

# The Meaning of Mail



*Grandparents and grandchildren.  
Soldiers at war. College students.  
Loved ones in different states,  
countries or continents.*

Millions of people are physically apart from their loved ones, but want to stay connected, especially at this time of year. Most rely on the mail to renew their bonds and to deliver messages of love and packages signifying their caring.

And in a world that offers some technological alternatives to mailing letters, many still cherish the mail.

Letters, cards and packages will always have an appeal that rises above other forms of communication. Mail has advantages that simply cannot be matched, as anyone who has sent wedding invitations or graduation announcements knows. Letters sent by mail are still the province of the formal or the important, whether it be a letter to a member of Congress, a letter of recommendation or a simple thank-you note.

Mail is secure and reliable in a world full of scams, hackers and accidental deletion. Getting mail, even letters or postcards, means getting something tangible that you can hold in your hand, just as the person who sent it held it when he or she wrote a special message on it. Receiving a package in the mail is still a thrill to a child, and for grownups, a warm reminder of childhood.

And as other forms of communication have become more popular because they are easier, the value of a letter as a way of saying “I care” has grown, precisely because it is not easy. Sending a letter takes a little more effort, but that gives it more value.

This holiday season, we’re looking at what mail means to people—how they use it to connect with the world or bring bits of it to them, how they are using mail in unexpected ways and how mail has value that other forms of communication can’t match. And we found more than a few people who deeply appreciate the value of a letter or package to create joy for themselves or loved ones.



## The mail matters

“Writing a personal message is like hugging someone,” said Sandra Lamb, author of *How to Write It (3rd Edition)*,” a guide to finding the right words for every occasion. Lamb says writing a message by hand, and sending it by mail, carries an unmatched emotional connection.

“It allows us to sit down and go to that deeper level of ourselves than if we were e-mailing a message,” Lamb said. “When they open the mailbox and they see that familiar handwriting, there is immediately an emotional response.”

The emotional response can outlast the writer. “We have examples from history of the troves of letters that are so treasured, stuffed in a shoebox in the attic,” she said. Many a grandchild or other descendant has gotten to know an ancestor by reading old letters.

“Certainly as a society we don’t want to be without this wonderful method of communication.”

Lamb urges parents to teach children to create letters and notes, even before they learn to write. “It’s extremely important for parents to teach the value of sending the written message,” even if it means letting the child dictate a letter to grandma or draw a picture. “The personal letter has the power to bind a family together. We want to keep this social practice going—it’s been a valuable part of our civilization.”

But taking the time to write a letter on paper is about more than sending a

message, she added. “Another value of the written message is that it allows us to be completely reflective.”

Writing an old-fashioned letter gives us the time to think about what we’re saying and think more deeply about our own beliefs, motivations and emotions rather than our first impulses. It’s also more likely to remain private. In this day of “reply all” embarrassments and Twitter scandals, taking time to write and address a letter has an added appeal. But writing a letter is about more than avoiding a mode of communication that caters too much to our impulsiveness and shares our private thoughts with too many strangers. Writing a letter, like writing in a diary or journal, helps you learn about yourself as much as communicate with someone else.

Lamb also has advice on the holiday letter, that annual tradition for some families of updating everyone on their mailing list about events of the past year. She suggests giving every family member

a voice in the letter, talking about adventures and discoveries rather than simply boasting of achievements, and personalize the greetings for each recipient: “Don’t just sign your name.”

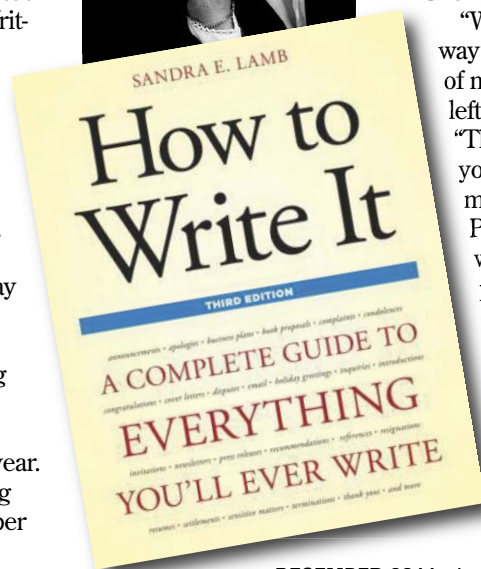
“The other thing that is wonderful to include is an individual plan to get together in the coming year,” she said.

