

## Royal Navy Letter Writing Style – 1775

Taken from [HMSRichmond.org](http://HMSRichmond.org)

In an era before telephones or cheap fast transportation, letter-writing was very important to the families of our period in England, at sea, and on expedition in America. Those that could write did so many hundreds of times during their lifetime. Many 18th century literary works (even some quite long novels) were in the form of a series of letters between the characters (the "epistolary novel"), often regardless of plausibility.

Writing a period style letter is sometimes done on occasion by our Ship's Company members, mostly when a formal need is at hand. Some e-mail messages of a "business" requirement is done in period style, but for the most part learning and doing so is just an enhancement of the total immersion in living history past the actual events we do. It is another way to extend one's knowledge and enjoy taking part in this period as often as one likes. Above all this, is the return to a time of conduct and manners, most lost in all that surrounds us today. To use it in any media of appropriate correspondence is to be noticed, and have your interest addressed smartly.

Past learning some background below, the best way to learn the lost art of this elegant writing style for our period is to read actual letters from this or near our period, many of which may be found on the Internet. To create these on a computer is but to install some of the many available TrueType quill script fonts.

There were no envelopes (or postage stamps), and any mention of an "envelope" is merely another sheet of paper folded around the rest (there could be writing on one side of the "envelope", as well as on the part of the other side that didn't end up on the outside of the letter).

It did not bode well to have handwriting as being too large, -- at the time, letters were charged according to the number of sheets of paper, so the smaller you could make your writing, the more you could fit in. To save postage, letters were frequently "crossed": i.e. after a sheet of paper had been written on, it was turned 90°, and further lines were written crossing the original writing. It was the recipient, rather than the sender, who paid the postage. Some original references to this matter are lifted from actual letters below:

"I will endeavour to make this letter more worthy your acceptance than my last, which was so shabby a one that I think Mr. Jones could never charge you with the postage." "Your letter was a most agreeable surprise to me to-day, and I have taken a long sheet of paper to show my gratitude." "Do not be angry with me for not filling my sheet, and believe me yours affectionately,..." "I thank you for yours, though I should have been more grateful for it if it had not been charged 8d. instead of 6d., which has given me the torment of writing to Mr. Hall on the occasion."

Franking (Frank) was a term applied to the superscribed signature of a person, such as a member of Parliament, entitled to send letters free of charge. A Frank was a letter bearing such a superscription.

Each quill feather pen, hand cut as it were, was like no other, and some reacted to the task much better than others. Cutting a pen properly is still an art, and good ones are difficult to find today. The Richmond

Ship's Company is most fortunate in having an official supplier of the most masterfully cut quill pens, adhering to the exacting design of our period.

Laid paper was the most common for letter writing, especially for formal correspondence. Parchment was reserved for certificates, &c. While the salutations closely match those of today, the top of the letter always stated where the writer was writing from, strictly so in military correspondence. In the case of non-military letters, the date may have ranged from the day only to the month and day, and rare the year. The person being written to was so addressed in the salutation by name in familiar letters to friends or relatives, but in formal letters of business or military, the person's name and title, if of existence, was always included at the very bottom of the letter. In such a case, the salutation stated the title of the person only, (consult the "Peerage" section of this section for correct ways to address certain persons of title) or if of no title, "Dear Sir," or "Dear Madam,." Otherwise, it was "My Dear Lydia," &c. Military salutations ran from the proper "Sir," to the more closely known peer "My Dear Sir," or if of title, "My Dear Sir Robert," for example.

The style of closing is most different from today. This varied greatly in the context of who the correspondence was addressed. Some examples of closings follow:

FOR NON-MILITARY ADDRESSEES: Believe me yours faithfully, Believe me, dear Sir, Your obliged and faithful humbl. sert., Believe me at all times with sincerity and respect, your faithful and obliged servant, Yours ever, Affectionately yours, With best love, &c., I am affectionately yours, I am yours ever,

MILITARY CLOSURES were somewhat more formal: Yours faithfully, Very respectful, I have the honour to be, &c., Your Obliged, &c., I am, &c., Your most obedient servant,

The proper closure for a Marine on land duty and assigned aboard ship for our period: (Rank) (Name) HM Marine Forces or Marines detachment, H.M.S. (name of ship). Less formally, it would be Rank, Name, Marines, and then just the name of the ship, without the HMS designation. NOTE: HMS was a 18th Century styling, the full and formally correct title for our period would be "His Majesty's Ship Richmond.

" A less formal style noted in period writings is "his Majesty's frigate Richmond," or just "the Richmond". Beginning in our period and later in the usage of this style of closures, it can be seen in the increased amount of abbreviations and "&c.," used that a change was in the wind, although such lasted well into the later 1800's.

As there were no envelopes to be had, sealing wax was used to hold the letter's pages intact. This was usually a red wax, although examples of blue is to be found, as other colours more rare. The seal was likely the initial of the Surname, or in the case of a title holder, government or Crown seal, the engraved symbol of that entity. The use of Black wax was reserved for the notification of death in the family, more so to speed the letter in the postal system than to give the receiver advanced notice upon receipt.

All the materials mentioned are still available today. Don't wait for the next event to continue taking part in living history - Enjoy.