

From

Scribal Spectacle

to a *Life of Letters*

katherine kerr

Or how to enrich your persona and SCA life using your scribal skills to take you – and others – far beyond scrollwork and into the real world (for a certain value of reality). Accompanied by guides on analysing period paperwork for reproduction and using late-period conventions to write a short thank you note letter-locked in period style.

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We've all seen the scribal "brag wall", where lovingly crafted, carefully framed SCA award scrolls are proudly displayed. There's a huge amount of time and training which goes into those spectacular artworks but, for the most part, few get to see them bar the owner, and they eventually risk fading (only metaphorically speaking!) into the wallpaper.



Photo courtesy of Viscount Duncan Kerr, Drachenwald

I aim to promote the idea of another common domestic feature which I think has a bit more life in it. That's the hallway drawer, the one which collects the minutiae of your life – receipts, takeaway menus, concert tickets, Christmas cards and letters from your mum. They might not be pretty documents or worth framing, but they can build up a rich, detailed portrait of the owner.

An SCA equivalent of a hall drawer could have all kinds of paperwork and documents in it, whether relating to your historic persona or your Laurel Kingdom SCA life. And that can provide many opportunities for learning, creating rich depths of play and a lot of laughter.

The historian Daniel Lord Smail, in talking about why people keep “stuff”, made the lovely observation that paper documentation acts *as a trellis on which a changing awareness of the past itself is growing*; that we keep things as part of our family patrimony. That's certainly been true in my case.



Show Us Your Papers

My shift from scribe to scrivener began with a Kingdom A&S Competition on *Patents of Nobility: papers that show noble descent to enter lists*. The only case I could find for this involved the unimpeachable source of Chaucer in *A Knight's Tale*...from the 2001 Heath Ledger movie:

They're limiting the field at Rouen. Noble birth must be established for four generations on either side. Patents of nobility must be provided.

However, my extensive research unearthed many ways that nobles did actually demonstrate their status publicly. Most typically it was in various heraldic displays, from crests to barding, banners to seals, but it turns out that a surprisingly broad variety of related paperwork was not uncommon. I found myself thoughtfully contemplating another movie-Chaucer line:

I'll scribble you anything you want, from summonses, decrees, edicts, patents of nobility...

So I set to, first making the requested Patent of Arms, this for my persona grandfather, along with the paperwork associated with a long life of military service by Francis Kerr and his son, my persona father Richard Ker. By the time the A&S competition rolled around I had three generations of diverse paperwork sitting in the Kerr family coffer.

In developing that, I got a much better sense of the time and social context for my persona, what she'd experienced, the kind of objects that were a part of her life, how she'd talk, what coins she used, what things were worth. I had a rationale for things – a Venetian mother gave me a plausible reason for having clothing and jewellery from that area as my inheritance, without having to resort to the SCA trope of being captured by pirates to explain away anachronisms. The persona story went from being a “late-period Scottish Borderer” to something much richer, with all the details feeding into a much stronger focus on and inspiration for related arts and sciences, garb, performance, and a whole host of other areas that have blossomed as a result.

The Clan Kerr Papers : from Scotland to Venice and back

Katherine writes:

James IV granted my grandfather a **Patent of Arms** for supporting the Crown against the Lord of the Isles. As Lord Kerr of Jedburgh. Francis Kerr took up the arms our family still bears. At 17, his son Richard entered the Tourney of the Wild Knight, and thereafter kept the **jousting cheques** recording his wins and losses at home and abroad; they show he didn't do half badly.

Richard had a municipality clerk draw up a **birthbrief** before he left for France to serve in the Garde Ecosais. It shows his line of descent to four armigerous quarters – some French nobles had birthbriefs to one's great-great-grandparents, but our family history is a tad...cloudy, shall we say....

I found a bundle of **pawn tickets and redemption notes** amongst Father's effects from his days serving Francois de Valois, a king well-known for failing to pay his men. That's why Richard left court to serve with the Medici condottiero Giovanni delle Bande Nere. They were both wounded around the time of the Battle of Pavia and convalesced in Venice. There Father invested in a print shop and somehow met and married Caterina Mocenigo, the fifth daughter of a cadet line of that ancient house.

Father's first will was made just before he went on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. In it he leaves everything in the hands of his own married wife...that she do with the goodes whatsoever she please to her self... I suspect that that would have shocked her conservative Venetian relatives.

Fortunately Father returned, sins forgiven. The **foundling name-tag** pinned to that will points to why he needed to assail his soul; it's in Father's hand, recording the birth of a short-lived boy, his byblow. Richard had no luck with sons – I was born in 1526, but the two brothers who followed did not survive, nor did my mother in her final childbed. When I was near 10, he returned to Scotland with me in tow, my mule toting mother's wedding cassone stuffed with clothes, jewels, books and documents.



I have added to these family papers with a **family tree with tricked arms** and a **roll of arms** showing our relationship to the well-known – some would say notorious -- Kers of Ferniehurst; these papers also acknowledge my lord-husband's own arms, along with the issue of that union, our three children born into the Laurel Kingdom of Lochac. An recent **inventory** of my goods has proven most useful and, to be prudent, I must soon draw up my own **will and testament**.

From Scotland to the Laurel Kingdoms

So that's a ridiculously detailed, plausible persona background, complete with supporting documentation. There's lots of fun and persona development to be had, but...ultimately it's unsatisfying, as there's primarily an audience of one. The SCA doesn't provide a ready place for such period persona play, so once you've documented your life what then?

In principle I have no major problems with that – the Laurel in me gets joy out of filling in the details of my persona; it answers a certain degree of obsessiveness that I suspect quite a few of us share. But the Pelican in me is driven to spread the entertainment and education to others. However I also know I can only natter so much about what a mid-16th century Border Scotswoman's life was like before eyes start glazing over....

Fortunately there's that whole other additional persona we all have – our SCA ones, embedded in the context and culture of this Great Game of ours. That opens up a whole world of possibilities, as within the SCA there are excellent opportunities for the production of living documents ranging from momentary ephemera to years of on-going theatre.

So here are some examples of various types of paperwork I've been involved with over the years, in the hopes of encouraging others to try things out. Full details, sources, images and text are available on my website: <http://webcentre.co.nz/kk> ; I am also happy to answer emails.

Court Schtick

When my lord-husband and I stepped up as Baron and Baroness of Southron Gaard, we confessed that we had been living in an adulterine manor, and begged the Crown for a **license to crenellate**, legitimating the (actual) turrets and crenellations of our home. I presented King Stephen with a license typeset in blackletter font with an eye-watering cadell cap; he said he would take it “under advisement”. Over the following years we petitioned various Crowns, with various pleas, verbal and written. A Kingdom A&S Competition for **letters to a patron** saw a meekly beseeching plea penned to Duke Ædward Stædfast asking for his intercession with King Draco; sadly, no reply. Some six years on, Their Majesties agreed to grant the license providing certain fines were paid...cue further shenanigans.

All good schtick, a means of leavening courts with a bit of period-based amusement, and educational to boot. There are plenty of ways to do this sort of thing, Crown and Court willing.