Dana Brinson of Chapel Hill, NC, is equally comfortable blogging and sending e-mails or mailing packages and letters.

“My grandmother was a postal worker for a long time,” she said, “and she introduced me to the idea of getting mail in packages.” After moving from Maryland to West Virginia as a child, the mail kept Brinson’s friendships going.

“Writing letters was a way to connect with all of my friends who were left behind,” she said. “They would say, ‘I got your letter and it really meant a lot to me.’ People like a handwritten letter with paper that is chosen by you for them, written in your own hand. That means something that e-mail can’t.”

Now Brinson is an avid letter-writer and





author of a blog, [savesnailmail.com](http://savesnailmail.com), that tries to bring the Internet generation back down to Earth.

Brinson writes and mails 30 to 50 letters a month to friends, family and pen pals, and gets about 15 in return. Sometimes she sends mail on stationery she makes herself. She even exchanges art by mail, creating mailable

art that others may enjoy and send on, sometimes after adding their own flourishes—part of an art-by-mail movement that began in the 1960s.

“In this day of rapid, instant communication, it almost makes handwritten letters more important than they’ve ever been,” Brinson said. She remembers a friend who kept in her purse for years a sympathy letter about a deceased relative, taking the letter out to read sometimes for solace. “You can’t do that with a phone call.”

For her 34th birthday this year, Brinson made a special request. “I don’t want presents,” she told friends and family, “I want a handwritten letter.” She received about 50.

When her mother was severely ill, Brinson wrote to her every day. It gave her mother something to look forward to and kept them connected while she recovered.

It’s no surprise that Brinson also writes a “Christmas letter” that goes to her entire circle of family and friends. Like Lamb, she finds that this annual tradition is as important to her as to those who receive it. “It’s cathartic,” she said. “It’s a way of reflecting and sharing for me. It’s good for the person who is writing it.”

Having grown up with both electronic and paper communication, Brinson uses both kinds and sees the value in each. For her, it’s not a one-or-the-other proposition. “There’s a whole world of us out there who see the value of a letter. We still use e-mail; we just know it has a different value.”

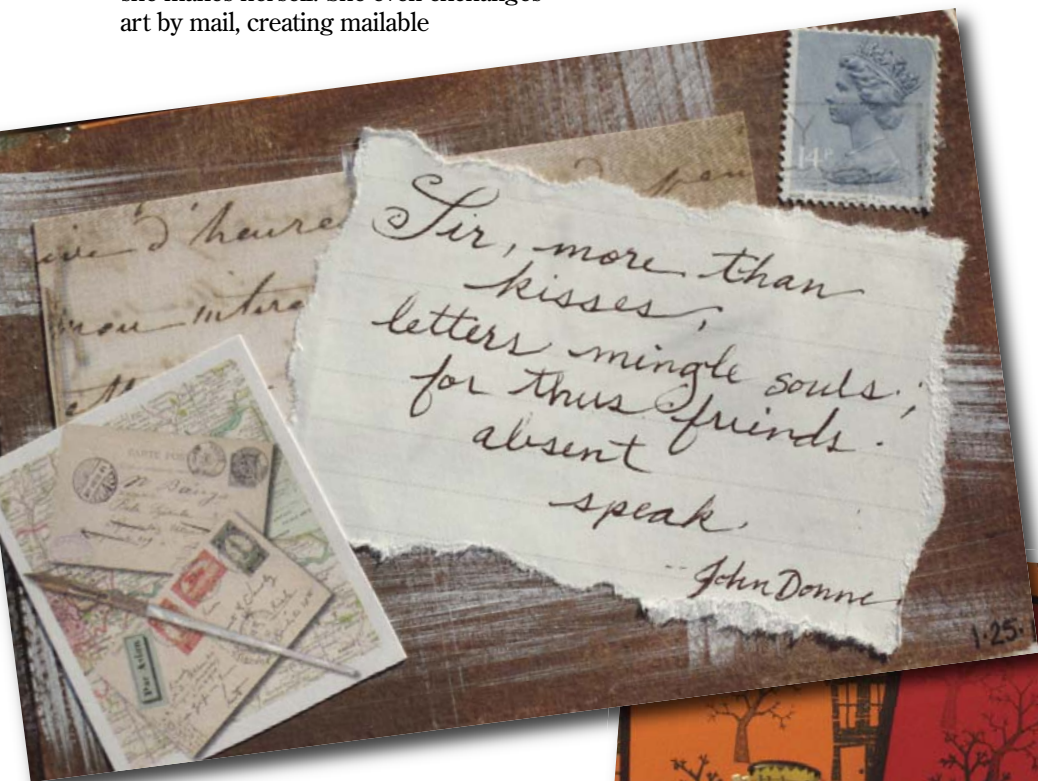
If you’d like to write to Brinson, you can reach her at P.O. Box 95, Carrboro, NC 27510.

