

Legacy Letters: passing your values on to future generations

Pause for a moment and consider the events in your life that have shaped who you are today. What are your proudest achievements? What are your biggest regrets? If you had the chance to pass these lessons on to future generations, what exactly would you say?

What is a legacy letter?

Also known as an ethical will, a farewell letter, a testament or an 'ending note', a legacy letter gives you the chance to pass on your most important life lessons to your family, friends and future generations.



Where does the idea come from?

The idea of a legacy letter is not a new one; in fact they have been around for more than 3,500 years with roots in the Old Testament and Hebrew traditions. Examples can be found in Genesis 49:1-33 and Deuteronomy 32-33. Popular contemporary versions include 'A letter to My Daughters' written by the US President, Barack Obama.

Why do people write legacy letters?

The purpose of a legacy letter is to capture your wisdom, knowledge, failures and successes so that you can pass them on to future generations, in the hope that they can learn more about your life, values, memories and traditions and take away something that helps them in their own future.

What is the difference between a legacy letter and a will?

A legal will differs from a legacy letter in that it is a legal document which declares who inherits your property, finances and material property. Unlike a will, a legacy letter is not a binding legal article and should not be viewed as such. It does not replace a will and should be written alongside a will, while being careful not to contradict any of the clauses of a will.

What format can a legacy letter take?

Paper

Paper is the traditional format for a legacy letter and choosing to write yours by hand can mean that future generations can see what your handwriting looked like.



A paper document can also be filled with photographs from memorable moments like births or weddings and could include other items such as personal letters. If you choose this method then you should be sure to keep your letter in a safe place and perhaps have copies with various different people to avoid the chances of it being misplaced or lost further down the line.

Another downside to paper is that handwriting is not always legible to those who aren't familiar with it, so having a typed document can be more practical.

Digital

One way to get around the problem of lost documents is to digitise your legacy letter. Many people choose to type their legacy letters on a computer and distribute them to friends via email or even post them to an online blog. Digitising your legacy letter is a sure fire way to secure access to your legacy letter for future generations.

Video

A modern take on the legacy letter is to use a video to record your memories and thoughts. Video captures the way you look, the way you sound and the way you act which allows unparalleled access to your personality. Video also offers the opportunity to include photos and music too. However, it is worth bearing in mind what future proofing steps you can take with this approach.



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For example, if someone recorded a legacy letter on a VHS video tape twenty years ago, how many people now have a VCR to be able to easily access it and play it?

What to say?

When it comes to actually writing your legacy letter, you may struggle to know where to start. The content can vary and is entirely your choice, but it might include combinations of the following themes or ideas:

- Family history and stories
- Cultural and ethical values
- Spiritual, religious and political values
- Hopes and dreams for children, family and future generations
- Hopes and dreams for the world in general
- Important life lessons
- How to deal with adversity
- Memories which you think are important and deserve to be passed on
- Declarations of love or pride over your loved ones
- Expressions of gratitude for specific deeds or your life in general
- Messages of support for loved ones in future events e.g. weddings and birthdays
- Declare any regrets and mistakes that you have made
- Ask for forgiveness and try to make amends
- Reasoning behind the decisions that are made in your will
- Thoughts on how you would like to be remembered

There is no rule book over how to write your legacy letter or what to include. Some people find that meditating on specific ideas such as 'important lessons' or 'hopes and dreams' is helpful, while others decide to keep a diary and pick out the best bits. Some people just write what they feel in that moment. Ultimately, you should just do whatever feels most natural for you.



Whether you make a video legacy, an audio recording, a poem, a letter or some other kind of testament, you should be sure to review it several times before you complete it. Often coming back to your notes at a later date can help you to better refine your ideas, or conversely allow you to record details you had previously forgotten to include.

Why it is important

The process of creating an ethical will involves confronting the reality of the shortness of life, and that means that it can be a very emotional process. It may involve remembering not only your experiences of love, humour and success but also those of sadness, loss and failure. However despite all the emotion involved many people remark that the process can be a cathartic one, especially as they know that their words could go on to benefit future generations.



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