



LAD Letter Writing: Su's Toolbox

Introduction

Hi! My name is Su, and I am a volunteer letter writer for LAD. I have been writing letters for about 9 months and I really wanted to share with you all some of the tips and tricks I've learned when it comes to writing uplifting letters for our recipients. That's what this comprehensive document is for: empowering you with tools to help you make a difference through the written word.

Just a disclaimer: letter writing is not a one-size-fits-all, and there are many valid, effective approaches to connecting with others in your writing. Therefore, take my tips with a grain of salt and use them according to your own judgment. It is with hope that my suggestions will be of aid to you as you are starting out as LAD volunteers.

What is the purpose of a letter?

Before I begin, I would like to briefly preface by talking about the purpose of a written letter (in the context of LAD, of course). While each letter may be different, I generally consider these my three primary objectives:

1. Validating the recipient

One of the most powerful ways to establish rapport with the person you are writing to is to validate them: their experiences, their struggles, and their personhood. Through acknowledging their battles, reminding them that it is understandable to experience pain, and “mirroring” back what they have shared in your letter, you are letting the recipient know that you have listened to their story. This is crucial, because most individuals who request letters from LAD do so because they want to be *listened* to — to have their voice heard.

2. Providing comfort and encouragement

Many of our recipients share traumatic experiences they have gone through or are presently going through, including loss, illness, or even violence. They also frequently mention the toll that academic, employment, or economic stressors have taken on their mental health. As the pen on the other side, we have the power to dulcify their pain (even for a moment!) through the compassionate words we write from the heart.

3. Forming a social connection

Loneliness is a common reason why individuals request letters from LAD, as letters offer a powerful form of connection not found in text-to-text exchanges or even in-person communication. It's not everyday you receive a 500-word piece of writing dedicated to making you feel loved and empowered. For this reason, it is up to us to connect with the recipient on a personal level, which can be done by sharing our own experiences, connecting with their interests and hobbies, and showing them that we care about their wellbeing.

Tips for validating the recipient of your letter

1. Explicitly let the recipient know that you empathize with their struggles

For example, if your recipient is struggling with loss of a family member, and you have lived experience, you could say something like:

“I’m sorry you had to go through that. I know how devastating it is to lose someone myself, as I’ve lost my (XYZ) in the past. The pain you feel right now is totally valid and understandable.”

If you have not experienced such a loss, you could instead say something such as:

“I can imagine how difficult it can be to lose someone whom you were so close to. Your pain is valid, and I am here to honor your experiences and be with you.”

These are just examples, and you can say something else entirely. The key takeaway is to not trivialize his/her personal experiences, instead letting them know that they are allowed to be upset, furious, or scared in the face of XYZ adversity.

2. Remind them that they are not (insert negative adjective) for experiencing pain and struggle.

Some recipients may mention in their story that they feel “weak”, or “not good enough”, or a “failure” because of the suffering they go through. In cases like these, reminding them of their worth can go a long way to building rapport with those you write to.

In many instances, it is better to be gentle when reminding them of their strength and their inherent worth. For example, instead of saying “You are not weak”, you could say that “I want you to know that I don’t see you as weak at all.” While the first response

could be perceived as invalidating because you are dismissing what they think of themselves, the second response could be perceived as soothing because you are not dismissing their thoughts, only sharing your own.

3. Use a metaphor or symbolism to show them that you can understand what they are going through on a more profound level.

For example, “I can imagine how grief can feel like swimming endlessly in total darkness”, or “I can imagine his hurtful words felt like a hammer to your confidence”. I will provide some tips for crafting effective metaphors later on in this guide.

Tips on being encouraging and uplifting in the letter

1. Let the recipient know that you are proud of them.

If you are genuinely proud of the recipient: whether for how much they’ve overcome, for seeking support, or for other reasons, letting them know in your letter could mean the difference between a good letter and an exceptional one. When individuals are told by a friend that their strengths and efforts are acknowledged, it replenishes their confidence and can help them to heal from self-hatred and self-criticism. Some phrases to use could be:

“I’m so proud of you.”

“It really amazes me how much you’ve overcome in the past few weeks/months/years.”

“I admire you for your courage in sharing your story.”

“Your (insert positive trait) is the reason why the world is a little bit more beautiful.”

As always, I encourage you to pick a different phrase entirely if you do not like using the examples I provided.