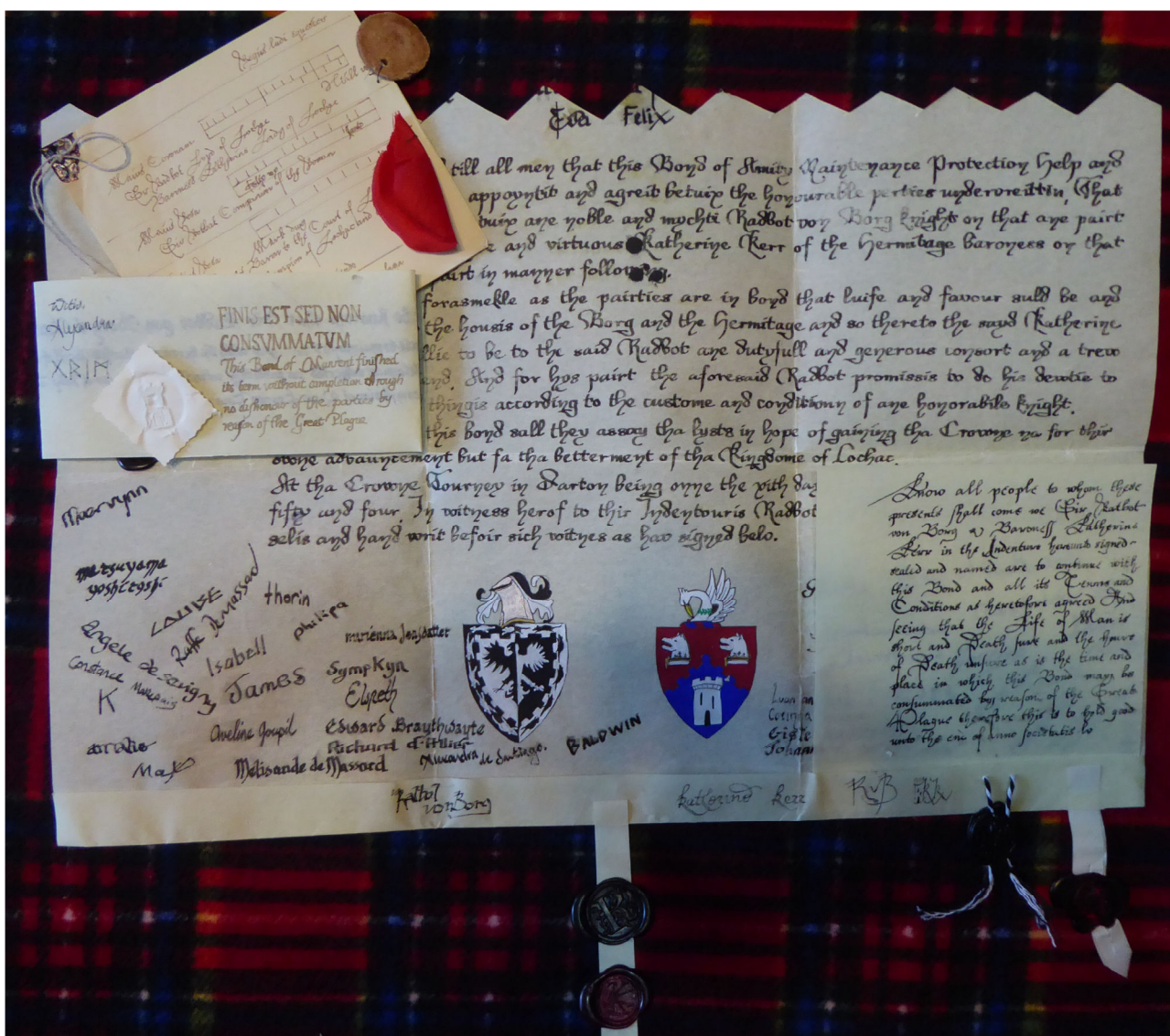
King Theuderic signs my passport, itself based on a forged version from 1596.

Consorting Correspondence

While undertaking a long journey to northern parts, I despatched a number of letters to my lord-consort Sir Radbot von Borg assuring him that we continued to be safe, and expressing interest in his welfare and hopes for his tournament successes, as a good consort should.

The consort relationship I have with Sir Ratbot von Borg has resulted in a large amount of paperwork, most notably a **Bond of Manrent** (a Scottish contractual format covering our roles and responsibilities as consorts) in the form of an **indenture**, which includes a couple of **talons** or amendments to that Bond extending the contract period, as well as a **tourney cheque** recording Sir Ratbot's accomplishments on the field and the awards he has accrued.

This is a living document in the sense that it is regularly updated to reflect changes in our circumstances. Each change has been duly witnessed and sealed, allowing others, from the Crown to the populace, to play into the concept and to experience what would have been a relatively familiar form of period legal process. I've also used it as a means of providing examples of different ways of both amending and sealing documents, tied, tagged, wax seals or paper ones, knotted or slipped; parchment, parchmentine or paper; iron gall ink or sepia.

