

Selections from Anonymous of Bologna's The Principles of Letter-Writing
(Rationes dictandi)

Translated by James J. Murphy

I. PREFACE

We are urged by the persistent requests of teachers to draw together in a brief space some certain points about the principles of letter writing. But we ask that the expert should not laugh, that the spiteful tooth of the envious should not bite, and that the unskilled in the art should not back away--for after all, even if the fullness of the moon is wanting, this undertaking is not on that account useless in every part. Therefore let honest men hear honestly what is here honestly set forth, and by hearing understand, and lock what they understand securely in the treasure box of the heart. And even let those who are advanced in this art add in some other points, just as grain is thrown by the handful on the threshing floor for the sake of separating it out.

II. WHAT A WRITTEN COMPOSITION SHOULD BE

A written composition is a setting-forth of some matter in writing, proceeding in a suitable order. Or, a written composition is a suitable and fitting treatment of some matter, adapted to the matter itself. Or a written composition is a suitable and fitting written statement about something, either memorized or declared by speech or in writing.

Now, some written compositions are metrical, others rhythmic, others prosaic.

A metrical composition is a written presentation which is properly distinguished by prescribed measures of feet and duration.

A rhythmic composition is one which is bound together syllabically according to a fixed numerical rule.

But since it is our intention to treat only prose composition, let us describe more carefully what it is and how it should be written.

A prose composition is a written presentation ignoring the measures of meter, and proceeding in a continuous and suitable order. Now, here let us describe the proper meaning of this first term, for, in Greek, *proson* is said to be "continuous." Then, we say that a written statement is "suitable" in which we treat the subject under discussion in words ordered according to the grammatical rules for prose or poetry.

Let us now examine particularly how to fashion this kind of composition, either in an approved and basic format or in accordance with circumstances.

The terms "approved and basic" (*recta et simplici*) are used at this point because the words of the writer might reach even the least educated or the most ignorant persons; for example, for this purpose I might say: "O loyal one and most beloved, I well believe that it is known to you what great trust I have in you concerning all my affairs."

By the term "accordance with circumstances" we mean a method for the more experienced writers. It is an apt accordance, a set of words ordered in a way different from ordinary syntax; it must by all means be made harmonious and clear, that is, like a flowing current.

Although we could discuss a correct arrangement of words at this point, even though that will be decided more by the ear than anyone's teaching could explain, nevertheless we have enough to do here simply to provide some form of introduction to those untrained in this art.

III. THE DEFINITION OF A LETTER

An epistle or letter, then, is a suitable arrangement of words set forth to express the intended meaning of its sender. Or in other words, a letter is a discourse composed of coherent yet distinct parts signifying fully the sentiments of its sender.

IV. THE PARTS OF A LETTER

There are, in fact, five parts of a letter: the Salutation, the Securing of Good-will, the Narration, the Petition, and the Conclusion.

V. WHAT THE SALUTATION IS

The Salutation is an expression of greeting conveying a friendly sentiment not inconsistent with the social rank of the persons involved.

Now, every salutation is said to be either "prescribed," "subscribed," or "circumscribed."

It is said to be "prescribed" if the name of the recipient is written first, followed by those things which are joined with that person's name, in this manner: "To G_, the most intimate of friends and the most eminent in the glory of all worthiness, F_, the student of letters who is ever so slow yet is also persistent, expresses greetings and the feeling of warm affection."

Next, a salutation is called "subscribed" if the name of the recipient is placed at the end, with those things which are joined with it coming before in such a way that the name is as clearly revealed in the preceding salutation as it would be if the whole were written in the opposite order.

A salutation is said to be "circumscribed" if the name of the recipient is written in several places in this way: "To Innocentius, revered in Christ our Lord, by the grace of God the highest Pontiff and universal Pope of all the holy church, R_, the bishop of Verona conveys due reverence in Christ."

What Should be Included in a Salutation

Next, we must consider carefully how somewhere in the Salutation we want some additions to be made to the names of the recipients; above all, these additions should be selected so that they point to some aspect of the recipient's renown and good character.

Now, if we want to add something to the names of the senders, let it at least be made suitable, since it should be chosen to indicate humility and certainly not pride. It is therefore necessary for us to be guided by the ranks of the persons involved in such a way that, as often as names of ecclesiastical ranks or professional status are joined with the names of the senders, they will be qualified by added phrases so that through them no pride whatsoever is displayed; for example, if it is a clerk or someone of ecclesiastical status, he should always be titled thus: "Johannes, clerk" or "deacon" or "bishop" or "abbot," . . . "although unworthy" or "undeserving" or "sinful." In secular positions or offices, of course, it is not necessary for it to be done in this way, if we say for instance: "N_, friend of the Tuscans," or "N_, Duke of Venice," or "Marshall of Tusca" and the like."

