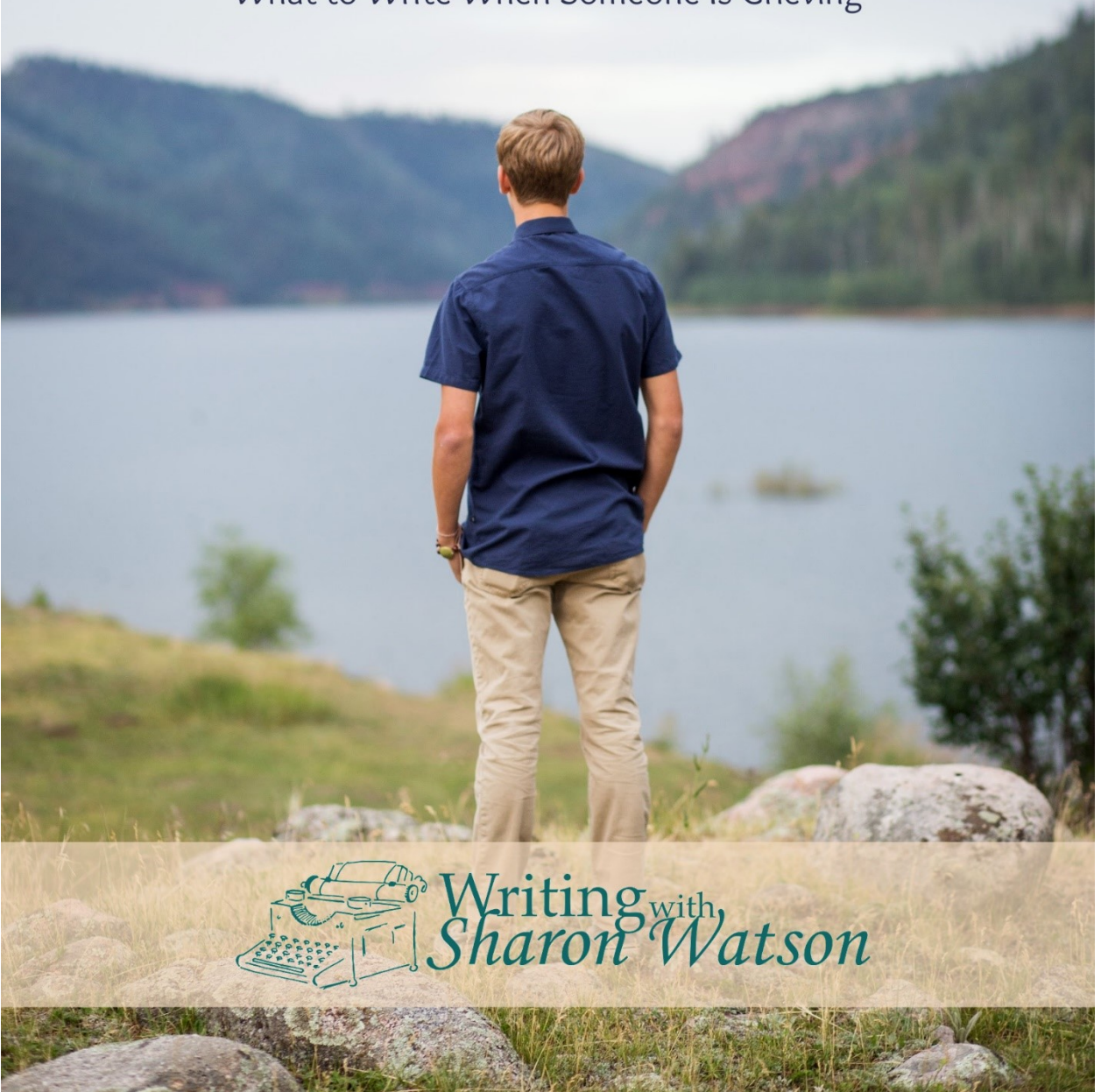


# "I Am Sorry for Your Loss" Tutorial

What to Write When Someone Is Grieving



Writing with  
*Sharon Watson*

# “I Am Sorry for Your Loss” Tutorial

## *What to Write When Someone Is Grieving*



### *Day 1: Letters of Condolence*

You will have friends or family members who go through losses in their lives. Maybe they will experience an accident or will have to leave all of their friends behind to move to another city. Perhaps someone close to them will die, and you will want to make a connection to acknowledge their loss.