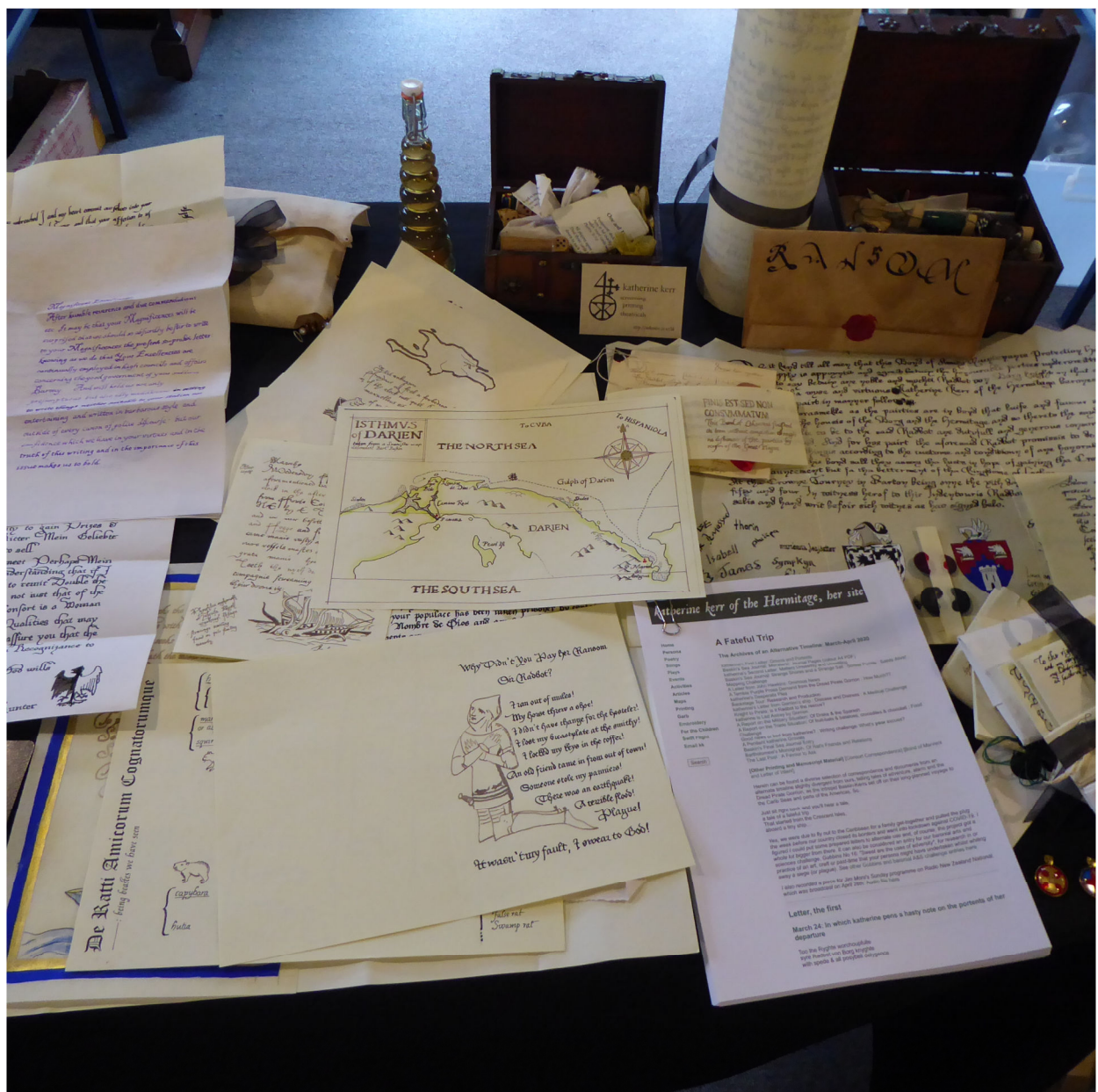


Travelling to many events has given the oft-folded Bond the battered look of extant documents. I welcome its marks and splotches, and the accessibility this document clearly demonstrates for any who wish to handle it – a far cry from the pristine *noli tangere* of a traditional SCA scroll.

There is also a growing set of **letters** delivered any time I cannot attend a tourney to take Sir Radbot's salute. They are becoming something of a tradition, whether handed over in court or by marshals, with plenty of populace offers to read them out (to date, Sir Ratbot has declined to share). I also penned a **letter of recommendation** outlining the worthy knight's virtues for entry to our Baronial Championship, based on a eulogy from *Morte d'Arthur*. When we contested Crown, I made a set of signed, sealed **thank-you notes** to show our appreciation for various supportive folk. Our Game provides a good many everyday opportunities to put pen to paper.

The most complex set of paperwork (so far) was the Caribbean Adventures of the Baskin-Kerrs, representing an alternate timeline to keep me and others amused during COVID lockdown. It ended up being a series of 31 daily posts made online consisting of thoroughly researched **letters** to Sir Ratbot and my lord-husband's **Captain's Log**, detailing a voyage of great derring-do in the company of Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Hawkins, and involving half-a-dozen different hands writing **accounts of pirate and kraken attacks, trade and intelligence reports, maps, ransom negotiations**, with Shakespearean misunderstandings and abject apologies. As of publication, I am working on a play version to open the Half-Circle Theatre next Canterbury Faire (one advantage of a letter-based script is that your cast doesn't have to learn many lines).

<http://webcentre.co.nz/kk/RatLettersVoyage.htm>



Populace Paperwork and Participation

Becoming a known jobbing notary or scrivener provides a chance for others to play, whether using your skills or with needs and ideas of their own. It can be something as serious as an **invitation to a vigil** or a set of **marriage banns**, or a quick **thank-you note** for stewards or officers, or a **request for attendance or assistance**. The Banco di Don Julio, a private funding venture, has distributed a mix of printed and penned materials in the form of **indulgences, licenses, attestations, share certificates** and the like to encourage and acknowledge its patrons. At Canterbury Faire, an exchange of notes saw an urchin-based **postal service** take shape; that may well develop further, allowing the children/teens a chance to play their part (payment in coin or chocolate may explain their enthusiasm...). At Court, the King, various baronages and Kingdom Officers endorsed my **period passport**, pleasingly based on an extant, forged model.



I produced lots of paperwork as part of a *Quest for the Foundling* – **letters, receipts, laundry tickets, trader’s notes** (one in Persian!), **safe conducts, maps, a horoscope, a summons from a Cardinal, an accounts journal**, and the **will and inventory** that kicked the multi-day quest off. This was all secretly tied in to a peerage elevation as a means of honouring the new peer and collecting together a range of suitable gifts revealed by the plot-line that tied everything together. Clues as to the identity of the foundling were scattered throughout the documents, as were the locations of the various inventory items sought, in a storyline which produced a rich back-history of the foundling’s recently deceased father. This kept the questers (and the peer himself) guessing until the final denouement.

(<http://webcentre.co.nz/kk/PeerageHughdeCalais.htm>)

Photo: Hugh de Calais with document coffer and wearing some of his “inheritance”. Photo courtesy Hugh de Calais.

Managing Scribal Demands

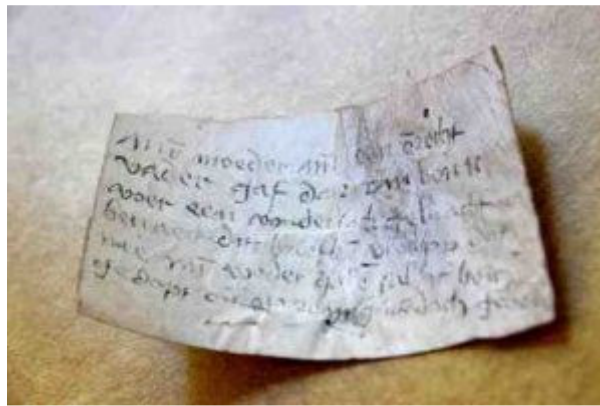
There can be value for Scribal Guilds in all this – imagine, for example, that you have a Chancery unit, the job of which is to help train new scribes by giving them Crown correspondence to cut their quills on, as it were. **Writs, promissary notes for scrolls, thank you letters, summonses** – there is a host of paperwork which can be used to train and entertain without requiring the perfect calligraphy or spectacular artwork which can be a deterrent to scribes starting out.

If your populace recognises the look and value of period-style paperwork perhaps they can be weaned off expecting a full-scale C&I production for every single item, providing a chance to concentrate that spectacular scribal firepower on the main scrollage and reducing the often very long lists of calligraphy and illumination demands requiring attention.

And you have the added bonus of people discovering that developing a written hand can be fun, especially if they can be given something real to cut their teeth on without the perceived huge expectations of a traditional SCA scroll.

Even Ephemera Can Have a Lasting Effect

Finally, consider this small scrap of parchment, a scrawled note written in despair in 15th-century Middle Dutch:



Erfgoed Leiden, HGW, Archiefnr. 519, Inv. nr. 3384, slip 5 (15th century)

Photo courtesy of Dr Erik Kwakkel : <https://medievalbooks.nl/2015/04/24/rare-medieval-name-tags/>

This and its accompanying small slips of paper told stories of abandonment and anguish, for they were name tags, pinned to the clothing of foundlings left at the Holy Spirit Orphanage in Leiden, and kept for 600 years in that institution's archive. This particular tag reads:

*My mother gave me an illegal father, which is why I was brought here as a foundling.
Keep this note so that they can pick me up again later.
I was baptised and born on St Remigius day.*

Think of the story these 40 words tell:

- illicit love with age-old consequences
- hope for a better future as a family together
- faith in the care offered by the orphanage
- regard for the tiny soul, born in sin but baptised nonetheless

Think of the parents penning that rough note on a scrap of parchment, pinning it to their baby in the chill of an autumn day, then turning and walking away from the orphanage doorstep....

