Anatomy of a Letter, Pt. 2

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Salutation

The salutation is the first part of text directed to the recipient of the letter and captures an important moment in which the writer establishes his or her relationship to the reader and show due respect, etc. Salutations vary widely, even within the small, early eighteenth-century collection of business correspondences we have been studying. Salutations in letters to John Rowe Parker, for example, include "Mr. Parker," "Dr Sir," "D Sir," and "Sir," to name a few. Salutations inform modern readers of the context of the letters that they study: these are a bit brusque and well, rather *businesslike*; other personal or political letters of the period include warmer or more flattering greetings. In the John Rowe Parker Correspondence, where Nicole and I are studying a series of letters, it is possible to trace the arc of relationships based on salutations that change over time.

Subscription

The subscription is the writer's final message to the recipient. It follows the body of the letter and precedes the signature. Subscriptions, like salutations, are important sites of identification for both the writer and recipient: writers here re-establish their intended relationship to the recipient and can subtly flatter, affirm or demean the recipient. In the same way the changing salutations can indicate a relationship in flux, subscriptions also show change in status and emotion. George
Willig’s letters to John Rowe Parker, for instance, show a subtle shift in respect over time as Parker fails to pay a bill to Willig. In Willig’s first letter to Parker in our collection, where he first requests payment—July 7th 1820—Willig’s subscription is two lines, intended to convey respect:

*With due regard*

*Your Obed [Sevt]*

In this subscription, Willig gives Parker two signs of respect: both “due regard” and a gesture of humility as “You[r] Obed[ient] S[ervant].”. Five months later, Willig has still not received his money from Parker, and his subscription is accordingly more terse, as seen on his note from December 11, 1820.

*Yours respectfully*

The following month, Willig writes Parker to inform him that he has still not received the money. Additionally, Willig has passed on to another man the note of lending that Parker has promised, and he hopes that the money is paid, because his other associate is “a gentleman who would be highly offended with me if it should be returned.” Willig signs this letter from January 17\textsuperscript{th}, 1821

*Yours as usual*
The progression in subscriptions is striking: Willig first signs in July with a doubly honorific subscription, then removes both Parker’s status as one deserving "due regard" and the obedience of a servant. After continuing to wait in vain for the payment of the note, Parker removes "respectfully" from his subscription and becomes merely "yours"—the possessive no longer signifies intentional servanthood, regard, or respect in the relationship.

The next month, Willig opens his letter to Parker on February 15th, 1821 with the words "I am much mortified to find that you have not paid..." Willig goes on to explain that the holder of the note, which he has passed on intends to sue Parker for the recovery of the amount. Willig, however has stepped in:

_I have prevailed on him to wait...I therefore beg that you will inform me by return of mail, what arrangement you intend to make respecting these notes_

Clearly frustrated with Parker’s negligence and seeking to emphasize the urgency of the situation, Willig reiterates his request for quick reply and, following his previous change of email, signs more informally:

__Expecting your speedy answers__

__I am as usual__

It is fascinating to note the different uses towards which a two-line subscription can be put. Where before two lines had been used by Willig to clearly express his sentiments of respect, the two-line subscription from February 15, 1821 reinforces sentiments of impatience from the body of the letter and reiterates a less respectful posture towards Parker.

Willig signs his next two letters—February 25th and April 21st— with "Yours as usual" and "Yours," respectively. These continually shorter subscriptions seem to show his growing impatience with Parker. His words in his final letter in the correspondence, from June 15th, 1821 are simple and direct:
I have waited with much patience I therefore now request you to inform me, by return of mail when and how my claim against you is to be settled. —

Interestingly, Willig closes with the subscription he used in his first letter, that is

*With due regard*

*Your Obed. Sevt.*

Willig’s motives for such a subscription are unclear. Perhaps he is wishing to wash his hands of guilt in the matter and thus closes very respectfully; he may be using such a formal subscription to convey his seriousness in forthcoming legal matters.

**Transmission/Postage**

Marks of transmission show the passage of the letter from sender to recipient. Like today’s letters, letters from the early nineteenth century were stamped on the dates that they were sent—in our letters from Philadelphia printers to John Rowe Parker in Boston, the front of the letter is stamped with the date in a circular pattern with an orange-red ink.
As in today’s world, the letters in the early 19th century cost money to send. In this time, however, the recipient, not the sender, was responsible for paying the postage. In the letters that Nicole and I have been studying, the postage is marked on the letter with a deep red ink.

Date on letter

The date written on the letter, while obviously used by bibliographers to catalog and categorize the letter, can also be used to other ends. Dates on letters can confirm historical accounts of events. Additionally, the date written on a letter can be compared to the date of a postage stamp, allowing to speculation on the gap (or lack thereof) between the written date and the date of postage.
Recipient Additions/Folds

After being read, letters were often filed by the recipient—the maxim “Get it in writing!” was as true 200 years ago as it is today. It is precisely because of the good filing habits of John Rowe Parker that Nicole and I have these letters to study. Filing systems often involve several modifications to the letter.

First, in order to save space, letters are often folded when they are filed. Filing folds can be identified on letters because their lines often cut through text on the front of the letter. In the examples below of letters from George E. Blake and George Willig, the filing folds are clearly distinguished by the way they cut through the superscriptions indicating Parker’s location in Boston.

Second, after folding the letters to file, recipients of letters often wrote the names of the letters’ authors on the front of the letter in order to organize and file them more easily. John Rowe Parker seems to have written the names of his letters’ authors in the top left corner.

Filing fold on letter from George E. Blake to John Rowe Parker, March 28, 1818
Filing fold on letter from George Willig to John Rowe Parker, Dec 11, 1820

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