As someone who appreciates the mail, Brinson is doing her part to save the Postal Service from attacks based on false information, such as claims that the Postal Service is going bankrupt or the primary cause of its troubles is e-mail diversion. “It’s so funny how people have all these mindsets about the U.S. Postal Service that aren’t true.” By using a blog to share her message about the value of the mail, she’s reaching a generation that risks forgetting it.

### *A secure feeling*

For many people, the feeling of using mail isn’t about warmth and friendship, it’s about security and convenience.

Gloria Picchetti of Chicago is one of many consumers who only sends money by mail. “I do no online banking, because of security,” she said, “because it doesn’t feel safe.” For her, paying bills by mail feels more reliable, too.



Some of the mailable artwork by Dana Brinson (top left), who runs the blog [savesnailmail.com](http://savesnailmail.com) to help people remember why mail is so rewarding.



## CASE STUDY:

# NETFLIX

"I did it myself, so I know it's done."

Picchetti's reliance on the mail to pay bills isn't unique. A recent Gallup poll found that two-thirds of Americans pay bills by mail.

Another recent survey found that 70 percent of postal patrons prefer a card to an email for their birthdays, a finding Pichetti also echoed.

"An e-mail can't replace a nice letter or note for something special," she said. "And how do you e-mail a gift?"

Or a package, or a product sample, or an autograph, or even a prize you win on the radio? "We mail out all of our prizes," said Kym McKay, program director for Nassau Broadcasting in Hagerstown, MD, which operates a number of radio stations in Hagerstown and nearby Frederick that regularly give out prizes, bumper stickers and other items. "We don't have a receptionist or an office assistant, so we just mail everything out to keep people from [needlessly] coming to the station." (McKay's grandfather, Robert J. Potts, was a letter carrier in Philadelphia.)

"We still get mailed-in requests for stickers and pens, and all of our prizes are mailed out via USPS unless listeners pick them up at the station," echoed Paula Kidwell, music director for WINC-FM in Winchester, VA, adding, "there's nothing better than getting a card in the mail, for birthdays, Christmas, or just anytime! Holding that card means someone actually did care enough to send you it."

McKay agrees. "Speaking as a parent, there is no greater joy in a kid's world than receiving mail. They love it. My parents send cards, and every fifth one, they'll throw a \$1 bill into it."

Collectors of items like autographs and other small items both request and receive them by mail, sustaining a robust community of collectors worldwide.

Every letter carrier knows that December is the busiest month for the Postal Service, as gift packages surge leading up to Christmas. But some gifts fill mailboxes year-round. Among the most popular monthly gifts are magazine subscriptions.

"Magazines are still important and valued in this information-rich era," Ellen Levine, editorial director for

Netflix best illustrates the power of mail to coexist in a digital world.

Started in 1997 as a mail-order DVD rental company, it eventually offered nearly any movie or TV show title that was in print to be mailed anywhere in the country. Big red envelopes started criss-crossing the country.

"When I first joined Netflix back in 2004, it was an exciting new service for film lovers ready to ditch Blockbuster and other video store chains," Dan Heaton wrote on his Public Transportation Snob blog. He's one of many Internet writers who have taken to the World Wide Web to praise the company. "The selection was beyond anything I'd seen before, especially for indie and foreign films. The idea of receiving DVDs in the mail almost immediately after choosing them was remarkable."