That image never fails to give me goosebumps. Small wonder that Dr Erik Kwakkel, who featured a series of these slips on his wonderful *Medieval Books* blog, suggested that one read them with a tissue at the ready.

We'll never know what happened to that child – if things worked out – but we can feel the emotion across the span of six centuries, thanks to the very human tendency to create and hold onto such stuff, small and unassuming though it be.

So I'd like to encourage SCA scribes and scriveners to think about going beyond scrollwork and its spectacular sterility, and consider the flesh-and-blood stories to be told – and the fun you can have – with simple scraps of paper and hasty handwriting.

Mistress Katherine Kerr (OP, OL, Barony of Southron Gaard, Lochac) has spent a good 20 years writing letters, organising licenses, safe conducts, indulgences, bonds of manrent and ransom negotiations, with the aim of entertaining and educating. She can write a number of period hands, some of which are almost readable.

Vicki Hyde was a founder SCA member in New Zealand as a student back in 1981, and has dealt with words and communication in her professional life as a journalist, author and editor in online, print and broadcast media.

Sources & References

There is plenty of printed material available but, to aid accessibility, I have focused on online resources.

katherine kerr of the Hermitage, her website; see here for expanded material on specific topics:

Main menu for manuscript material: <http://webcentre.co.nz/kk/printing.htm#msmenu>

Letter & Document Collections

Paston letters and papers of the 15th Century, Part I; Table of Contents; Clarendon Press, 1993;

Online contents: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/Paston/1:3.15?rgn=div2;view=toc>

The Cely Papers: <http://www.r3.org/on-line-library-text-essays/the-cely-papers/>

Thomas Bodley letters: <http://www.livesandletters.ac.uk/bodley/bodley.html>

The Letters of King Henry VIII; M St Clare Byrne (ed); Cassel & Co, 1936

Henry VIII Letters: <http://www.tudorsdynasty.com/love-letter-henry-anne/>

Mary Queen of Scots Letters: <http://www.marie-stuart.co.uk/letters.htm>

Bess of Hardwick Letters: <https://www.bessofhardwick.org/>

Plumpton Correspondence 15C; Thomas Stapleton (ed); Camden Society; 1839 (pdf)

https://richard3nz.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Plumpton_correspondence.pdf

A Spaniard in Elizabethan England: The Correspondence of Antonio Pérez's Exile; two vols;

Gustav Ungerer, Antonio Pérez

Tudor England Primary Sources: <https://englishhistory.net/tudor/primary/>

Black Book of Taymouth (Innes, 1855); includes letters, bond, chronicles etc:

https://archive.org/stream/blackbookoftaymo00inneuoft/blackbookoftaymo00inneuoft_djvu.txt

Corpus of Scottish Correspondence (CSC) 1500-1715:

<http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/CoRD/corpora/CSC/index.html>

BYU EuroDocs Primary Documents, 1500-1600:

https://eudocs.lib.byu.edu/index.php/History_of_Medieval_and_Renaissance_Europe:_Primary_Documents#1500_.E2.80.93_1600

Folger Library: Shakespeare Family, Legal and Property Records:

<https://shakespearedocumented.folger.edu/exhibition/family-legal-property-records>

British History Online: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>

Parliamentary Records of Scotland: <https://www.rps.ac.uk/>

Scriveners' Company Common Paper 1357-1628; ed Francis W Steer. London Record Society,

Volume 4: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/london-record-soc/vol4>

War Manifestos Database (1492-1945); Yale Law School:

<https://documents.law.yale.edu/manifestos>

History in Deed: Medieval Society & The Law in England, 1100-1600; Harvard Law School

Collection: <https://hls.harvard.edu/library/historical-special-collections/exhibits/>

[history-in-deed-medieval-society-the-law-in-england-1100-1600/](https://hls.harvard.edu/library/historical-special-collections/exhibits/history-in-deed-medieval-society-the-law-in-england-1100-1600/)

Epistolae: Medieval Women's Letters (4-13C): <https://epistolae.cml.columbia.edu/letters>

Medieval Missives: Aids to letter-writing; Caryl de Trecesson:

<http://www.dragonbear.com/letters.html>

Writing a Medieval Letter; THLaird Colyne Stewart:

<https://athenaeumhectoris.blogspot.com/2014/06/writing-medieval-letter.html>

Dr Erik Kwakkel; Medieval Books blog: <https://medievalbooks.nl>

Dr Diane Tillitson; Medieval Writing, History, Heritage and Data Source:

<http://www.medievalwriting.50megs.com/writing.htm>

Letter Writing: Manuals and Commentary

Letterwriting in Renaissance England; a Folger Library exhibition:

https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/Letterwriting_in_Renaissance_England

A Letter Book selected with an introduction on the history and art of letter-writing; George

Saintsbury; Bell & Sons 1922: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/31072/31072-h/31072-h.htm>

The Medieval Art of Letter Writing Rhetoric as Institutional Expression; Les Perelman:

http://wac.colostate.edu/books/textual_dynamics/chapter4.pdf

The Principles of Letter-Writing (Rationes dictandi); Anonymous of Bologna; James J. Murphy

(trans): <http://medieval.ucdavis.edu/20B/Ars.Dictandi.html>

English Vernacular Letters. c.1400 - c.1600: Language, Literacy and Culture; Sarah Rhiannon

Williams; University of York thesis, 2001: <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/10795/1/249352.pdf>

Angel Day; *The English Secretary*:

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A19966.0001.001?view=toc>

Daniel Lord Smail, *Why do People Keep Things (including Manuscripts)?* (video):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsen60q_CZM&feature=youtu.be

Learning to Write the Alphabet; Folger:

<https://collation.folger.edu/2013/05/learning-to-write-the-alphabet/>

Handwriting & Period Fonts

Early Modern Handwriting: An Introduction; Elisabeth Leedham-Green:

<http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/eres/ehoc/>

English Handwriting Online 1500-1700: <https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/eres/ehoc/>

Scottish Handwriting tutorials: <https://www.scottishhandwriting.com/tutorials.asp>

National Archives Palaeography tutorials:

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/default.htm>

Elizabethan Handwriting for Beginners:

<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~ingram/paleography/RES-1925-BYRNE-198-209.pdf>

Folger Library: Guide for Reading Secretary Hand:

https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/mediawiki/media/images_pedia_folgerpedia_mw/2/21/

Alphabet_Abbreviations.pdf

Three Classics of Italian Calligraphy : an unabridged reissue of the writing books of Arrighi,

Tagliente, Palatino; Dover, 1953

Pia Frauss, an excellent source of free fonts based on documented period manuscripts:

<http://www.pia-frauss.de/fonts/fonts.htm>

Secretary hand: <https://freefontsdownload.net/free-secretaryhandancient-font-98206.htm>

Ludovicos: free font download: <https://www.dafont.com/ludovicos.font>

Historical Fonts (commercial); Alex Moseley; Crazy Diamond Design:

