fine letters,” said Harvey Teal, an expert on South Carolina postal history.

Teal said he recently re-read the letters of Mary Boykin Chesnut, the renown Civil War diarist, work that never would have resulted by email, he said.

“Email becomes a shorthand,” he said. “It’s quick and dirty.”

Cindy Grosso, who runs the Charleston School of Protocol and Etiquette, is emphatic about the need to convey “the attitude of gratitude” with a well-worded thank-you note on special paper, for example.

But when there are so many other ways to communicate, Grosso is not convinced writing long letters about daily activities has much value anymore.

“People in today’s hurry-up society don’t need all of that,” she said, “but it doesn’t mean that letter-writing is dead.”

