

# Gratitude Letter: The Why and the How

## Why You Should Try It

Feeling gratitude can improve health and happiness; expressing gratitude also strengthens relationships. Yet sometimes expressions of thanks can be fleeting and superficial. This exercise encourages you to express gratitude in a thoughtful, deliberate way by writing—and, ideally, delivering—a letter of gratitude to a person you have never properly thanked.

## Time Required

At least 15 minutes for writing the letter and at least 30 minutes for the visit

## How to Do it

Call to mind someone who did something for you for which you are extremely grateful but to whom you never expressed your deep gratitude. This could be a relative, friend, teacher, or colleague. Try to pick someone who is still alive and could meet you face-to-face in the next week. It may be most helpful to select a person or act that you haven't thought about for a while—something that isn't always on your mind.

Now, write a letter to one of these people, guided by the following steps.

- Write as though you are addressing this person directly (“Dear \_\_\_\_\_”).
- Don't worry about perfect grammar or spelling.
- Describe in specific terms what this person did, why you are grateful to this person, and how this person's behavior affected your life. Try to be as concrete as possible.
- Describe what you are doing in your life now and how you often remember his or her efforts.
- Try to keep your letter to roughly one page (~300 words).
- Next, you should try if at all possible to deliver your letter in person, following these steps:
  - Plan a visit with the recipient. Let that person know you'd like to see him or her and have something special to share, but don't reveal the exact purpose of the meeting.
  - When you meet, let the person know that you are grateful to them and would like to read a letter expressing your gratitude; ask that he or she refrain from interrupting until you're done.
  - Take your time reading the letter. While you read, pay attention to his or her reaction as well as your own.
  - After you have read the letter, be receptive to his or her reaction and discuss your feelings together.
- Remember to give the letter to the person when you leave.
- If physical distance keeps you from making a visit, you may choose to arrange a phone or video chat.

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## Evidence That It Works

Seligman, M. E., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). [Positive psychology progress: empirical validation of interventions](#). *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410.

When researchers tested five different exercises, the gratitude visit showed the greatest positive effect on participants' happiness one month later; however, six months after the visit, their happiness had dropped back down to where it was before. This is why some researchers suggest doing this exercise once every six weeks or so.

Also, [2009 research led by Jeffrey Froh](#) found that adolescents who don't generally experience positive emotions showed a significant boost in positive emotions two months after doing a gratitude visit.

Research suggests that while there are benefits simply to writing the letter, you reap significantly greater benefits from delivering and reading it in person.

## Why It Works

The letter affirms positive things in your life and reminds you how others have cared for you—life seems less bleak and lonely if someone has taken such a supportive interest in you. Visiting the giver allows you to strengthen your connection with her and remember how others value you as an individual.

## Sources

[Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D.](#), University of California, Riverside

[Kristin Layous, Ph.D.](#), Stanford University

[Martin Seligman, Ph.D.](#), University of Pennsylvania

Credit: Greater Good Science Center