The little service became so popular, offering titles that weren't available in a local movie rental store, with no late fees, that by 2010 Netflix had driven the large rental chain Blockbuster into bankruptcy. As of figures released last year, the company ships more than 2 million discs every day to more than 20 million subscribers.

In 2007, Netflix expanded its services by offering a "Watch Now" feature, which allowed subscribers to stream movies over the Internet to their computers and televisions. The feature was offered free to subscribers and became so popular that Netflix streaming now accounts for one-quarter of all Internet usage.

Since then, Netflix has seen streaming as the future of its business, sometimes seeming to forget about the disc rentals. Last year, Netflix Chief Service and DVD Operations Officer Andrew Rendich testified before a Senate subcommittee that Netflix backed the Postal Service's plan to end Saturday mail delivery.

That didn't sit well with some Netflix fans. "I get a lot of Netflix movies—and I get them on Saturdays. This gives me plenty of time to watch them over the weekend and send them back *en masse* on Mondays," wrote a user named Jayson on the blog Geek with Laptop. "I know I can watch much of Netflix's catalog on my computer ... but it won't be the same."

This year, the company created a new subscription model, separating streaming from disc rentals. While that move angered many subscribers, CEO Reed Hastings' next move enraged much of the subscribers base. He announced that Netflix would spin off disc rentals into a new company called Qwikster. Many believed the rebranding was a way to ultimately sell off the disc-rental business.

More than a million people canceled their memberships and Netflix's stock share price plunged from \$300 to \$77 three months later. Hastings reversed course, announcing Netflix would not separate its business, and writers have been comparing Qwikster to New Coke as one of the worst business ideas ever.

As Andrew Johnson wrote on his Tezini.com blog, Netflix made the mistake of thinking the company had to choose between the streaming or the disc rentals. "Some of us—a lot of us is my sense—actually like having *BOTH* the streaming and by-mail option. With the former, I get convenience; with the latter, I get an incredibly comprehensive selection (and Blu-Rays to boot), something that's very important to a cinephile like myself."

Hastings should listen, or Netflix could face being the next Blockbuster.



Hearst Magazines, told a Senate committee in September. “Ninety-three percent of adults read magazines. Magazine readership has also increased over the last decade, as has the total number of magazine titles.”

According to Levine, nearly all magazines use the U.S. Postal Service to deliver to subscribers, and subscriptions account for 90 percent of magazine circulation.

A recent Postal Service study ranked magazines behind only personal letters and greeting cards as the type of non-package mail people like to find the most in their mailboxes.

Letter carriers—the people who actually deliver the magazines—have noticed this. Several have urged their fellow carriers to latch onto the trend to support the Postal Service. For instance, in a letter to *The Postal Record*, Ken Hill of Waco, TX Branch 404 recently wrote, “Instead of buying a gift someone doesn’t use or want, why not shop at home this Christmas season and buy magazine subscriptions for loved ones?”

“This gift gives all year long and will be appreciated by any recipient. We all have our own interests, and there is a magazine out there to match it. If every postal worker in this country bought just

three subscriptions, how much postal revenue would that generate?” Hill noted that renewal notices and mail generated by magazine ads multiply the effect.

“I know this Christmas season I will be doing just this and hope many others will too.”

In fact, magazines are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to gifts you can give by mail once a month.

Fruit, cheese, wine, beer, cookies, chocolate, coffee, tea, steaks, cigars, flowers, perfume, popcorn, candles, toys, juice, ties, lingerie, books, movies, soap and coins—these are just samples of some of the items you can give someone through the mail as part of a monthly “club.” You can, of course, order them on the Internet, but the gifts will come every month by mail.

### *Support, not stuff*

Any time of year, you can even send caring through the mail to strangers. Millions of Americans have sent care packages to American soldiers serving overseas every year through services like AnySoldier.com.

“This is about support, not just stuff.”

That’s how Marty Horn describes AnySoldier.com, the website he and his wife Sue created to match volunteers who send letters and care packages with soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines overseas who want more mail from someone back home who cares.

