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Be Letter Perfect

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At Christmas time your friends want news about you.

Be Letter Perfect

by Laura Dailey

Editor, Alumnus Magazine

CHRISTMAS newsletters have become a delightful custom. They give all the news of the past year in one fell swoop and carry your most personal Christmas wishes as well. Have your message mimeographed on plain white or simply decorated paper. Include the letter in your Christmas card.

There are, however, a number of precautions to observe in writing such letters. Here are a few "do's."

• Do keep it direct—in first person. "We" is a good dodge for an editor avoiding personal accountability or a consciously modest actor, but it's very confusing in a newsletter—"We went to the lake," gives your reader no idea of who "we" includes.

• Avoid phrases that give some of your readers a left-out feeling. If you say, "Those of you who know Aunt Harriet will be interested to hear—" it will immediately arouse an "outside" feeling in those who don't know Aunt Harriet. Either omit such a piece of news, or, if sufficiently important, include it without any qualifying, or rather disqualifying, statement.

• Avoid sarcasm like the plague. Such statements as "Little brother Bobby's ears still haven't cooperated with the adhesive tape to form a closer attachment to his head," may sound frightfully clever at the time, but has a way of assuming a disloyal and even unkind ring in retrospect.

• Be sure all allusions are clear to everyone on the list. If you send out the news that Alexander is now almost completely blind, be sure everyone knows that Alexander is your pet cat and not a member of the family.

• Unless you pound a very clever typewriter, keep your letter in straightforward language. Putting words into the mouths of dolls, stuffed animals, or even live ones can be pretty disastrous. (One of the cleverest letters I've ever seen, reported on a family's doings as seen from Bubbly in the goldfish bowl, but that was from a professional writer.) Most of us are better off to write as ourselves.

• The tone of most letters, since they are written at a gay, happy time is pleasant. However, there are bound to be some sad, even tragic events take place in some lives in the course of a year. Ordinarily it would seem best to omit such news in this type of letter. However, if you feel hypocritical to ignore a very important but sad or unpleasant happening, include it in your own sincere way, but do not dwell upon it.

• Write your letter early. Let it stand and get "cold." Use a blue pencil freely, and then rewrite it.

• And last, and probably most important, send it only to personal friends and relatives, not casual acquaintances and never to purely business associates.

As a newsletter it should be newsy; as a Christmas greeting it should be cheerful; and as a person-to-person communiqué, it should be YOU.