<http://www.crazydiamond.co.uk/>

Letter-locking Formats & Sealing

Letter-locking: Jana Dambrogio, Daniel Starza Smith; MIT: <http://letterlocking.org/>
Pleated letter format with floss and wax seal, John Donne 1613, Jana Dambrogio, MIT:
<https://vimeo.com/189316707>

Medici packet, slit and tab, 1617: <https://vimeo.com/189258806>

Mary Queen of Scots letter-locking: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzPE1MCgXxo>

Bess of Hardwick examples: <https://www.bessofhardwick.org/background.jsp?id=163>

imPRINT: seals (focus on fingerprints): <https://www.imprintseals.org/>

Bess of Hardwick's seals; Daniel Starza Smith:

<https://www.bessofhardwick.org/background.jsp?id=162>

The Origin of the Notary's Seal; David Thomas:

<http://www.davidthomas.com.au/notesseals.htm>

Sealing Practices: Impressions of the Past and Their Contemporary Significance; Lana Grace Rose, Thesis, 2016:

https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1229&context=honors_theses

Teffania Tuckerton's Stuff: <http://teffania.blogspot.com/search/label/sealing%20practises>

Equipment and Supplies, Product and Process

There are thousands of online sites and stores with oddles of products and opinions; these are just a small selection of sites or articles which may be helpful in starting out or assessing paperwork needs.

Fountain Pen Network: <http://www.fountainpennetwork.com/>

An introduction to dip pens, nibs and holders; Jetpens:

<https://www.jetpens.com/blog/the-best-nib-and-nib-holder-combinations/pt/763>

A useful assessment of beginner calligraphy supplies; Jetpens:

<https://www.jetpens.com/blog/the-best-calligraphy-supplies-for-beginners/pt/689>

Arte of the Booke: <https://arteofthebooke.com/>

Inkt: <https://www.inkt.co.nz/>

How to Make a Pen; English Heritage video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKlad7IcBCQ&feature=youtu.be>

Ink and Paper Testing; KWHSS Proceedings, 2019; Calamus of Northshield:

<http://heraldry.sca.org/kwhss/2019/Ink-and-Paper-testing-Part-1.pdf>

Hamlet's Tables and the Technologies of Writing in Renaissance England; Peter Stallybrass, Roger Chartier, John Franklin Mowery, Heather Wolfe; *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol55, No4, Winter 2004, pp. 379-419; Johns Hopkins University Press:

<http://higinbotham.lmc.gatech.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/359/2018/01/writing-tables-wolfe.pdf>

'A unique instance of art': The Proliferating Surfaces of Early Modern Paper; Helen Smith; *Journal of the Northern Renaissance*, Issue 8 (2017):

<http://www.northernrenaissance.org/a-unique-instance-of-art-the-proliferating-surfaces-of-early-modern-paper/>

Scribe Scribbling; blog by THL Ian the Green: <https://scribescribbling.wordpress.com/>

Manuscript Production (focus on medieval books, but with some good generic coverage):

<http://web.ceu.hu/medstud/manual/MMM/ruling.html>

Making Period-Looking Paperwork

Period written communications tend to be a far cry from the illuminated manuscript style of most SCA scrollwork, but can be just as satisfying. Letters Patent may involve illuminated capitals and careful calligraphy, but there are plenty of examples of everyday documents and letters that have messy handwriting, ink blotches, sloping lines and other real-life aspects which would be rejected by exacting scribes.

Whether looking at modelling high-end or low-brow paperwork, there are some basic questions to be asked, and some things to be borne in mind. Here are some things to consider.

What characterises the document?

It helps to take a look at examples of extant documents to get an idea of how they were written and features of their layout; the language used, from opening salutation to closing signature; how they were sealed, locked or delivered.

Some features are obvious: the cut toothmarks of an indenture; the bifolium folds of a letter; the large landscape orientation of a Letter Patent; the wide lefthand margins of most documents.

Other features are more subtle: the placement of a signature at the end of the letter; the terms used (or not used!) in the salutation; the size of the paper and the amount of white space left.

You can look for exact models – letters to a patron, passports, apprenticeship contracts, deeds of sale, inventories, journals – but the often-ephemeral nature of much of this material may mean an exact match can be hard to find, though the general approach for the kind of communication you're after is likely to be reasonably identifiable.

Try adapting something which has a comparable context, such as:

- an ambassadorial appointment or a passport/safe-conduct for a letter of introduction
- an entry from the Master of Revels register for a listing of entertainers or bardic winners
- an inventory as a model for a packing list or an event check-list
- a wager of law for a letter of intent to enter a tournament
- a sub poena to require an individual or an Order to attend Court for an elevation

And where do I find a period example?

There are plenty of archives, letter collections, exhibition catalogues and preserved documents available online, providing a wide range of document styles and covering many different purposes. Legal organisations and parliamentary records will often have collections. Special-interest groups, such as the Richard III or Hakluyt Societies or the Folger Foundation, can be rich sources for documents from specific times or locations.

Make use of online utilities such as high resolution options, zoom, detailed database entries. It can be a lot easier to find text than the physical representation, but it can be worth asking. (And don't forget to acknowledge useful sources and helpful people!)

Online sources are great but they have their limitations. Nothing really substitutes for seeing and, if you're lucky, handling a real 400-year-old document. Check out your local university libraries and museums; talk to the librarians or curators; keep an eye out for symposia.

Sometimes such things come up for sale online and are not too unbearably pricey – I bought four documents (indentures and deeds from the early 1600s) and was delighted to receive them folded up as they would have lain for centuries in someone's coffer. Handling them gave me a much better idea for how parchment should feel – a far cry from the stiff sheets I have purchased or seen in use. And close study also enabled me to answer some questions about how knotted seal tags work; being able to look closely at documents from both sides can be a rare treat.

What kind of hand is appropriate?

Most SCA folk are familiar with the blackletter/fraktura/gothic lettering typically used on SCA scrolls. SCA practice has seen these often take their model from highly illuminated manuscripts such as a Book of Hours, the *Bible* or some other relatively early codex, rather than from actual paperwork. As a result, we tend to develop what can be a highly distorted idea of what typical paperwork would have looked like in period.

