

How to . . . Write a thank-you note

The art form is increasingly rare in an age of e-mail and cell phones

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It's the time of year when graduation gifts and wedding presents start rolling in. The loot comes in all shapes and sizes, from big fancily wrapped packages to slim envelopes bearing cash or checks.

Some of it's great. Other gifts? Well, not so much.

But think back to what mom always said: "It's not the gift but the thought that counts."

If that's the case, why is it that more people don't recognize those thoughtful gestures with notes of appreciation?

Laziness might be the easiest answer, but when it comes to writing thank-you notes, a lack of know-how is probably the real culprit.

Think about it. If you're not quite sure how to craft a note of thanks, or confused about the etiquette behind sending one out, you're more likely to put off doing it.

But it doesn't have to be so hard.

The most important thing to remember is that, like the gift, the thanks should come from the heart. Ditch the flowery language and big fancy words. Keep it short, simple and sincere.

Lynne Breil, owner of The Professional Edge in Springettsbury Township, specializes in business image, etiquette and communications. She said people are in such a hurry these days that they sometimes forget to be courteous.

"We just don't have the time or want to take the time," she said. "Civility has taken a backseat."

But she challenges people to think about the last time they found a handwritten note tucked between the typewritten bills and business correspondence in their mailboxes.

"Ask someone who has gotten a handwritten note what they have done with it," she said. "Most people keep them. It has great power, especially in business because so much of what we do is electronic."

Most people probably know that they should send a note of thanks for any gift they receive, whether it be for a birthday, anniversary or other celebration. But tangible gifts aren't the only ones that should be recognized. Gifts of time or effort also warrant appreciation.

"If someone spends more than 15 minutes helping you with something, that certainly deserves a thank-you of some kind," Breil said.

A good rule of thumb is to write the note and send it on its way as quickly as possible — generally 72 hours after receipt of a gift or service. But Breil said when it comes to saying "thank you," it's better to do it late than not at all.

Start off by buying a box of thank-you note cards or pretty stationery. These days, you're more likely to have sticky Post-it notes on hand than a box of thank-you notes.

When choosing stationery or note cards, pick something that reflects your personality or interests. For example, Breil often used stationery decorated with piano keys or musical notes when she was growing up because she studied piano and enjoyed playing music.

Write the note in blue, rather than black ink. "Blue is much warmer and more personal," Breil said.

Never write a thank-you note in pencil. "Pencil doesn't denote permanency," she said. "It looks like you just grabbed whatever you could find."

Start the note with a simple sentence that says ... three guesses here ...

Yep, you got it: thank you.

"Get it right out," Breil said.

Once you have thanked the person for the item, service, time or effort they have given you, follow up with a sentence that says what you intend to do with the gift or how they have helped you.

"Jack and I love the bottle of white wine you gave us last week. We're looking forward to enjoying it with some fresh seafood we'll get this weekend," Breil said, as an example.

Or, "Thanks for the cash gift for my graduation. As you know, I'll be entering college in the fall and the money will certainly come in handy at the college bookstore."

Express why the gift is so meaningful or valuable to you, or why you like what was given:

"As you know, my favorite color is pink, so I can't wait to wear the sweater. I'm sure I will wear it often."

"The extra time you spent helping me with my research will be invaluable when I turn in this dissertation."

Close by saying something about the nature of the relationship you have with the person you are thanking.

"Jack and I are so glad we've met you and become friends," or "You've been great friends to my parents and I'm glad you could come to my graduation party."

"It's just a nice rounding out," Breil said. "It also reaffirms the status of the relationship or association. And what could be nicer than that?"

Slip the note into an envelope and address it by hand. "Less than 4 percent of letters sent through the U.S. Postal Service are hand addressed today, so these things do stick out," Breil said.

Be sure to send it through the mail. "You don't want to run the risk of looking like you didn't want to fork over the 37 cents for a stamp," Breil said.

In most cases, e-mail is not an appropriate way to thank someone.

"E-mail is the purest form of communication because you only have your words," Breil said. "But words don't say it all. You don't have the color of the stationery, the texture of the paper, the design of the note that might be typically you if you are artsy, conservative or flamboyant. That's another level of communication that's expressly one's own."

Of course, if you don't intend to send a tangible note, an electronic one is better than none at all.

So take a minute to say thanks, thank you, gracias or merci to a person who has done something special for you recently. It doesn't matter how you say it as much as that you do.

After all, it's the thought that counts.