How do you begin? How do you know what to say? Writer Garrison Keillor gives us some advice:

Sit for a few minutes with the blank sheet in front of you, and meditate on the person you will write to, let your friend come to mind until you can almost see her or him in the room with you. Remember the last time you saw each other and how your friend looked and what you said and what perhaps was unsaid between you, and when your friend becomes real to you, start to write.



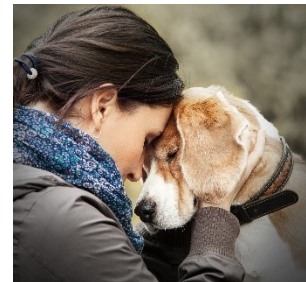
As Keillor advises, focus on your friend, acquaintance, or family member, not on your uneasiness about writing. Writing a letter of condolence is all about the person who is grieving. Because of this, **avoid recounting any stories about you** when you experienced a loss. People in pain do not have the brainpower or the emotional energy to take in such stories, and they usually do not care how you reacted or what you felt. They are doubled over on themselves and find it hard to focus on you.

Second—yes, this is a list—**keep it short** (“I am sorry for your loss, and I’m keeping you in my prayers”) or write a longer note that includes a memory you have of the person

or special pet she just lost. These shared memories are healing, and they affirm the good qualities of the dearly departed.

Third, **avoid teaching life lessons** or writing something hurtful. This includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- **“At least you had him for \_\_\_\_\_ years.”** The number of years will vary, but the callousness of this statement does not. It negates the grieving person’s pain and implies he should be happy or thankful. Incidentally, anytime you hear yourself say, “At least . . .,” “Well . . .,” or “But . . .,” clap your hand over your mouth because your next words will most likely do nothing but hurt.
- **“It’s all for the best.”** Even if the person was sick and in great pain, a death rarely feels like it is “for the best.” Family and friends will miss the person or cherished pet who died. They will mourn him. Say something about the loss; avoid platitudes.
- **“I know what you’re going through.”** While each loss shares similar emotions, you do not live in your friend’s head. Two possible ways of letting your friend know you are there for him or her might be something like these: “I had a similar experience” or “I lost my brother, too. Do you want to talk about it?” This tells the person that you understand the pain, but it doesn’t burden the recipient with your unhappy story.



And last, **be specific about what kind of help you can offer.** A vague “Call me if you need anything” means little to the overwhelmed mourner and might soon be forgotten. So try something specific like offering to drop off a dessert on Thursday or feed and walk the dog on the day of the funeral.

And really last, even if you are more likely to text someone than to write a note, everything you are learning here still applies.

On the next pages, you’ll find questions, examples, and exercises.

## Day 2: Make a List, Read Examples, and Answer Questions

*Practice 1* In the space below or on a separate piece of paper, write the items in the Day 1 lists that are new to you. Also, if you have suffered a loss in your life, write things people told you that were helpful. Then proceed to Practice 2.

*Practice 2:*  
*Do they make the grade?*

Below and on the next page are three sympathy letters written by students for an assignment. Read the "fake" letters. Look for what the students did well and where they could improve. Then answer the questions that follow them on the next page.



1. Dear Friend Katie,

I am so sorry for your loss. I can't imagine what it might feel like to lose my father at our age. Although my words may not be the most comforting, please know that you and the rest of your family are in my prayers.

I will call you after the funeral. I want to bring over a snack and look at your old photo albums with you.

With my deepest sympathy,

2. Dear Bennet,

Everyone's so sorry that you lost your father to cancer, but it's times like these when we need to remember the happy times.

I'll always remember the time when we were in the car with your dad and it started raining. I said sarcastically, "There's our five percent chance of rain," and you said in all seriousness, "Well, it's always fifty percent chance. Either it will rain or it won't." That's when your dad's milkshake came out of his nose and sprayed the windshield. We had to stop to clean it, but it was worth the memory.

Just know you'll see him again, and you're in our prayers.

Your friend,

3. Dear Jamal,

I give you my utmost condolences for the loss of your grandfather. I do not say this out of mere ritual but from true, heartfelt emotion. But do remember that if "home is where the heart is," then your grandfather is walking the golden streets right now. He led a productive life and has left a fine legacy and fond memories behind.

Remember that time when you invited me to your family picnic at the park? Your grandpa insisted that he could play football, but, attempting to catch the ball, he crashed into Aunt Bess. Bess was carrying a casserole dish, which went flying, almost as if it were in a cartoon. The dish hit Uncle Ben, and he tripped, crashed into the table, and upset the tower of health food muffins that your grandpa brought. The whole place was a mess, but your grandpa was ecstatic. His only remark was, "I caught it! I caught it!"