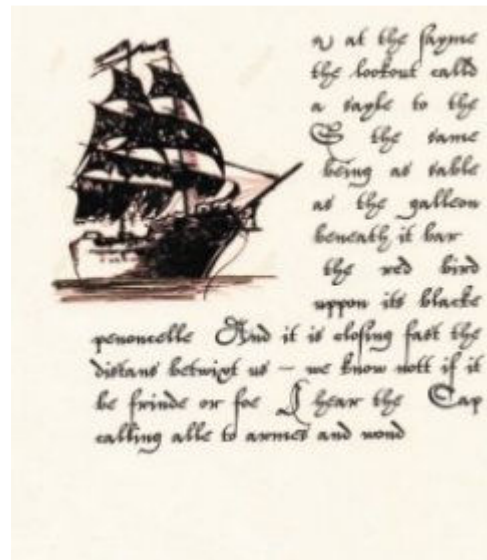
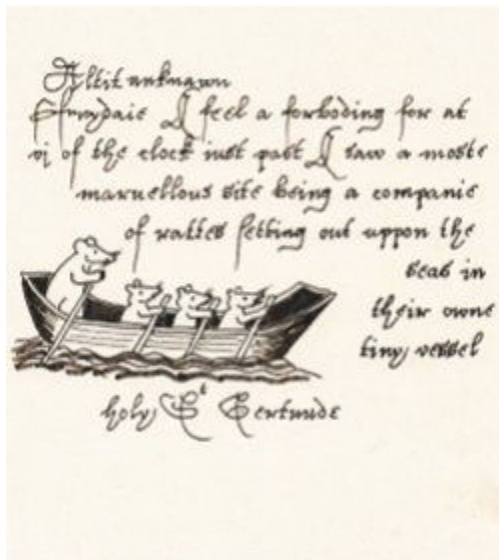
To achieve a more period-looking form of communication (in this case focusing on the 15-16th century), you might consider writing in secretary hand or the relatively simple italic of late-period humanist cursive. You can personalise these or make them more persona-appropriate by using location/time-specific letter forms or fancy swashes and capitals.

There are plenty of examples online of period writing manuals which were aimed at assisting people in developing a cultured hand. Practice helps!

A fast, easy way to push out paperwork using the benefits of modern technology is to:

- do a draft layout using an electronic font to get the lettering and placement right
- lay out text on an A4 sheet and then position on an A3 sheet to provide the commonly seen wide margins and respectful white space if required
- use a lightbox (or glass coffee table) to trace over the lettering in ink

The free fonts available at PiaFrauss.com have detailed information regarding their source material from specific materials, and are highly recommended. The main disadvantage with most fonts is that they tend to lack connected ligatures or special letterings, but if you know what should be there, it's easy to make those changes as you work through the text. They also tend to be more legible than period hands, but that's no bad thing if you want your work to be read. Another advantage of this approach is that you can concentrate on your wording and, do it often enough, the hand will start to feel natural and you'll be able to ditch the crutch of the electronic and go stright for your pen. Help your lettering by slowing right down.



The above pages (from a sea journal detailing some maritime adventures) may look similar on first glance, but the one on the left has my handwritten secretary script and a hand-drawn image; the one on the right is typeset in an electronic secretary hand font with a printed jpeg.

If you're doing this work for a friend or as a commission, consider including some educational background so the recipient understands why you're recommending this look over the tSCA.

What's it written on? What is the paper like? What are the edges like?

Much in the way of surviving documents are on parchment, but paper was not uncommon by the mid-1400s on. The latter was high-rag, linen-based laid paper, regarded these days as high end and likely to be found in specialist art shops or paper suppliers.



From top, sand-coloured 80gsm copier paper; a map on 120gsm goatskin "parchment"; bottom: white 110gsm cartridge paper; at right: a parchment document wrapper

Many formal SCA productions use parchmentine, a vegetable-based substitute for the real thing. It tends to be very stiff and somewhat greasy, but makes a nice, very durable change from paper. Hot-pressed watercolour paper or cartridge paper is readily available but can be a bit fluffy for crisp pen use. Copier paper (80gsm) works well for ephemera, but you should pick a heavier-weight, acid-free paper for anything formal. Keep away from the bright white standard copy paper; there are inexpensive papers available which are off-white and comparable to period paper. Paper with a laid finish can be useful to give the look of a handmade paper; check for parallel (laid) lines running against the grain of the paper, used to simulate a handmade output (or, for easier identification, check the label of the ream). Actual handmade paper is generally not useful as modern craft papers are often artistically "enhanced" with leaves and other rough fibres which are diabolical for pen and ink work. Build up a library of papers; make notes on the name/type, its weight (gsm), colour, supplier, sizes available. Have slips for testing new nibs and inks; write the same words for easy comparison.

Some people like the feathery deckle edging as a Ye Olde Worlde effect; but most quality period paper would have been trimmed cleanly. The same holds for tea-stain antiquing or brown marbled papers labelled as "parchment". Unless you're wanting the Ye Olde effect, stick to a good quality paper of around 90-110gsm weight. The better paper you get, the easier it is to write on without blotches or dragging on the pen nib.

A3 approximates period-sized paper, so is reasonable for both large format items (ie unfolded for Letters Patent or indentures) and, when folded in half, for the common bifolium format of letters. Drawing blocks can be a good inexpensive source, or buy single sheets for special work.

What do I do for a signature? Should other people sign?

Take a look at examples on documents from your time and place to get a feel for how people signed themselves. Consider what language or written script you would be familiar with. Or what abbreviations or variants were commonly used eg Jas for James, or Iames or Iago or Jaime.

Remember that Shakespeare spelt his name six different ways! Signs and shaky handwriting were a common feature of those not accustomed to writing, and not just the traditional X; initials, drawings, even word squares were not unknown. Or try finding a flourish you like to use on your initial capital or closing letter.

For more signature information, with examples:

<http://webcentre.co.nz/kk/vickiimgs/HOSignatures.pdf>



This is my persona signature, based on a humanist cursive with some special characters typical of mid-16C Scottish handwriting: the "butcher's hook" h, the "theta" e, and the script r. I have always used lower case initials as that was a very common characteristic of women's signatures at that time, from marie stuart to katherine of Aragon.

As for other people signing, encouraging witnesses, where appropriate, is a nice way to get people involved. Typically in period you'd have two or three witnesses to things like deeds and indentures, often named within the text of the document. Royal signs manual would sometimes go at the top above the main body of text, rather than always at the bottom.

What should I write with?

A quill, of course! But they don't tend to be readily accessible and are quite specialised in use. Ideally a dip pen with a broad nib, securely held in place, and a good quality ink, most commonly black or brown/sepia, but coloured inks (eg shades of red, purple, green) weren't unknown. Iron gall ink is commonly recommended. It has a tendency to be alarmingly faint when first used, with the ink darkening up later; it can also etch away the writing material.

When starting out, a fountain pen helps you to concentrate on your lettering without having to fuss about with ink charging. As with many crafts, buy the best you can afford; if you can, find a specialist shop and ask to try out the nibs so you know you feel comfortable with your choice. Felt-tip "calligraphy" pens are not going to give you the right look and can lead to poor writing habits, but fine-point art pens have their uses eg Faber-Castell has a nice set of four PITI artist pens in sepia pigmented India ink.

As with any art, if you want to get good then practice, practice, practice. Try your pen, nib and ink on various papers; try flourishes. Get a feel for what the angle and weight does to your lettering. It doesn't have to be perfect or perfectly match the example, but it should please you.



My scribal box: from left: an inkpot; my KK seal and green wax; brass pins; inks; waxed linen thread on a bobbin-needlecase; a sealing wax spoon; a nib holder with a Speedball C3 nib; a leather penner.

What about sealing stuff?

Wax seals can be used as additional legal identifiers – they preceded signatures in this regard – as well as the more modernly-familiar security closure on a letter/envelope. These days there tends to be two kinds of sealing wax: (1) the traditional, somewhat brittle wax, often sold in sticks with or without cotton wicks, and (2) souple, or flexible wax which is robust enough to go through the post, often coming in stick or pellet form. The brittle wax works well for sealing letters you intend to be opened, as it will break; the flexible kind grips paper and is best for paperwork where you want the seal to survive. Brass seals with wooden handles are commonly available, with letters, monograms, symbols or plain engrave [your mark] here. Sit your seal on an ice cube just before sealing; it will release the wax more cleanly. Also mark the edge of the seal with a scratch for "this way up".

