

Bethesda Metro Area Village
Aging Well Shared Interest Group

How To Write A Legacy Letter

(Also called an Ethical Will)

By Chris Palmer
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Your *legal will* determines who receives your assets when you die, whereas a *legacy letter* (or recording) answers the more profound question, “What do I want my heirs to know when I die?”

Legacy letters grew out of a Jewish custom that originated many centuries ago. Older Jewish parents wrote letters that expressed their love and shared their wisdom and advice. They highlighted vital life lessons and described the lives they hoped their children might lead. Those letters came to be known as “ethical wills.”

Many of us share that desire to pass on what is important to future generations. Your legacy letter helps transmit your values, stories, and life lessons to your loved ones. It can capture your character and spirit, articulate what’s important to you, and contain stories you want remembered.

It summarizes what you’ve learned from life, so it’s not forgotten when you die. A legacy letter expresses your love and gratitude to those you love who survive you.

Loving, thoughtful older people create legacy letters to produce an enduring message for future generations. They are a recognition that whatever physical or financial assets you may have, your most significant wealth is your love, values, stories, wisdom, gratitude, guidance, reflections, and your vision for the future.

Composing a legacy letter is a profoundly satisfying experience. It helps preserve your memory and legacy, and invariably gives you (the author) a fulfilling sense of completion and peace.

A legacy letter need not be long (2 to 5 pages is a reasonable length). Nor do you need to wait until your death to share it with your loved ones. On the contrary, sharing a draft as you write the letter may open up deep and meaningful conversations.

Your loved ones receive inspiration, comfort, love, and guidance, as well as gain a clearer window into the unique person you are. Legacy letters are a way to pass on to future generations your hopes for them and what you would like them to know about you.

Writing a legacy letter is not easy. It’s challenging to be introspective, reflective, and look deeply into yourself for insights and wisdom. However, the following three steps can help make the task less onerous and perhaps even fun:

1. Determine your audience and goals

You may want to write more than one letter. For example, you may want to write one to your children, another to your grandchildren, and perhaps a third to your siblings. On the other hand, some people write a single legacy letter addressed to their heirs and other loved ones. Your relationships and your hope for a meaningful connection will help you decide the right path for you.

Once you've determined your audience, it's time to clarify your goals. Your goals will likely include sharing life lessons, saying what's important to you, and describing your values (perhaps told through one or two pertinent stories from your life). Your goals will also likely include outlining your hopes for the future and expressing your love and gratitude.

2. Brainstorm

Now is the time to begin jotting down your thoughts on what you might want to say. Think about your life story, your values, what gives your life meaning and purpose, your feelings towards those you love and treasure, and your hopes for their future.

Find the words that express your love and gratitude towards your loved ones and what they mean to you. Reflect on what you want them to feel when they read your legacy letter.

What do you love and cherish about them? How did they enrich your life? What hopes do you have for their future? Do you need to forgive them for anything? Do you need to *ask* for forgiveness? What do you need to thank them for? Can you tell them, "I love you"?

You may also want to brainstorm about any significant projects, roles, or commitments you were involved in, why they mattered to you, and how they gave your life meaning. How did those obligations and responsibilities embody and reflect the values by which you live your life? Such values might include tenacity, generosity, self-discipline, creativity, frugality, or service. And they might involve issues like protecting the environment, fighting injustice, helping the homeless, or fostering education.

Another area to brainstorm is your philosophy of life. What are the guiding principles that shepherded you through a diversity of life experiences, some of them undoubtedly painful, stressful, and challenging? Reflect on what practical advice and wisdom you can offer.

Those reading your legacy letter will appreciate receiving your counsel on important issues relating to children, love, friendship, marriage, success, work, career, health, exercise, reading, social media, and other things related to the quality of life.

Re-read your draft to be sure that it is not preachy or directive. Your readers want to be informed about you and your values, incorporating what is meaningful to them in their own lives without feeling guilty about the choices they make for themselves.

You might even want to touch on errors or mistakes you committed that you'd like your loved ones to learn from and, hopefully, avoid. If talking about your outright blunders and stumbles is too painful, then you may want to write about one or two of the struggles in your life and how you overcame setbacks and disappointments and showed resilience and courage.

Of course, relaying your successes and triumphs is also essential, especially when you can use those stories to illustrate when you were at your best and exhibited tenacity, humility, altruism, and compassion.

3. Writing your legacy letter.

Now is the time to review your accumulated notes from brainstorming and draft your legacy letter.

The important thing is to get something down in writing so you can begin editing and improving it. Your legacy letter at this point is a work in progress, and you can work on it as much as you like. Your goal is to produce a less than perfect first draft. Make that your mantra. It is far better to have an imperfect first draft than a blank sheet of paper.

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Write from the heart and convey that your life has value, and one reason for this is your relationship with your family, loved ones, and friends. Share how important these special people are to you. By doing so, you may strengthen your relationships with people who most matter to you.

In writing your legacy letter, you will have done your best to provide future generations with an immeasurably valuable gift, something they may cherish and view with pride, reverence, and gratitude as an enduring example of your spirit and character.

Examples of legacy letters can be found by Googling “legacy letters and ethical wills.”

For your interest, I'm attaching three of my legacy letters.

3 Attachments