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How do I love thee? Let's see ...

Heartfelt letter-writing tips for last-minute cupids

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Lovers have long declared their intentions in handwritten letters, but the instant age of e-mail - shorthand punctuated with winking emoticons - has all but snuffed out the urge to fan the flames of passion with a few well-turned phrases.

"For most of us, if we want to communicate, we send an e-mail," says Rosemary Fetter, author of "Colorado's Legendary Lovers." "It's not the same, somehow."

It is possible to rekindle the lost art of the love letter, even at the last minute. A special pen, a leaf of lovely blush paper, perhaps a pot of scented pink ink, all can be deployed in a billet doux, although honeying up to your heartthrob doesn't have to be that complicated.

"I write love notes on heart-shaped Post-it notes," confesses Carmen Ramirez, who works amid a dizzying selection of elegant writing instruments and fine papers at H.R. Meininger Co. art supply in Denver.

The point is that romantics take a moment, maybe longer, to give a little permanence to the expression of their feelings.

"We live in a world that's made up of bits and bytes, DSL and T1. Everything is transient. Nothing lasts," laments Walter Baas, a 45-year-old video producer who often has hidden a tiny, handwritten smooch for his sweetie under a bar of scented soap.

"We don't keep keepsakes anymore, and that's what love letters are," he says. "They put us at one point in time that we can always remember fondly, even if that person isn't here any more."

For 20 years, Che Rippinger has toted around a 10-page memento of a summer romance.

A smolderingly handsome young man used the letter to proclaim his love for her in a scramble of song lyrics scrawled in pencil on ordinary notebook paper.

There wasn't much artistic flair to the correspondence, but Rippinger still gets a warm feeling when she thinks of the effort the man, whose name she cannot remember, put into composing the message.

"It was so heartfelt. That he spent that much time doing something for me, that was the true meaning of heart," says the now 38-year-old relationship humorist and newspaper columnist.

Victorian correspondents paid strict attention to a code of conduct that dictated everything from ink color to the way a message was to be folded and sealed. They wrote in code, and had their parents edit the writing. Today's letter-bound lovers can be far more free and creative.

Rippinger makes her own cards. Ramirez gravitates toward artsy stationery. Baas says fine papers set a certain romantic mood.

All three shudder at the thought of a typed love note.

"Handwriting is something of a lost art," Baas says. "If it's something that you have problems with, then print. It doesn't matter, as long as the letter is by your hand."

And from your heart.

The love letter should not be an exercise in creative writing. Sound relationships are based on truthfulness, openness and faithfulness, explains Kerensa Fite, a marketing expert who helps people polish their online dating profiles for TRUE.com

Those same concepts should be considered in a love note.

"When you write a love letter, you must be sincere and truthful, and you have to be a little vulnerable and speak from your heart," she says.

The loveliest letters also are mindful of where the recipient is in the progression of the relationship.

Rippinger was mortified when a new beau had a card waiting on her desk after their second date. The card included an envelope of bubble bath.

"We hadn't hit it off with that kind of chemistry, so it came across negatively," she says. "We forget how our gestures affect other people. Words and gestures have huge power."

For Ramirez, it is as lovely to write a romantic letter as it is to receive one, especially when she uses a graceful glass pen. "And when you use perfumed ink with the glass pen, you can smell it, see it and actually hear the sound of the glass moving across the paper."

Taking the time to actually spell out your feelings instead of firing off an e-mail may be the greatest gift an impassioned correspondent can give.

"There's a lot of erotic e-mail going back and forth out there, but that's not my bag," Baas says.

He'd rather surprise his gal with a fancy little box stuffed with handwritten thoughts and promises. "You can write a half a dozen notes. You can use different colored papers and inks, or watercolors to bring out the romance.

"Taking time is the most important thing," he says. "It shows that you care."

Beth Anne Steckiel, who owns the Colorado Springs romance bookstore Beth Anne's Book Corner, was courted by mail more than 30 years ago by the man who would become her husband.

Steckiel still values a personal note over an expensive bauble or a fistful of flowers.

"It's not the special gifts, or the money, it's the thoughtfulness of the card and what the card says."

Putting pen to passion

Make the recipient feel good about herself or himself.

Let the person know how you feel about him or her.

Write from the heart and be sincere and truthful.

Consider the inner qualities of your beloved and explain how he or she makes you feel. Include specifics about the person that make your heart pitter-patter.

Select attractive stationery, and make sure all of the words are spelled correctly. Your letter may be stowed away for generations.

Do not type the letter.

Don't save all your ardor for a Hallmark holiday. A note hidden in your beloved's pocket or stuck on the bathroom mirror when it's least expected often is the most exciting.