Seals are attached in many ways depending on the type of document. Letters would be folded with seals across the outside edges or holding paper strips or floss in place. The wax could be used to hold internal paper security triggers, or to attach paper embossed seals. Legal documents, such as deeds and indentures, or Letters Patent, could have seal tags, with one or more seals attached to a slip of parchment threaded through the bottom edge. Sometimes these were secured with floss; sometimes they were slit and turned though in a simple knot providing a good grip area for the wax.



Desirous to shew my self thankfull...A Letter-Writing Exercise

The following provides a general idea for how you could go about writing a short thank you note in a late-period style. The example text comes from letters written around 1450-1600.

Consider writing a note thanking your B&B or an officer for their work; an artisan for giving their time and knowledge; an event steward or the person who washed the dishes. Bribe an urchin to deliver it, or hand it out in court, or put it on their feast plate. You'll make their day.

What to say and how to say it: (see the examples in The Writing of Parts)

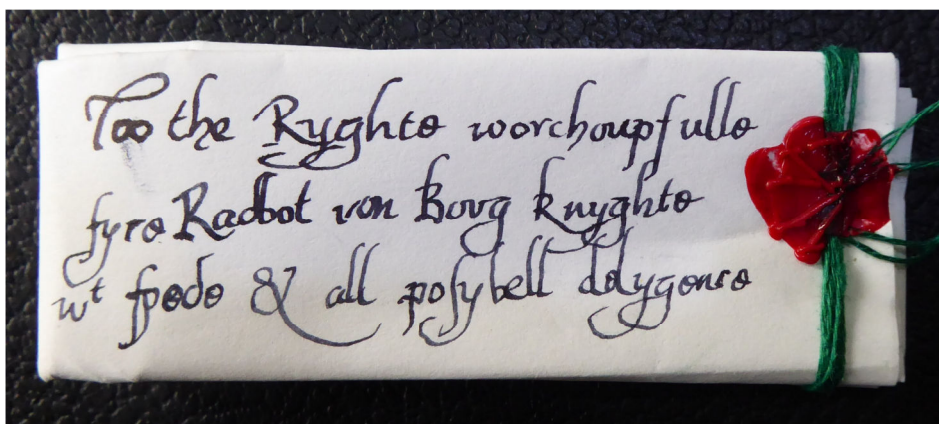
- pick a *Salutatio* suitable for your recipient and their station/relationship to you
- add a line or two from the *Narratio* samples; personalise it or make a general batch to use
- finish up with a date/location, the *Conclusio* sign-off and your signature or mark
- when you come to write, the trick is to take it slowly; use a dip pen or fountain pen

Layout and Production (see the Layout Sheet)

- before you write, fold your paper in half (ie from landscape to portrait, fold at the left)
- give the text a big left-hand margin and a narrow right-hand one; try to keep your text justified (ie lined up at the right) or make squiggles to fill any gaps; no paragraph breaks
- if writing to an equal/inferior, your *Conclusio* and signature can go directly under your writing; if writing to a superior, put it at the very bottom of the page on the right
- after you've locked and sealed your letter, you'll have space on the outside to write the *Superscription*, or addressee and delivery instructions
- the Ludovicos font in the writing example models a simple 16C humanist hand; or try a secretary hand or bastarda for an older, more formal style (handy cheat: use a computer font to lay out the letter on a practice page, then trace over with a pen using a lightbox)
- use cream paper or hot-pressed watercolour paper (eg 110gsm); A3 is close to period-size paper and is easier to fold than A4, or go bigger to show your wealth, respect or humility

Letter-locking and Sealing (see the Layout Sheet)

The Layout Sheet shows the text area where you write, and folding instructions for one way to use floss and/or wax to lock the letter – there are 70+ known ways of letter-locking! Letters typically would be folded a couple of times top to bottom to enclose and protect the text on the upper page; then folded horizontally left to right, making the edges meet for sealing.



In the above pictured format, you pierce a hole near the centre edge using a heavy needle or awl; pass floss/thread around the letter and side going through the hole; then tie it off and seal with wax on one or both sides. A simpler variant has a horizontal fold from left and an overlapping one from right tucking one inside the other. The edges can then be sealed together with wax.

The Writing of Parts

Before we take in hand the instruments wherewith to write an epistle or letter, we haue to consider these pointes following: to wit, the estate, dignitie, or qualitie of hym vnto whom we write: whyther he bee a publike person, or a priuat, whyther he be rich or poore, a friend or an enemy: also whyther he bee well known vnto vs, or but little.

Fulwood, Enemy of Idleness

salutatio (the opening; starts the text body)

My dear heart, swete harte,
Right worshipful Lady
Honourable/good/noble lord
Right welbeloued frinde, I greet you well
To my goode lover [can mean good friend]
Unto the right worshipful & full singular
gode lord
Right trusty and welbeloued I commend me
humbly unto you
Souveraine Lorde, yn as humble wise as any
true liege man can thinke or devise
Of Alle erthely Princes Our most dred souereigne
liege Lord and noblest Kyng
Most Gratius Souereigne.
...and Erasmus taking the mickey:
To the most perspicacious lord, golden
candlestick of the seven liberal arts, shining
peak of thinkers, ever gleaming lantern of
prowess etc

Narratio (the body; no paragraphs)

I thank you/thee for...
[NB you=formal; thee=intimate]
Desirous to shew my selfe thankfull.
I am become a great debter vnto youre goodnesse.
Acknowledging my selfe deeply bounde vnto you
for manye sundry fauours.
I hope I may render some recompense vnto the
benefites from you receyued.
I thank you hertely of the grete business that ye do
for me and for the reaulme.
By our faithful wisse, the vertues whiche are in
you should be knowne vnto all men
Hauing sundry tymes receiued benefits from your
honour, I thank thee well.
If I should take vpon me to thanke you, all my
wordes would not be able to suffice that which
my heart willeth & desireth.

