

19th Century literary non-fiction

Source B

This extract is from an 1856 article letter which presents a gentleman's opinions on the current state of letter-writing and offering advice about how to write letters well. It is from *The Leisure Hour*, a general-interest periodical.

Hints for Letter-Writers

An eccentric old bachelor* friend of ours used to say, that he never read letters which were spun out beyond a certain length, and that if any person sent him one which overstepped the prescribed limits, he made a point of stopping at the proper place, leaving the rest unread. This was certainly a summary* mode of proceeding, and the account made his hearers
5 laugh heartily; one of them intimating that he presumed the speaker had not many ladies among the number of his correspondence.

"I have not," he said in return; "but if I had, I should dispose of them much more quickly."

"How so?" inquired a lady; "would you burn their letters without reading?"

"Not so, madam," was the answer. "In most cases I would read the postscript only. I should
10 thus, without trouble, arrive at the only important part of the letter. The majority of ladies do not remember what they are really writing about till they have concluded; then, just recollecting themselves, or perhaps asking the question in their own minds why they write at all, it is recalled to their memory, and there you have it. Besides, the letters of ladies are always of such an unreasonable length; not contented with the limits of the paper they have
15 chosen to spoil, they cross and re-cross it, till it becomes one undistinguishable mass of illegible writing, only to be deciphered by one of themselves. I tell you, ladies and gentlemen," continued he, "I would have an act of parliament to restrict letters within a certain length, allowing ladies, however, to write twice as much as gentlemen; but after that
20 piece of paper is filled, or the number of lines allotted to each is written, I would tax every additional word."

"What a barbarian!" exclaimed some of his lady hearers again; "why, you would neutralise the benefit of the penny postage act*, and put an end to friendly correspondence."

"By no means, ladies, by no means," said he, again; "you misunderstand me. I would only
25 teach people when they write, to say what they think, and cut off all the unmeaning compliments and excuses with which too many letters are crammed from end to end; substituting really useful topics, and teaching them to speak on subjects which are alike pleasing to both the writer and the recipient of the epistle*. I would limit the length of letters, in order to teach men and women to think before they write, as I would have them also think
30 before they speak: we should not then be bored with those which compel us to wade through four dismal pages, vainly endeavouring to discover why they were written at all, only to find out all that was of the slightest consequence thrust into a scrap of paper at the last."

[...]

35 “When you wish to write a letter, think over what you have to say; finish one subject before you begin another, and in such a manner that you will not have to recur to it again; then, try to explain your whole meaning in as few words as possible. If you wish to speak onto subjects which have any reference or resemblance to each other, link them, by placing one immediately after the other, so that in like manner they may be joined in the mind of the reader; and, lastly, be sure to write legibly.”

Glossary

- * bachelor – unmarried man
- * summary – brief, done suddenly
- * penny postage act – in 1840 it became cheaper and easier to send a letter within the UK: this act meant that it cost just one penny
- * epistle – ancient and literary word for letter

Sample Paper 2 Section A Question 3:

03 You now need to refer only to **Source B** from **lines 24 to 33**.

How does the writer use language to describe badly written letters?

[12 marks]

This extract is from “Hints for Letter-Writers” by author unknown from Vol. 5 No. 238 of *The Leisure Hour* magazine (17th July 1856). The full text can be found online at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433081682910?urlappend=%3Bseq=458>.

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