



# Life Reflections Project

## WRITING A 'LEGACY LETTER'

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### **What is a legacy letter?**

A legacy letter is a personal statement that you write and share with people you choose, either before or after the end of your life. A legacy letter offers an opportunity to reflect on your important life experiences and transmit your values and blessings to your children, grandchildren or other loved ones.

### **Why should I write a legacy letter?**

A legacy letter is a way for you to be remembered and for your life lessons to be shared and preserved for future generations. It also gives you an opportunity to express gratitude, request forgiveness or make amends. It's a wonderful gift to your loved ones *and* yourself.

### **Is a legacy letter the same thing as an ethical will?**

Yes. There is no difference between a legacy letter and an ethical will – the two terms are used interchangeably. The term "legacy letter" has become more popular in recent years, perhaps because it sounds more personal and less legal.

### **Is a legacy letter the same thing as a memoir?**

No. A legacy letter is typically just a few pages, so it's not a full-length memoir or autobiography. Like a memoir, it's an opportunity to share stories about your life, but a legacy letter should focus on your values, insights and life lessons rather than your achievements and adventures.

### **Is a legacy letter a legal document?**

No. A legacy letter (or ethical will) has no formal legal standing; it's simply a personal statement that you write and share with chosen recipients. As one writer put it, "Legal wills bequeath *valuables*; ethical wills bequeath *values*." Many people choose to complete a legacy letter along with their legal will or other estate planning documents, but you can write a legacy letter yourself and revise it as you wish.

### **When should I write a legacy letter?**

There is no right age to write a legacy letter. Most people who write them are older, when they have reached an age where they can reflect on their life's meaning and purpose and want to share their values and life lessons. But don't wait too long to start! It's never too early to write a legacy letter but it can be too late before you know it.

### **I'm not much of a writer. Can't I just tell my loved ones what I want to say?**

First, you don't need to be a "great writer" to complete a legacy letter. All of us have experience writing letters to people we love and a legacy letter is just that. Second, there is enormous power in committing your stories to the written word. Writing about your life lessons may help you find some clarity or perhaps some courage to say things you haven't expressed before. And a written document will be preserved for future generations and treasured by people you'll never meet in your lifetime.

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## **How do I start?**

There is no one “right way” to write a legacy letter – everyone’s letter is different and yours should come from your heart, not a template. But here is a simple, six-part model that you may find helpful as a way to organize your thoughts and begin writing:

### **1. Introduction**

- Choose a salutation
- Explain why you are writing a legacy letter

### **2. Tell Your Story**

- Imagine a reader who will never meet you
- Describe a few important choices you’ve made or key moments in your life
- What really defines you? How do you want to be remembered?
- Focus on lessons and insights – what you’ve learned, not what you’ve achieved

### **3. Share Your Values**

- What are the fundamental values and principles you believe in?
- What are the practices that help people to “lead a good life”?
- How do your stories reflect those values, principles and practices?

### **4. Express Gratitude**

- Who are you grateful to? What are you grateful for?
- How have others enriched your life?

### **5. Reflect on Your Regrets**

- When did you fail to live up to your values?
- What do you wish you’d done differently?
- What have you learned from your regrets?

### **6. Offer Blessings and Guidance**

- Be generous, wise and hopeful – not critical, judgmental or directive
- Use “I hope” or “I wish” language, not “I expect” or “You must”
- Ask yourself: How can I help my loved ones to be all that I hope they can be?
- Shape your own legacy: “I hope you will think of me when you....”

## **A few more details to consider**

Think about when to share your letter – either before or after the end of your life – and with whom you want to share it. Once it’s written, keep a digital version and a printed copy of your letter, ideally on durable acid-free paper. Be sure to keep your printed letter with your other important papers, or give a copy to a trusted friend or family member, so your loved ones know where to find it.

Best wishes to you as you craft your legacy letter! Please contact me if I can offer advice or guidance.

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