For fighting men and women far from home in tough circumstances, mail isn’t about getting cookies or news—it’s about getting a reminder that people are thinking about you and want you to come home safely.

Horn started AnySoldier.com in 2003 when his son, Brian, a sergeant with the Army’s 173rd Airborne Brigade, parachuted into Iraq’s Kirkuk area at the start of the war.

Sgt. Horn received letters and packages of treats from his parents, but when he called home months later, he asked for more.

“I thought he was kidding,” Marty Horn, himself an Army

veteran, said. “I said, ‘You can’t eat that much.’ But he said, ‘No, Dad—it’s for the guys who don’t get mail.’”

Sgt. Horn began distributing packages from the U.S. addressed to “Any Soldier.” In a few years, Marty and Sue had set up a system for distributing thousands of letters and packages to men and women in every military branch. More than two million service members in 18 foreign countries have received mail through the program.

“I saw it myself: The morale of one soldier affects an entire unit,” Marty Horn said. And good morale, he added, increases the likelihood that every soldier will come home safely.

“We want our troops to do their jobs and get home. We have every intent of being there for them.”

Speaking as a veteran and the father of a fighting man, Marty Horn reflected on the importance of mail from home to a soldier, especially a soldier at war.

“You can’t even imagine the conditions,” he said. “My son never saw a bed for seven months in Iraq, let alone sleeping in one. To have mail delivered from some unknown person—you have absolutely changed that troop’s life.”

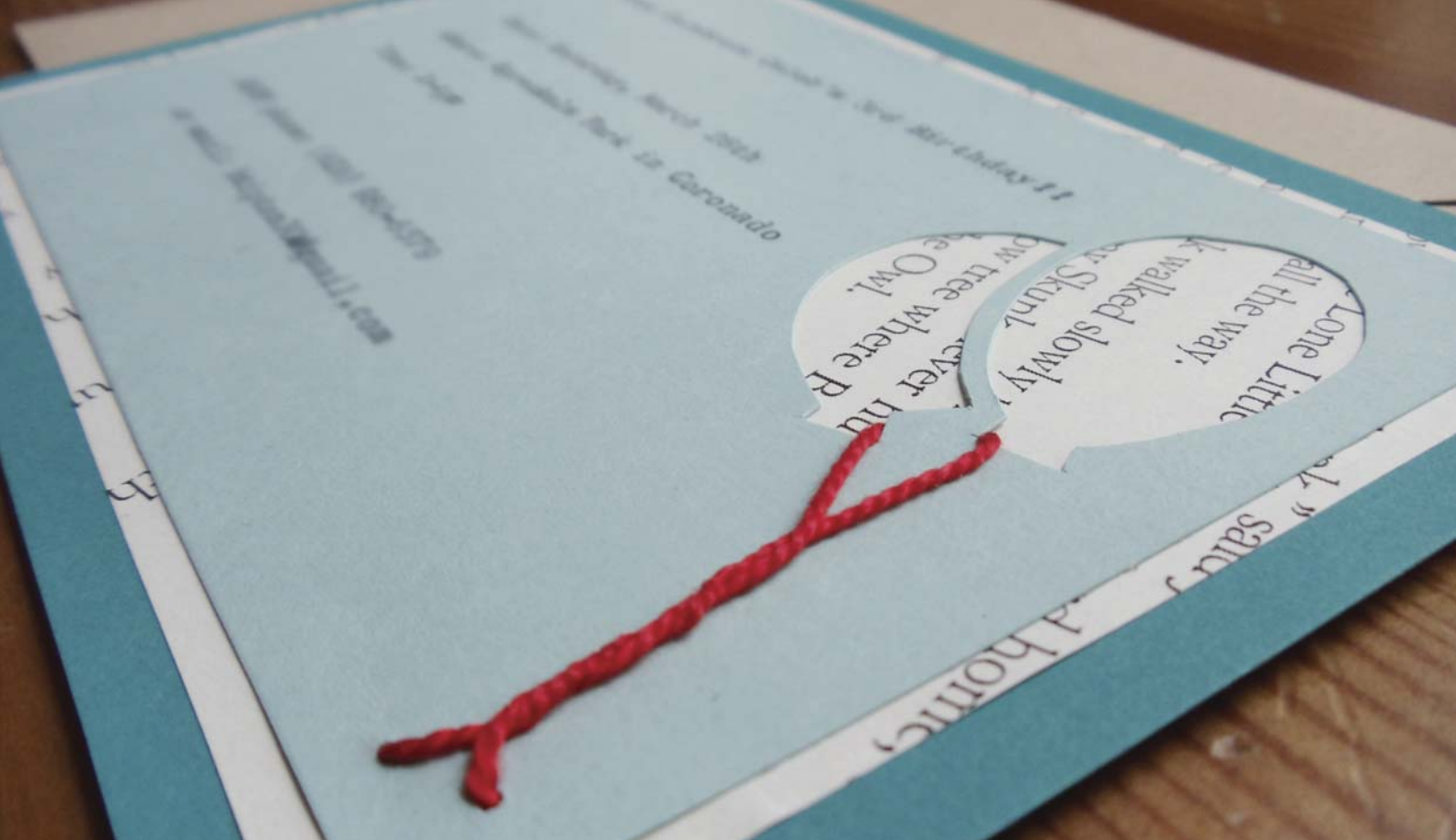
Horn still remembers what a retired Army colonel once told him about the difference a simple letter from home made in his life: “To this day I have on my wall a picture sent to me in Vietnam drawn by a little child,” he recalled the colonel saying. “It still means the world to me.”