But if we walk backwards into the future, we are sure to bump into something. So let's leave the past behind us. After all, time heals all wounds. But then again, absence makes the heart grow fonder. On that note, don't mourn, for we do know where he has gone, and we will someday join him.

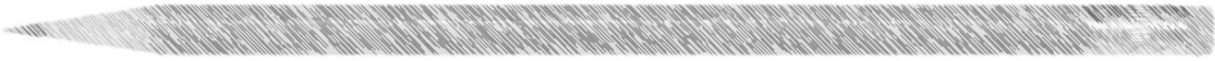
Signed,



Answer the following questions:

1. What did the writer do well in letter #1?
2. What did the writer do well in letter #2?
3. In letter #2, underline the part he probably should have left out. Explain why.
4. What did the writer do well in letter #3?
5. In letter #3, underline the parts he probably should have left out. Explain why.
6. Is there anything in any of the three letters that you would appreciate hearing in a time of grieving?
7. In the margin next to each "fake" letter, grade each student based on what you now know about writing a letter of condolence.

## Day 3: Make Another List and Write a Note of Condolence



*Practice 3* Compile lists of hurtful things and healing things people can say to each other at a time of grief. In order to do this, talk to people and ask them what others have said to them that hurt and helped.



*Practice 4* Write a note to a real friend as though your friend's family member or close pet has just died or is otherwise absent. Or write a note as though your friend has just gone through something tragic. Go beyond pretending; immerse yourself in the idea and identify with your friend as Garrison Keillor suggests at the beginning of this tutorial.

As you write the note, keep in mind what you've learned about writing a note of condolence. Put yourself into this situation as much as possible in order to stay focused and to be compassionate.

After you write your note, go out and do something that will wash the sad off you.

This is the end of the tutorial.

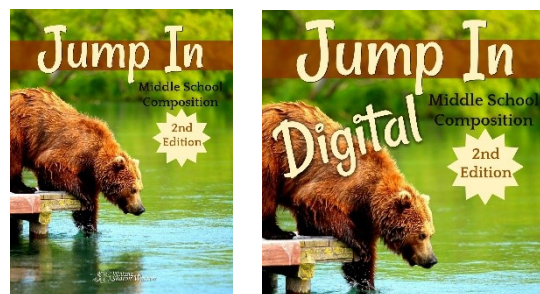
## Answers to Practice 2

1. What did the writer do well in letter #1? *Condolences without platitudes, specific help, and the offer to look at photo albums together.*
2. What did the writer do well in letter #2? *Recounted a humorous anecdote about the person.*
3. In letter #2, underline the part he probably should have left out. Explain why. *But it's times like these when we need to remember the happy times. It tells the mourner how to feel. Almost anytime you say "but" or "at least," you are negating what came before it.*
4. What did the writer do well in letter #3? *Recounted a family anecdote about the grandfather.*
5. In letter #3, underline the parts he probably should have left out. Explain why. *But do remember that if "home is where the heart is," then your grandfather is walking the golden streets right now./ But if we walk backwards into the future, we are sure to bump into something. So let's leave the past behind us. After all, time heals all wounds. But then again, absence makes the heart grow fonder. On that note, don't mourn. "But do remember" indicates to the reader that his grief is nonsense. A more appropriate wording would be this: "I'll be glad to see your grandfather on the golden streets someday." The second underlined part is filled with conflicting platitudes, each telling the mourner how he should feel.*
6. Is there anything in any of the three letters that you would appreciate hearing in a time of grieving? *Answers will vary.*
7. In the margin next to each letter, grade each student based on what you now know about writing a letter of condolence. *Answers will vary. Letters 1 and 2 will most likely end up with higher grades than letter 3.*

### High School Composition



### Middle School Composition



This tutorial is adapted from [The Power in Your Hands: Writing Nonfiction in High School, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition](https://writingwithsharonwatson.com/the-power-in-your-hands/). Go to <https://writingwithsharonwatson.com/the-power-in-your-hands/> for free samples of the textbook and teacher's guide, including a sample grading grid to make grading easier.

And [click here](#) for more samples of all of our composition and literature courses.

Acknowledgement:

Keillor, Garrison. *We Are Still Married*. Viking, 1989.

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