Conclusio (endings)

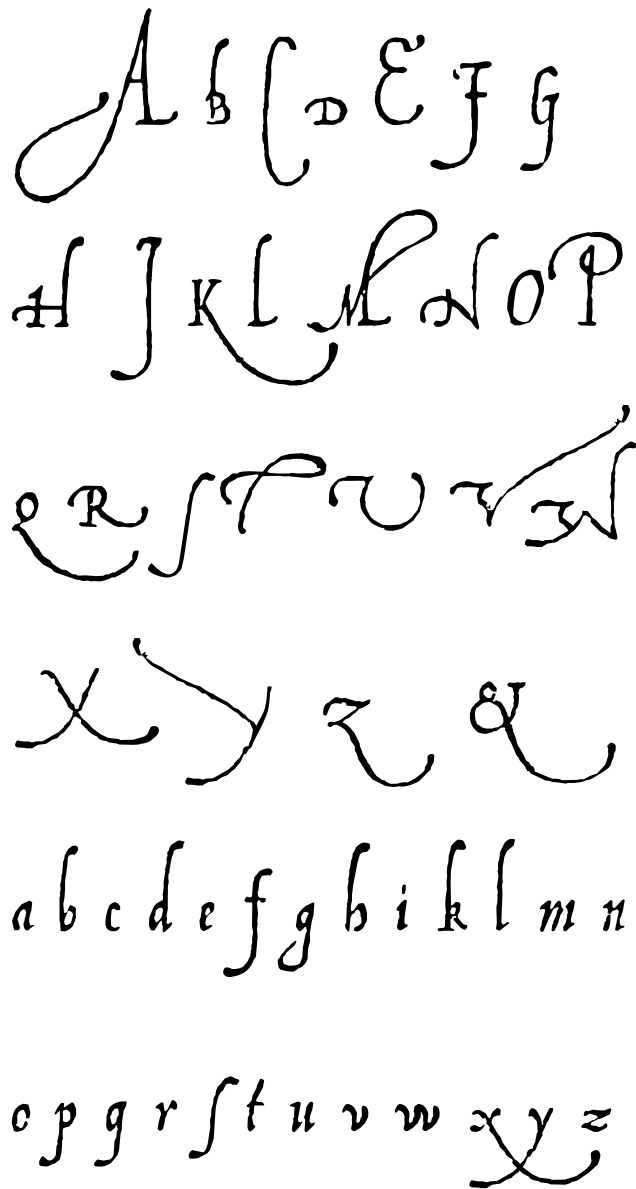
By yours &c.
Your mystrys
No more at this time
Yours as a brother
Youre owne assured
I say my déere adieu
By your faithfull frende for euer
Youre humble subgit and trwe ligeman

By your most humble & obedient seruant
with moch worchyppe
So praying for your health, and the increas of
your happynes I end
Wishing youre healte and prosperitie euen as
mine owne. &c.
My heartie commendations vnto you remembred.
Reioycing not a little at the health of you and all
other our friendes
Whose regarde stretcheth vnto your worship more
then vnto any others.

supercription (addressee, on the outside)

*...the letter being closed, sealed and packed vp after
the finest fashion, whereupon must be written his
name to whome the letters shold be addressed, & his
dwelling place, (if it be not notoriously knowne)
placing therewith the name of his dignitie, Lordship,
Office, Nobilitie, or Parentage*

To the right Noble & singular good Lord
To my very louing frend, S^r [initials] knight
To my good lady [name] be thys delyueryd
To the right honorr my singular good Lady
To the moste noble and towardly young
gentleman [name] of [place]
To my verye good ladye [name] geffe thys
To the worshipfull his especiall good Maister
[name]
To the Quenes most excellent Maiestie



Ludovicos, a free font based on the 16th century humanist cursive hand and italic type of Papal scribe and writing-master Ludovico Vicentino degli Arrighi.

General Conventions

- Use an ordinary s at the end, otherwise long s: *f* ; join top to following h, t: *fb ft*
- Generally v at the start, u otherwise (eg vnto = unto; euer = ever)
- i replaces j (eg iuell = jewell; Maiestie)
- i and y can be interchangeable (eg myne = mine)
- i and a j terminal are used in Roman numbers (eg iij = 3; xxvij=27)
- I is the capital for J (eg Iames = James)
- superscript abbreviations (eg wth = with)
- double the lls (eg faythefull, littyll, humbill)
- add e at the end (eg frende = friend)
- use a macron to indicate a dropped n (eg demād = demand)
- / = a full stop or change of thought
- no apostrophes, few paragraphs

Example text from BessoffHardwick.org:

..may yt please yow to vndearstand that m^r wyngfeld hath deleuered yow veneson to the quenes magsty w^t my lords most humbill comendacyons (L096)

...I harde nott from you offe All this tyme tyll now whyche drove me in dumpes but now Revyved Agen by your wrytenge vnto me (L065)

My swete harte your trewe & fethefull sole you bere me is more commfortabull to me than Any thyng I can thynke Apon & I gyve him thanks dayly for his benyfates he hathe bestoud of me! (L071)

Dating/Location

(generally at the end of the letter, often within the text body)

- from the courte this munday at noone the xxth of Ianuary
- And so fare you well. Sheffield the xvijth of Ianuary
- this present fryday late at nyghte. the xiiijth of february
- at nonsuch wensday this xxiiijth of marche
- Sondag. xjth of apryll
- Shefelde tuesday mornynge being the xviiij of maye
- /from Hardwyck the second of Iune
- Iuly xv/[year]
- / ydes xj off Awgust
- I wyll sease troblynge you with my crebelynge frome my poore howse at Chattysworthe the laste of September. [year].
- And so I take my leave, from London the xiiijth of October.
- god kepe your honour well 7th nouembr.
- at sheffeld this sixth of desembar

Other Dating Formats

Saints Days: Feast Days, Eve of, Translation of Nones and Ides: 5/13 or 7/11 day of the month
 May 1 2020-April 30 2021 = Anno Societatis 55
 In the Reign of King [name] & Queen [name]

To the right worshipfull
& my verey good frinde
st Rabbot at Southron
Gaard this be delivrd

Ryght honourabel & myne especial good
lordconsort I commend me unto you at this
tyme & wishe you welle in yer endeavors
and all good health Know that my tongue my
pen & my heart are all your servants and when
you cannot hear me through distance you must
see me in my letters Written at the Hermitage
the Eve of st Vitale by y^r assurd friend
Katherine

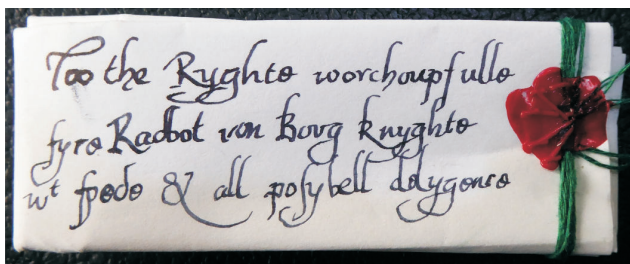
This is the outer page used for addressing and protection. If your letter runs long, tuck another bifolium inside; this page will then become page 8.

After FOLD 5, make a hole.

↑ Pass 60cm of floss through the hole, around the top, bottom and edge. Seal with wax.

supercription
Delivery instructions: name, title, address, commands, drawings of gallows

FOLD 5:
fold left to right



katherine kerr:
<http://webcentre.co.nz/kk>

Inspired by Jana Dambrogio and Daniel Starza Smith
<http://letterlocking.org>

FOLD 2:
top folds down to centrefold

salutatio which runs into the Narratio main part of the letter ending with the conclusio.....

Set out your letter with a wide left-hand margin and narrow right one. The text runs on without paragraph breaks.

FOLD 1: to make bifolium.
Fold sheet in half to make this page 1 on top

FOLD 4:
centrefold up

Before writing, do FOLD 1.

Almost all personal letters were bifolia, with one sheet folded to make four pages. After FOLD 1 this becomes page 1 of 4 (eg A3 folds in half to A4 portrait)

date and location

Here or at end of the letter text

FOLD 3:
bottom folds up to centrefold 4

signature or sign

If writing to an equal/inferior, sign close to the body of text.

If writing to a superior, sign at the bottom of the page.