

Charles Dickens tells his wife bad news

Charles Dickens sent this heartbreaking letter to his wife Kate while she was recuperating from illness at Malvern in Worcestershire. It explains how their daughter Dora has been taken ill. Dickens wrote this letter knowing that Dora had actually died of convulsions the night before but he was worried about the shock this would cause his wife.

Devonshire Terrace
Tuesday morning, 15th April, 1851

My dearest Kate,

Now observe, you must read this letter very slowly and carefully. If you have hurried on thus far without quite understanding (apprehending some bad news) I rely on your turning back and reading again.

Little Dora, without being in the least pain, is suddenly stricken ill. There is nothing in her appearance but perfect rest – you would suppose her quietly asleep, but I am sure she is very ill, and I cannot encourage myself with much hope of her recovery. I do not (and why should I say I do to you, my dear?) I do not think her recovery at all likely.

I do not like to leave home, I can do no good here, but I think it right to stay. You will not like to be away, I know, and I cannot reconcile it to myself to keep you away...

...we never can expect to be exempt, as to our many children, from the afflictions of other parents, and that if – if when you come I should even have to say to you, ‘Our little baby is dead,’ you are to do your duty to the rest, and show yourself worthy of the great trust you hold in them.

If you will only read this steadily I have perfect confidence in your doing what is right.

Ever affectionately, Charles Dickens.

Lost Letters

In the US the Dead Letter Office was started in 1825 to deal with undeliverable mail. Now known as Mail Recovery Centers (MRCs), they destroy correspondence (to preserve privacy) while removing items of value. Those that cannot be returned are sold at auction (with the exception of pornography and firearms).

In the UK, the Royal Mail destroys an average of twenty-five million letters, parcels and packets every year. Every day it sends almost 70,000 items to the National Returns Centre, where the staff attempt to work out the intended recipient of the letter. The majority is business post, although some envelopes are simply written as ‘To Mum and Dad’, with no address.

In Australia lost letters go to the Mail Redirection Centre.

However, no matter from where in the world they originate, some badly addressed letters manage to get through regardless. One UK letter reached its destination despite only having a photograph of the recipient glued to the envelope, along with the postal town.

Wise Words About Letter Writing by Lewis Carroll

Best-known as the author of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) Lewis Carroll was also a prolific letter-writer who logged all the letters he wrote and received in his lifetime. He wrote a letter-writing manual, *Eight or Nine Wise Words About Letter-Writing* (1890) which was, in the words of his biographer Morton Cohen, ‘practical, sensible and tongue-in-cheek’. Here are some examples of his advice...