

Dos and Don'ts of Writing a Sympathy Card

No one likes writing a sympathy card- we get it. You are probably not happy to have to research this topic. It means someone has died. It means someone (or many people) you care about are suffering. And most of us don't know how to write a sympathy card. They don't teach us that in school. Anxieties start flooding . . . What do I say? How do I say it? What if my words are wrong?

Sometimes we don't have the perfect words, but being genuine goes a lot further than most people realize. Writing a sympathy card is something really small you can do to make your friend feel loved and supported, so seize the opportunity to do it well.

DO

Pick a simple card. It can be tempting to go with an elaborate card with a long, printed message on it — Hallmark wrote all the words so you don't have to, right!?! A simple card with a longer, personal note will be a lot more meaningful. It allows you to personalize, and shows you took the time to really think of your friend and their loved one.

Think about your friend. No one knows your friend like you. When questioning which card to pick think about your friend and trust your judgment. If they are not religious, a very religious card may not be the best fit (even if it is the one *you* like best).

Handwrite your message. This feels like it should go without saying, but in the technological age it may be tempting to consider other options. Don't do it! No one cares if your handwriting is bad. This is one time it is important to sit down, grab your pen, and send it snail mail. Many people keep all the sympathy cards they receive and find comfort in them during their grief. An email, text, or Facebook message alone just isn't the same. Feel free to do those things, but send a handwritten card too.

Talk about the person who died. Often sympathy card messages will focus exclusively on the pain the recipient is experiencing. A card remembering the special qualities of the person who died, or even a specific memory of that person, can go a long way in bringing comfort. If you know the name of the baby, refer to their child by name.

Offer something specific. Though people grieving often need help and support, it can be hard for them to know how to ask. Offer them some specific suggestions of how you could help (*I would be happy to babysit Sally for a few hours any time; I would be happy to take care of mowing the lawn for you for the next few weeks, I would be happy to come clean your home etc*).

Plan to send an anniversary card. When someone dies the sympathy cards roll in. But one year after the loss many grieverers are faced with silence. Very few people remember the date or to check in with them. When you buy a sympathy card, buy a card for the one year anniversary of the loss at the same time. Put the date on your calendar and stick a note on the card, then tuck it away. Send it at the one year mark to let your friend know that you are still thinking of them, that you acknowledge their grief is still difficult, and that you are still there for support.



DON'T

Rehash the tragedy. When you don't know what to say all sorts of inappropriate things may pour out of your mouth/pen. A sympathy card is not the place to rehash the specific circumstances of the loss.

Tell them their loved one is in a better place. They may believe that. They may even say it, but you don't want to be the one to say it first. Even with a belief in an afterlife, this does not ease the pain and loneliness of the person being gone.

Offer something you can't deliver on. We are all for people offering specific ways they can help support a griever, but don't offer something you can't follow through on. It can be very hard for a griever to ask for support, so if you say you can make them dinner every Sunday this month you better be able to do it.

Say anything on the WYG 'what not to say' list. Check out [our full list of what not to say](#) before you write your card. God has a plan, you understand their pain, and at least he/she lived a long life are all some classics that should be avoided. But there are a number of others, so be sure to check out the full list.

Fall back on stock phrases from greeting cards. A personal message is crucial. A long message created by a Hallmark employee does not exactly convey your most sincere, heartfelt, or genuine sentiments. Create your own personal message, no matter how tough it is. A sincere personal message will go further than a Hallmark message every time.

Example of a format you may want to use

Dear _____,

Offer condolences. Talk about the person who died. Offer something specific. Close.

Sign.

Using this form can allow you to say as much or as little as you want.

Dear Janis,

I am so sorry for the loss of your infant (child's name if known). I can't even imagine the pain of losing a child. I could tell from the way you talked about your pregnancy how excited your family was to welcome this child into this world. I am sure you will have many arrangements to take care of in the next few weeks. I would be happy to (watch the girls for a few hours if it would be helpful, bring over a meal, spend time with you, run errands etc.) You, Rick, and your family will be in my thoughts and prayers.

Love,

Donna