



How not to write a newsletter

TN63 Training Notes series: Communication

These notes were first published on the website in October 2011 and last updated in September 2023. They are copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

It's October and many of us will, within a few weeks, be crafting that December favourite: the Christmas round-robin.

Did I hear a groan?

No! Stay with me! They can be vehicles for creative writing and innovative design that you read and reread for pleasure, while the rest of the pile gets filed under B for boring.

This is just one application for these particular notes (and admittedly rather more a personal one than my normal subject of church organisation). But the point is that the same principles apply with only minor variations to:

- prayer letters sent to distant supporters;
- outreach literature to pass on from your church;
- promotional literature for church events;
- writing anything at church for mass printing.

These notes are really about writing for a reluctant reader. That includes most things you may write but, at this time of year, Christmas letters are a good example to take. When people receive ten in one day, they'll surely be reluctant. But after reading this, yours can be the one they study immediately and come back to again ... because they want to.

Giving the positive points to follow is just a fraction dull, like most Christmas letters. So, instead, here goes with the seven most common mistakes I see in December when I open the envelopes (or emails) from some of my friends (the rest of whom send superb examples of course!).

I am assuming you can cope with some common uses of a program such as Word, but you don't need to be an IT whizz-kid for what follows. A simple design is better than an amateur's attempt at something complex. Don't forget: these headings are how-not-to's!

1 **Too many words**

If you aim for just one side of A4 (which would be wise for any Christmas letter), that means a maximum of 650 words in a 9 point font (in two or three columns at that size) on a page which includes some pictures. Beware: that's less than many people cram in. But it's 450 max if the type runs across the page at 10 point and you want to increase the picture content and keep the text really to the point.

You need to balance enough content to make it newsy with sufficient brevity to make it an easy read. So write your first draft, discover it's 1,000 words, then cut, cut, cut to lose the dross. See also point 5 below.

2 **Not enough breaks**

This is closely related to the previous point. Reluctant readers will not tear into solid print. Your piece needs many more paragraph breaks than you were ever taught at school: at least every two or three sentences. Most newspapers break after about an average of 1.2 sentences.

You also need gaps between sections with large, bold headings and sub-headings plus good-sized margins.

It will be much easier to read if you break into two or three columns. Don't fully justify the type – ie. left and right margins both lined up – or it may look grim. The whole page needs to look attractive. You are not writing a PhD thesis. You can do all this in Word, but if you know how to use Publisher or equivalent, go for it.

3 **Poor visuals (or none)**

It is the visuals that will catch people's attention and get the text read. Photographs of people's faces are best with short captions to explain them – but they need to be of a reasonable size rather than resembling a postage stamp. They should link closely to the text and be in colour.

Adding a spot of clip-art (candle, ivy) is no bad idea but use it sparingly – it is not really in favour these days. Do keep the text in black (or dark grey). Use coloured fonts very sparingly and, apart from the photographs, the best designs keep to black and one colour rather than trying rainbows everywhere, unless this just happens to be considered cool among your friends. Keep to one, or at most two, different fonts – something modern but easy to read.

4 **A turn-off opening**

Many Christmas letters begin with something so dreadful that the reader cringes and gives up. *"Well, it's November and I cannot believe that Christmas has come around again so soon."* Or, *"I'm sorry to be sending a typed letter..."*

It's such a shame to waste 100 words of your 650 on such clumsy filling. Aim instead for a punchy, direct sentence that would be classified as News to entice the reader further in. So *"I'm glad to report we're all OK after an uneventful year"* needs the blue pencil treatment at once – it's hardly 'news'. Look at your local newspaper to see how they start each item.

5 Uninteresting content

Staying with the concept of 'news', some letters tell you stuff that clearly interests the writer but which is of little relevance to most readers. So put yourself in your readers' shoes and think what they do and do not want to hear about you.

Unless you happen to be a brilliant writer, better to focus on two or three interesting or unusual incidents or stories in the year than to lose them in a list of ten items, seven of which are frankly boring except for you, or ones that you say every year. If nothing much has changed, find something that has. Keep sentences short and punchy throughout.

6 Showing off

A fine line this one but parents do use family newsletters to show off their children's achievement (I'm as guilty as anyone). By all means celebrate good GCSEs or a degree – or, for yourself, that important anniversary – but don't overdo it and make it sound as though you are the perfect family and nothing ever goes wrong.

Read the mock family newsletter (3rd March entry) in Adrian Plass' book *The sacred diary of Adrian Plass – Christian speaker* (NB not his first diary book) which does this superbly and makes you want to throw up immediately. Almost like some letters do.

7 Nothing distinctive

Try to inject something to make your letter stand out from the crowd: some humour every now and again if you are good at that, really dreadful puns for your headlines, something that teases your readers and fools them into thinking the wrong thing before the punch line, or the whole letter modelled on an unusual approach.

Or, in design, something with just a touch of originality in the layout. Anything, however simple, will stand out at Christmas.

Footnote 1: The power of relationship

There are some people who can get away with ignoring everything I have written here – but that is because they have such a wonderful relationship with their readers.

I will read some turgid prose all in one paragraph and without pictures from a saint who I know is absolutely genuine and whose prayers no doubt account for so much in my own life. I am certainly not promoting a gimmicky approach, nor one that is untrue to the person you are.

You would never dream of following all the opposites of my points above when writing a letter to your beloved (if you write love letters). In this case everything that interests you will interest them. You are only writing to one person and can make it specific for them. My context for the above is a wide variety of readers and a crowded market-place.

Footnote 2: Emails

Emails are great for ease of getting across but they squeeze the originality out of most pieces of communication. You can email a letter as an attachment – a great way to send abroad.

But to get through to people there's still nothing to beat a piece of paper through the post, especially if it has your personal signature at the end and possibly an individual greeting (not so important if your letter goes with a personal Christmas card).

Footnote 3: Print design

If you know a thing or two about how to design a page through Word or Publisher or other software, you can make your letter look professional with good and varied columns, shaded boxes, pictures that cut across lines and so on.

But if you are not into all that, remember my point at the start that something really simple can look pretty good too, and better than an amateur attempt to show off with print design. Only professional graphic artists know how to be really complex and not make it look a mess.

When you've applied all this to a family newsletter, try it on a piece of print for your church using the same principles. If it's targeted outside the membership, they'll certainly be reluctant readers. The same may well apply to your members too!

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN63. See for more detail Article A54, *How to get a message across*. Also see Training Notes TN2, *Ten steps to help you communicate*, TN38, *We've got news for us!*, TN39, *We've got news for you!*, TN75, *Writing for the media*, TN89. *Hold the front page!*, and other items on communication on the website,

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN63 under Communication.

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU

Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>