Next, it should be noted in regard to salutations that the names of the recipients should always be placed before the names of the senders, whether with all their adjectives in the dative case or, likewise with all their adjectives in the accusative, unless--and only when--a more important man is writing to a less important man. For then the name of the sender should be placed first, so that his distinction is demonstrated by the very position of the names.

Next, let us show briefly what is proper in salutations sent to all sorts of persons.

Of course, among all people some are outstanding; others are inferior, and still others just in between. Now, people are said to be "outstanding" to whom no superiors are found, like the Pope or the Emperor.

Therefore, when a letter-writer (dictator) undertakes to write, and the difference between the ranks of the persons involved is known, he must take into consideration from the first whether the purpose is for one man to write to one other man, or for one to write to several, or several to one, or several to several; and whether equal is writing to equal, inferior to superior, or superior to inferior.

Next, the kind of subject must be considered, so that the writer may fashion the salutation with words suitable and prescribed according to it.

Next, the writer should know what is fitting to be attached to the names of the persons involved, as for instance the proper ending of any salutation.

If one man is writing to one or several or several to one or several, and the writing happens to be among equals, or from inferiors to superiors, the names of the recipients should be placed first, in the order of the salutation, in the dative or accusative case with their adjectives. The names of the senders, on the other hand, with their corresponding adjectives, should be placed last, in the nominative case. But if superiors are writing to inferiors, the names of the senders should be placed first so that their rank may be indicated by the sequence of the writing itself.

Some Sample Salutations

Salutations among Noblemen, Princes, and Secular Clergy

"To the vigorous soldier and noble friend, Earl *N_*, *P_*, the Duke of Venice, sends greetings and wishes for every good fortune," "greetings and warm affection," or "uninterrupted affection with unceasing good-wishes," if perhaps one of these forms is suitable to be sent between these men. The following passage will show which forms are clearly appropriate to be sent between comrades and friends.

Salutations of Close Friends or Associates

"To *N_*, the closest of friends," or "the most beloved of comrades," or "the dearest of favorites," or "bound to one another by a mutual union of affection," or "linked together by an indissoluble chain of affection," or "*N_*, devoted to the study of letters, sends greetings and a feeling of warm affection," "the affection of warm feeling with unceasing good-wishes," "steadfastness of personal fellowship," "the sweetness of the dearest friendship," "the constancy of sincere good-will," or "the sweetness of imperishable love."

Another example of uniting in friendship: "Guido, already bound by a sincere bond of affection, *N_*, follower of the profession of logician, wishes to be bound further to him by a mutual chain of affection and to be disturbed by no hostility, wishes him to live forever and to abound in all good things, to live always honorably and never to cease in his affection, to possess always wisely a happy life, and to hold always more firmly to the rightful ways."

These salutations are also sent appropriately to comrades or close friends, since the different ranks of these persons can be indicated by a rather easy variation. For where "Guido, already bound by a sincere bond of affection" is written, "friendship" or "fellowship" or "brotherhood" could be written where "of affection" is written, in whichever way the truth of the matter will require.

The Salutation of a Teacher to his Pupil

"*N_*, promoter of the scholastic profession, wishes *N_*, his most dear friend and companion, to acquire the teachings of all literature, to possess fully all the diligence of the philosophical profession, to pursue not folly but the wisdom of Socrates and Plato."

The Salutation of a Pupil to his Teacher

"To N_, by divine grace resplendent in Ciceronian charm, N_, inferior to his devoted learning, expresses the servitude of a sincere heart," or "always obedient honorable service," or some other phrase corresponding to those suitable to be sent from subordinates to prelates.

What Should be Included in Parents' Salutations to their Sons

In salutations which are sent out of a feeling of love from parents to their sons, we are accustomed always to put the term "blessings"; this is stipulated since it is written: "The obedience of sons gladdens their parents, and the sons are always enriched by their blessings."

Salutations of Parents to their Sons

"Peter the father and Mary the mother, to John their most beloved son, send parental blessings with their greetings," or "fresh greetings and eternal blessings."

Salutations of Sons to their Parents

On the other hand, a salutation of a son to his parents should by all means be one which is described above as appropriate to be sent to superiors by subordinates, as for example, "filial veneration with love," "servitude of filial veneration," and the like.

Salutations of Delinquent Sons to the Same Parents

"To Peter and Mary his parents, N_, once their son but now deprived of filial affection," "once dear to them but now without cause become worthless, does whatever he can though he seems to be able to do nothing."

Another example: "To N_, most beloved lord," or "dearest father" or "relation" or "brother" or "comrade," "N_, shackled by iron chains" or "subjected to the harshest confinement of prison" or "tied by heavy bonds," "sends wishes for all manner of good fortune which he himself utterly lacks," "sends wishes with his greetings for all the prosperity he does not have," and the like.

VI. THE SECURING OF GOOD WILL

Now that these things have been explained, especially the varieties of salutations, let us turn to the Securing of Goodwill. The Securing of Goodwill (*benivolentiae captatio*) in a letter is a certain fit ordering of words effectively influencing the mind of the recipient.