The site allows volunteers to match themselves to the soldiers in need, and for servicemen and servicewomen acting as contacts for their units to request what they need on the site, straight from the field. Donors also have sent items such as toys and medicine that troops could give to civilians in the war zones. Donors can even buy pre-assembled care packages and items on the site.

Brian Horn described the joy of distributing mail from AnySoldier.com to fellow soldiers who needed it. “To have been able to distribute the mail personally as a contact to soldiers who get next to no mail at all, and for that brief moment see the look of hope in their faces of good things to come—the hope that somebody out there does care.”



A holiday card created and mailed using a smartphone app.



## *The Internet generation rediscovers the mail*

Among the most intriguing ways of communicating this holiday season are new “apps” for smartphones and computers that convert a message from digital to paper. A user can take a picture on a phone and use such an app to create a greeting card. The app sends the card to be printed and mailed. The latest version sends holiday-themed cards.

Clearly, there is something about the mail that even technological entrepreneurs appreciate.

Many young people raised in a world full of technology and instant communication still understand the unique value of a mailed message—even a handwritten letter that doesn’t require a smartphone to create.

Yale University senior Maggie Cooper, whose hometown is Denver, loves getting mail—real mail, not just e-mail. She thought other young people felt the same way. With high school friend Annabeth Carroll, now a student at Vassar College, Cooper founded the Society for the Prevention of Empty Mailboxes.

Cooper and Carroll have matched hundreds of college students at about 50 schools as penpals. Despite growing up in a world steeped in instant electronic communication, the penpals

have found that writing letters has a value all its own.

“It’s the novelty,” Cooper said. “We’re used to sending tons of e-mails. It’s exciting to get a physical piece of mail.”

The friends were inspired by penpal clubs for children. Many of the participants had penpals when they were kids, she said, and they want to continue that kind of communication as young adults.

E-mail and social media sites have their place, Cooper said, but they don’t fulfill every communication need, and people in her generation still understand that postal letters have value.

“It’s not either-or,” she said. “Seeing someone’s handwriting—that gives you insight into what people are like. That’s lost in e-mail.”

Writing a letter on paper is likely to yield more personal insights than other forms of communication, she said.

“There’s something about letter-writing that’s more intimate.” E-mail isn’t just for personal communication—a computer mailbox is stuffed with work and school business, she said. Sitting down to write a letter takes away those distractions and encourages deeper reflection.

“When you’re young and at a slumber party and they turn off the lights, you’re more likely to say things you wouldn’t say to people if you could see them. Writing a letter is kind of like that.”

As their mission statement says, “We think that there’s a lot to say for the medium of letters: They’re arguably more personal and certainly less creepy.” And letter-writing doesn’t allow for endless interruptions from other friends who want to chat on Facebook—or for Internet stalkers to track or harass you.