2. Let the recipient know that you believe in them.

Recipients often feel empowered to fight their personal battles head-on after knowing that someone else believes in their abilities and their character strengths. Hearing the words “I believe in you” can be particularly reassuring for those who feel as though they

have let others down in the past. If you want to make the statement more impactful, you can let them know that your belief in their abilities is unconditional, and that they cannot “lose” your faith in them if they “mess up”.

3. Try to limit cliché or dismissive statements such as “Look on the bright side”

Statements such as “it isn’t that bad”, “focus on the positive”, and “look on the bright side” can feel invalidating to some recipients, and are generally not as therapeutic as more personalized encouragement. The phrase “you matter” can also be seen as cliché by a few individuals, and changing the phrase to “You matter to me” is much more impactful overall.

4. If appropriate, suggest possible solutions from your personal experience.

If the recipient mentions in their story that they are upset because they “don’t know what to do” or “don’t know how to solve this problem”, then offering suggestions can be a powerful way to uplift their day and give them the clarity needed to confront what they are facing. However, if the recipient does not mention their desire to problem solve in their story, it is better to approach any suggestions you provide with caution, as trying to “problem-solve” too much in a letter can feel invalidating to some.

Tips on forming a connection with the recipient on a personal level

1. Connect with their hobbies and interests

If a recipient mentions a specific hobby or passion they engage in, express your interest in what they do. For example, if they enjoy painting, you could say something in your letter such as “It’s so cool that you can paint, I’ve always wanted to learn painting myself.”. If you’ve watched their favourite movie or read their book, mention it in the letter! It will show the recipient that you’ve read their story, and that you are intentional about establishing a connection with him or her.

2. Mention your own interests.

While it’s generally recommended to keep the letter focused on the recipient, it can be worthwhile to briefly introduce yourself: write about your own goals, hobbies, and interests. This can be particularly powerful in fostering connection and camaraderie between you and him/her, as talking about yourself can make the letter more personable. As a general rule of thumb, one paragraph is sufficient to allow you to properly introduce yourself to the individual receiving your letter. Utilize the rest of your

paragraphs to validate his/her experiences, provide comfort and encouragement, as well as connect with their hobbies and interests.

3. Compliment the recipient.

While reading their story, there may be aspects you admire about the recipient. Maybe they have just finished a rigorous university degree, or maybe they mention a specific skill they have that you admire greatly (e.g. ballet, programming, etc). If you see it, point it out! Many recipients will be tremendously grateful that someone has paid attention to their skills and talents, and will be happy to hold you, the letter writer — in high regard.

4. Keep the writing style of your letter casual and personal, as opposed to formal and detached.

By writing to the recipient in a similar way you would converse with him/her in real life, the relatability of your letter will be ameliorated.

Other Miscellaneous Tips:

- 1. When a recipient discloses trauma or PTSD in their story, telling them what they could have done differently can be harmful.** For many survivors of trauma, being told this can cause them to start questioning if the trauma was their fault, and that they could have somehow avoided it if they had done something different. This can give rise to feelings of shame, self-blame, and despair in the recipient who experienced the traumatic event. Instead, it is more favourable to provide ample comfort, encouragement, and friendship in the letter you write to them.
- 2. When you aren't sure if you are over-sharing your personal experiences in the letter, examine your intentions.** Am I sharing this with the recipient to demonstrate to them that I can relate to their struggles? Or am I sharing this experience for personal reasons (e.g. to get it off my chest)? If it is the former, you almost certainly have nothing to worry about. If it is the latter, it could be beneficial to examine whether sharing this information will actually be of therapeutic value to him/her.
- 3. If you are really stuck on how to write a letter for someone else who is struggling, writing a letter to yourself is a fantastic exercise.** Do your best to make yourself feel encouraged, loved, and uplifted in your letter, and examine what works and what doesn't work. A bonus of this exercise is that writing a letter to yourself can work wonders for your self-compassion and overall mental health.

Tips for Metaphors in Letters

I love using metaphors in my letters. Metaphors are truly a versatile literary device: they can make your encouragement more impactful, demonstrate your thoughtfulness to the recipient, and allow you to provide a fresh perspective in the letters you write.

Metaphors can be daunting, however, so I have written a couple points below to help you craft an effective metaphor should you decide to use one in your letter.

First of all, an effective metaphor tends to be consistent. For example, here is a metaphor that lacks in consistency (technically a *simile*, but has the same function of a metaphor):

“The police car pursued the reckless driver like an eagle sprinting towards its prey.”

