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Time Trial: Email Vs. the Hand-written Letter

For most of the last century, the primary method of personal or business communication over long distances involved tools and materials that hardly anyone now would think of using; a pen, paper, envelope, and a stamp. In short, a hand-written letter! Hardly anyone today would think to pick up a pen to write and send a letter to their family on the other side of the country. Beside the actual work involved with writing a letter, the drafting, proofreading, placing it in a mailbox, the waiting weeks for a reply, seem like too much effort and inconvenience to simply ask an aunt for her recipe for cherry pie. Today, all of the materials and work involved with writing and sending a physical letter have been replaced by E-Mail. Instead of drafting and proofreading a letter you can simply type it on your computer and there’s a good chance that your email service will proofread it for you. You can click send and know that your message will be delivered to your party’s inbox within a matter of minutes. Despite having almost completely supplanted the hand-written letter, email has many similarities to that older media.

Before the advent of email, the hand-written letter reigned supreme as the primary means of communication across distances and for leaving a record of that communication. At their peak, hand written letters were used for internal business communication, contacting friends and loved ones who lived far away, and other casual communication.

Today, email is used for many things that hand-written letters were used for in the last century. Email is the primary medium for inter-office memos, love letters, casual personal communication, and to communicate with family who live far away.

Writing an email is actually a fairly straightforward process. First, you must sit down at your computer, open your email provider of choice, and then organize your thoughts. Once you know what you want to say in your email you can begin typing it. After you have typed your email you should look it over and proofread it to make sure it is correct. Once you are satisfied with your email message you can send it with a single mouse-click.

Writing a hand-written letter is also a fairly simple process. To write a hand-written letter you need to gather a pen or pencil, paper, an envelope, and stamps that will cover the postage fee for your letter. Once you have all of your materials the process of writing a letter is essentially the same as writing an email. When writing a letter you must organize your thoughts and write them down on paper, then you must proofread. If there are any glaring errors or omissions, you may have to start over on a clean sheet of paper to rewrite the letter before you can finally send it.

The transmission processes for email and handwritten letters are very similar. Although emails are sent electronically and a letter has to start from a mailbox they both undergo a similar process on their way to their destination. When you finish typing an email, proofread it, and are ready to send it you must specify a recipient by typing their email address into the appropriate form in your email service.

After you specify a recipient in your email and hit send, the email service looks at the recipient email address and sorts the email for transmission to the next step in its path. The recipient address of an email tells your email service which of the many big distribution servers to send your message to. That server then determines the route that your message will take across the internet based on the recipient’s email address. The server then sends it to another big distribution server that forwards it to the email service that recipient is using, and from there the message is delivered to the recipient’s inbox. All of this happens in a matter of seconds or minutes.

In much the same fashion as and email, a handwritten letter is deposited in a mailbox to be picked up by a letter carrier. The letter carrier delivers the letter to a local sorting facility that will determine which regional distribution center to send it on to based on the addressee on the letter. Once at the regional sorting facility the letter is sorted based on destination and then sent on to another regional distribution center to be sorted and sent to a local sorting facility near the recipient. From there the letter is sorted and sent to the local post office, and from there it is delivered to the addressee. Though this process seems completely different it actually follows a very similar pattern as email distribution, albeit transported physically over a span of days instead of seconds or minutes.

Email is a purely electronic medium and can be sent, received, and replied to within a matter of minutes from anywhere in the world. Even so, the act of sending an email and the medium of email bear a striking resemblance to the hand-written letter that it has largely superseded. These similarities include the purpose of writing an email, the process of writing one, and the system for transmitting email to its destination. Despite these similarities, the delivery time and convenience advantages that email provide clearly show it to be the superior medium for communication.