Like many young people who love postal mail, Cooper and Carroll are perfectly comfortable using whatever mode of communication they find useful for a specific purpose. They use a blog ([mailboxsociety.tumblr.com](http://mailboxsociety.tumblr.com)) to help them publicize the Society. You can write to them at P.O. Box 203655, New Haven, CT 06520.

## *Mail as art*

There is no substitute for good taste.

E-mail and social media have made keeping in touch easier, but postal mail remains the standard when you want to announce or celebrate a special event like a wedding, graduation or milestone like a birthday or anniversary. A letter or postcard of thanks for a gift just wouldn’t be the same in electronic form. And long after the wedding is over or the child who wrote a thank-you note to grandparents is grown, the invitation or announcement makes a treasured keepsake.

Lindsay Warriner makes stationery products, like the ones below, to help people put more of themselves into their communications.



Lindsay Warriner of Brookline, MA, is, at 23, another member of the Internet generation who understands what it means to create a special, one-of-a-kind piece of mail with style in mind. Warriner designs customized invitations, announcements and cards for Warren Tales ([warrentales.blogspot.com](http://warrentales.blogspot.com)), her small but growing business.

"What I really like is having a product that someone wants, and is more than they imagined." Each of her projects is a work of art in itself, often incorporating objects, fabrics and intricate designs you won't find on a Hallmark card or standard-issue wedding invitation.

When she's not creating invitations, Warriner designs, prints and mails her own homemade postcards. "I usually send 13 to 18 postcards every other week," Warriner said. "I have a large list of people I send mail to all across the country."

Sending unique greeting cards, she said, is the ultimate personal mail.

"Because I was sending so much mail, it started losing what was important. I thought I should put more of myself into it." Warriner avoids sending traditional Christmas or birthday cards, opting for surprising recipients with the unexpected greeting.

Warriner likes to take her time penning personal messages. Sometimes she even writes them using an old-fashioned quill pen. "Most people don't send postcards that take more than 30 seconds to write," she said. "You never realize how quickly you write postcards and letters until you do it in quill and ink and it takes an hour."

Mailing her creations is more satisfying than instant communication, she said. "It seems somehow more real than e-mail; there's something extra. In a world of digital, it's literally something you can hold onto. It says 'I'm here' and there's something bringing us together."

Keeping in touch should be about more than having a list of friends, she said. "Facebook makes it incredibly easy." But taking the time to send mail to someone special is a statement in its own right. "It's a nicer touch than Facebook. You do the reaching out. Even if you don't hear back, it keeps the chain of communication alive.

"It shows that it's you they were thinking of."

The customers of Toys in the Mail enjoy the best of both worlds.

"They like the convenience of ordering through the Internet and getting

delivery at home," said Scott Graves, founder of Toys in the Mail. With his wife Patty, Graves fulfills thousands of orders for lucky children each year from his headquarters in Eagle, ID.

"As you can tell from our name, we feel like there is a value for people to have things delivered. Our feedback is that our customers love to order by Internet and get delivery," Scott Graves said. "It's a convenience."

Graves has been fulfilling orders by mail from his website, [ToysintheMail.com](http://ToysintheMail.com), since he founded the company in 1999, at a time when larger mail-order sites like Amazon.com had yet to turn a profit. Now his company is part of a huge Internet-mailing industry, though it is still small enough that when you contact the company, Scott or Patty usually answer the phone.

"It's exciting knowing there are people out there working for you—you don't have to get in the car or stand in line at the store. Someone's doing all that for you. I know when I do that, it gives me an exciting sense of something happening behind the scenes."

To Graves, the mail part of his customers' experience is more than convenience.

"It's a classic or nostalgic convenience in a modern-day era," Graves said. "It's a modern twist on a classic American lifestyle, with someone delivering packages who has been delivering them for a hundred years."

Most children can relate to that kind of excitement. "I remember as a kid checking the mail every day," Graves said.

The joy of anticipating the arrival of greetings, gifts and packages, especially during the holiday season, is an enduring tradition. With luck, today's children will pass on warm memories and a love for the wonderful messages and packages that come through the U.S. Mail to their own children someday. Many children will, of course, deliver wish lists to Santa Claus by writing and mailing him a letter. ☐