In this metaphor, the act of “sprinting” is mismatched with the noun of “eagle”, as eagles fly instead of run. Instead, a stronger metaphor could be:

“The police car pursued the reckless driver like an eagle swooping down on its prey.”

Another tip to enhance your metaphors would be to use more descriptive, “punchy” vocabulary that can convey what you are trying to say to the fullest extent. For example:

“Her lackluster resume was a flamethrower, **burning** her chances of securing gainful employment.”

“Her lackluster resume was a flamethrower, **incinerating** her chances of securing gainful employment”

The bottom phrase is more effective than the top example, as the word “incinerating” is more descriptive and profound than the word “burning” when employing the metaphor of a flamethrower.

Furthermore, when using cliché or overused metaphors, introduce a few changes to it to make it fresh and original. For example, here is a twist to the common metaphor of life as being a box of chocolates:

“Life’s a box of chocolates, you never know what you’re going to get!”

“Life’s a box of chocolates: some are sweet, some are nutty, and some have gone bad and will give you stomach cramps tomorrow!”

The second phrase takes a cliché, overused metaphor and introduces some novelty to it in the form of a humorous twist — although it still preserves the original meaning.

(All above metaphors were written by me, with the exception of “life’s a box of chocolates”)

Signing off a letter

So you’ve finished your letter to the recipient you claimed in the portal. You’ve validated their struggles, provided comfort and encouragement, and established a connection with him or her. Now you’re thinking: “How do I sign this letter off?”. There are various ways to sign off a letter, and I want to share with you some of my personal favourites.

★ “Warmly” - this is, in my opinion, the gold standard for letter sign-offs. “Warmly” is an excellent balance between formal and casual, and can serve to make the recipient feel all warm inside (well, obviously). Short and sweet like a scoop of gelato.

★ “Sincerely” - a more formal version of “Warmly”, “Sincerely” may not be as suitable for personal letters but is still a solid sign-off choice.

★ “Blessings” - I personally think this is a compassionate, uplifting way of signing off a letter, although it might not resonate with all recipients.

★ “You are loved/valued/cherished” - An unorthodox way of signing off, this sign off is effective when you really want the recipient to feel loved or cared for. It is particularly suitable when writing letters to individuals who have experienced breakups, bullying, or grief.

★ “You are amazing/incredible/resilient” - Another fairly uncommon way of signing off, these phrases are effective when you aim to make the recipient feel confident or empowered. These sign-offs are suitable when writing letters to individuals experiencing career setbacks or individuals who have trouble feeling self-confident.

How to overcome your fear of “saying the wrong thing” in a letter

All of you probably have this fear. I know, because I have it too. I know how easy it can be to fixate on the possibility of “error”, the possibility of making things worse for the recipient if you say the wrong thing.

First of all, I want you to know that writing a letter and saying something wrong inadvertently is significantly better for the recipient than not writing the letter at all. Many of those requesting letters have experienced tremendous quantities of loneliness, trauma, and setbacks in their lives. They are not looking for a sinless, infallible individual to write back — they are merely looking for a compassionate, empathetic friend and listener. I can assure you that even if you do slip up and say the wrong phrase by accident, the good you do for the recipient will FAR outweigh the bad.

In addition, if you are really nervous about saying the wrong thing when writing a letter, you could try your hand at creating sample letters for LAD (sample letters are letters written to pretend recipients) until you feel ready to write to real recipients. These sample letters are still much needed, as they will be posted to LAD’s Facebook page. You may also receive feedback about them from LAD Innovation should you request it.

Another way to help assuage your fears could be to read any letter you write out aloud to yourself. Oftentimes, reading the letters I write can make me feel all warm inside, giving me confidence that the recipient will enjoy them as well. Chances are, if your letter makes you feel warmth, then the recipient will feel it too!

Final remarks

I just want to let you know that your initiative to write letters for *Letters Against Depression* is greatly appreciated. We are currently experiencing a shortage of letters, and we are overjoyed at every single letter we are able to receive and subsequently send to our recipients. All of the above tips are merely my personal suggestions, and you don’t have to follow them 100% of the time. The most important thing to remember when writing the letter is to **be yourself. Be authentically, unapologetically you!** Because chances are, the recipient will appreciate you for the compassionate, caring person that you are.

I hope my words were enjoyable to read, and equipped you further to write effective, comforting letters to those who need a little more kindness in their lives. May your endeavors have a profound impact on those around you. Happy Writing!

- Warmly, Su