
James S. Mullican
THE WRITING PROCESS: 
HOW [NOT] TO WRITE A LETTER OF COMPLAINT

James S. Mullican

The Number One term on the Composition Hit Parade is undoubtedly "the writing process." As Huck would say, "heuristics" and "relevance" ain't shucks alongside of "process." Teachers of writing are urged to observe their own processes to see how homo sapiens (see shortened form below) really does compose her/himself. Thus in a spirit of scientific inquiry and neighborliness I offer the following prescription for composing a how-to essay.

Have you ever felt so mad that you could just eat a banana? Maybe a business firm has cheated you out of some money, or maybe some politician has done something incredibly stupid or corrupt. In both instances, injustice has been let loose upon the world, and it falls to you to set the matter straight. How do you go about righting this terrible wrong? Assassination is definitely out. as is assault and battery. A personal tongue lashing is a possibility, but all too often, the truly guilty are far removed from you personally, and even if they were close by, you just might get a fat lip if you got too vociferous in giving the wicked some well deserved badmouthing. So what recourse is left? Write a letter of complaint.

Now, the first step in writing a letter of complaint is to find some grievance that must be remedied post haste. In this crooked world in which we live, that isn't so difficult. The task is made a bit more difficult when we must find some grievance that can actually be remedied. Let's face it: A letter of complaint will not balance the federal budget, redress the trade imbalance, or stop the nuclear arms race; it probably will not save the whales or persuade nincompoops to quit shooting bald eagles. So you need a more manageable problem, say, the fact that leaf burning makes you sick and that your fellow citizens, so admirable in other ways, are barbaric when it comes to disposing of their leaves by depositing tars and gasses in the lungs of their neighbors. Now that's a grievance worth getting hot under the collar about and one that somebody just might pay some attention to.

Now that you have your topic, a worthy grievance, what are you going to do about it? If you follow my advice, you will empty all your venom onto the page. Really let those dumbos have it in some such vein as this:

Dear Creeps:

You call yourselves good citizens, yet you smoke up the neighborhood, letting the smoke hang like a sodden poisonous blanket over the lives and property of your neighbors. Some of you go to church on Sunday and profess to love your neighbor. Is that any way to love your neighbor, by dumping poisonous gas on him or her? You keep the insides of your houses neat and clean; you may even have electronic air filters to keep your air clean, but you don't mind befouling the air of your neighbors. You have no consideration for those who suffer from allergies and asthma. You'd rather deposit your filth in their lungs than to pay a couple of bucks for some plastic bags and take time to put your leaves in them for the street department to pick up. In conclusion, you are rotten bastards and lowdown sons of bitches.

With sincere venom,

Having completed your first draft and feeling much better, you are ready for the second step: let this draft cool for twenty-four hours.

The third step is to read what you have written and visualize the faces of your neighbors. Think of the barbecue you had with them last summer. Think of the time they found your cat dead in their
yard and came to your door to tell you
about it in hushed tones, dabbing a tear
as they talked. Think of the time that
your son threw a rock and broke the
windshield of their new car and they
didn't even call the police. Visualizing
your neighbors' faces is necessary for your
next step, writing for an audience.

In revising your first draft, edit out
anything offensive, salvaging anything that
might be useful in achieving your goal.
Finding nothing there to salvage, you begin
afresh with something like this:

Hi, neighbors:
This morning as I was out working
in my garden, a familiar, but not
altogether pleasant odor assailed my
nostrils (ha, ha!). I hate to tell
you, but it seems that some of you
were burning your leaves. I know they
do make a mess on your lawns, but
after all, guys and gals, I do get the
sniffles a bit after inhaling smoke and
there is some evidence that smoldering
leaves can contribute to the BIG C
(shortle!). You know what? The street
department will give each household
ten plastic bags, and wouldn't it be
great if our fine neighborhood didn't
have even a smidgeon of smoke
anywhere? I know it's a little trouble
to bag those nasty leaves, but the
payoff would be something else in
livability in the ol' neighborhood.
Think about it.

Your old pal,

After letting this draft stand overnight,
you should take a hard look at it. Very
likely you will say, "Boy, what a bunch of
baloney. This is a letter of complaint?!
This draft bends over backwards to butter
up those rascals. Better no letter at all
than such sop as this." I have to admit
that your judgment would be good in
rejecting this drivel, so now you are ready
for a third try, this time addressed to the
local newspaper in which your complaint is
stated in general terms.

The advantage of the general audience
is that your neighbors will see your name
and suspect that the letter may be meant
for them, but they won't get mad because
they won't know for sure. Here's a sample:

My Fellow Citizens:
In this modern jet-age world of
today, one may encounter problems that
partake of both the old and the new.
From time immemorial, homo sapiens
(Sap, for short) has disposed of
surrounding arboreal excrescences
through incineration. In the eons and
eons of prerecorded time, those noxious
fumes had little impact, since the
human race was extended spatially over
wide distances and one's family and
oneself were the only ones who would
have to partake nasally of aerial
hydrocarbons. Further, the existence
of carcinogens was unknown, so the Sap
could ingest these not unpleasant—and
soon to become, nostalgic—aromas to
his heart's content in the aura of
blissful ignorance (Cf. "Smoke gets in
your eyes"; "Chestnuts roasting on an
open fire"). No more!!! Now the
population is concentrated in urban
centers, and congestion in megalopolies
(sic: look it up), not to speak of
nasal passages, reigns supreme. If the
human species is to survive, prosper,
and breathe the clean air of freedom
from emphysema and pulmonary carcinoma,
we must all of us come to the aid of
our countrymen and quit burning the
dadburned leaves.

Very truly yours,

This draft need simmer only twelve hours
before its assessment, which, to make a
long story short, reveals that the third
draft too is so much hokum. Then, dear
reader, you are ready for your final step.
Throw all these drafts in the wastebasket,
close all your windows, turn on your
electronic air filter, and relax until
the fires go out and the sodden ashes
quit smoldering.

James S. Mullican teaches English at Indiana State University in Terre Haute, Indiana.
He is the former editor of the Indiana English journal.