Now this may be secured in a letter in five ways: from the person sending the letter, or from the person receiving it, or by both at once, or from the effect of circumstances, or from the matter at hand.

Goodwill will be secured by the person sending the letter if he mentions humbly something about his achievements or his duties or his motives.

On the other hand, it will be secured according to the person receiving the letter when not only the humility of the sender but also the praises of the recipient are duly indicated.

Goodwill will be secured also from the effect of circumstances if something is added which would be appropriate to both persons involved, or which would be in the purpose of things, or could be suitably or reasonably connected to goodwill, such as "intimacy," "affection," "fellowship," "familiarity," "lordship and service," "fatherly feeling and filial feeling," and the like.

In any case, goodwill will be secured from the matter at hand if the extent of its future importance is openly set forth. That kind of securing of goodwill is also used in the conclusion of a letter.

If however the situation arises for a combative letter to be written, that is, for enemies or opponents, the goodwill could in fact be sought in it according to the persons of the adversaries, namely in that fashion which Cicero introduces in his Books of Rhetoric, this method should be used, by all means, if we would lead our opponents into hatred, jealousy, or contention. If the matter at hand is honorable, or if the auditor is known to be friendly, we should seek goodwill immediately and clearly; if it is not honorable, we should use indirection and dissimulation. As a matter of fact, opponents are led into hatred if their disgraceful deeds are cited with cruel pride; into jealousy if their bearing is said to be insolent and insupportable; and into contention if their cowardice or debauchery is exposed.

Besides, very often the largest part of the securing of goodwill is in the course of the salutation itself. For that reason we should devise our letters in such a way that whenever the humility of the sender or the merits of the recipient are advanced at large in the salutation, we should either begin the rest of the letter immediately with the narration or with the petition, or we should point out our own goodwill rather briefly and modestly.

Also, in the remaining parts of the letter a not inconsiderable goodwill is expressed again and again--such as in certain names indicating the honor or glory of the recipient's office or rank. The recipient himself would be called many times "father" or "lord" or "eminent pontiff" or "noble duke" or "closest of comrades" according to the principles of variation noted earlier.

VII. THE NARRATION

The Narration is the orderly account of the matter under discussion, or, even better, a presentation in such a way that the materials seem to present themselves. We should by all means run through such a Narration quickly and clearly for the advantage of the sender's cause.

Some Narrations are simple, others complex. A Narration is simple that is completed by the narration of only one matter. A Narration is complex, on the other hand, in which several matters are recounted.

Furthermore, some Narrations are written about the past, others about the present, and still others about the future. The subject of handling these various forms will be taken up later in its proper place in this book.

VIII. THE PETITION

Now, that discourse is called the Petition in which we endeavor to call for something.

There are indeed nine species of Petition: supplicatory or didactic or menacing or exhortative or hortatory or admonitory or advisory or reproving or even merely direct.

A petition is supplicatory when we entreat by prayers that something be done or not done. Minors often use this form.

A Petition is didactic when we seek, through precepts, that something be done or not done. It is menacing, when we do it with threats; after all, someone's official office is in a sense a threat, as for instance when a bishop sends a message to admonish one of his subordinates under the force of his office, or when some lord addresses a slave under threat of cutting out his eyes or head or his right hand, and the like.

A Petition is exhortative when we seek through urging that something be done or not done; admonitory, through admonishing; advisory, through advising, reproving, through chiding.

On the other hand, it is said to be direct when we ask that something be done or not done in none of these ways, but only by indicating or writing it directly.

Again, some Petitions are simple, some complex, just as we have set them forth above.

IX. THE CONCLUSION

The Conclusion, of course, is the passage with which a letter is terminated.

It is customary for it to be used because it is offered to point out the usefulness or disadvantage possessed by the subjects treated in the letter. For example, if these topics have been treated at length and in a roundabout way in the Narration, these same things are here brought together in a small space and are thus impressed on the recipient's memory.

Thus we can use this passage for affirming or denying. For affirming the letter's usefulness, it might be put in this way: "If you do this, you will have the entirety of our fullest affection"; for denying, disadvantage might be phrased thus: "If you fail to do this you will without doubt lose our friendship."

The ending of a letter contains nothing that relates directly to the subject matter of the letter itself. Thus I might say in the first person, "I salute Petrus and Paulus"; in the second person, "Farewell, Petrus and Paulus, my brothers and friends"; or in the third person, "May good fortune be increased for Petrus and Paulus."

XIII. CONCERNING THE VARIATION OF A LETTER

For truly every letter must be arranged within the approved format as it is said above, or in accordance with circumstances.

It is especially necessary for this adaptation to circumstances to be made smooth and harmonious and resplendent in the judicious use of words. Since that capacity is acquired by the judgment of the ears and experience in writing--rather than by any very fixed precepts--we are contenting ourselves in this book with providing some basic skills for the untrained.