How To Write A Christmas Letter That Doesn’t Suck

by Tom Catalini

Be Real.

Not Real Boring.
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Why be boring?

Staying in touch - your annual report
Christmas letters (ok, "holiday letters") go out once each year to family and friends. Sure, you may be on Facebook or Twitter giving out nauseating detail on your what you ate for breakfast or your thoughts on the newest Lady GaGa video. And you're probably calling or emailing some friends throughout the year. But the holiday letter, that's like your official Annual Report. It's the one communication that neatly summarizes the status of your life. It's the balance sheet by which you are evaluated by family and friends, complete with a report of major activities, accomplishments and vague and noncommittal forward looking statements.

But, it's not an annual report
The Annual Report style is the natural way to think about and present the letter, of course. And that's why most of your holiday letters have probably been tedious and boring. We can fix that. And not by copping out with a photo greeting card (hint: that's boring).

Yes, a picture is worth a thousand words, but those are the wrong thousand words. A staged photo tells the story of whether or not you've grown or shaved that goatee or found just the right sweater (or worse, set of matching sweaters) for the family photo. That's not the most interesting thing you've done in the past year (I hope). And yeah, the kids are cute and all, but an even worse offense is to send out a picture of just your kids. Your friends are friends with you, not your kids. Is having kids the last interesting thing you've done with your life? Probably not, so share more. Get out the keyboard and give an update. We'll make it easy. And fun.
**Planning a chance encounter**

Sure, it's hard to summarize a whole year's worth of stuff into a brief letter. It's like when you unexpectedly run into a friend that you haven't seen in a while. Even though you're close (or were close), the conversation can easily get reduced to elevator chit chat. So much has transpired that you can't possibly recall everything off the top of your head and squish it down to a few neat sentences, so you end up saying a bunch of watered down things like "I'm doing well" and "things are great."

But what if you could know about that chance encounter beforehand? What if you knew you had that 10 minutes to amaze your friend with all the wonderful things that are really going on in your life?

Well, you can.

Your holiday letter is precisely that opportunity. In fact, it's that opportunity with not just one friend but all of them at once! With a little effort (and it really won't take much effort), you can provide a very non-boring update of the life and times of you. And your friends and family will appreciate that a lot more than a bland and generic Annual Report style run down.

Wouldn't you like to receive holiday letters with a little more pizazz? Ones that gave you a better feel for what's actually going on in your friends’ lives in a fun an interesting way?

Well, you can, perhaps, if you start the trend in your social circle. Let’s get started right now. There are just a few easy steps to follow.
Make Some Quick Lists

**Brainstorm**
First, let's brainstorm a bit. We've got to dig up a year's worth of stuff, and that doesn't just pop out of your head instantly. But, we can coax a lot of information out by generating a few lists. Grab a piece of paper and create the five lists below. Take your time. You may not even complete this in one sitting. But start now. Go as far as you can, and then sit on it for a couple of days if you need to. You may remember more items as you're driving to work or picking out groceries. When you're done, share the list with your spouse (significant other, friend) to make sure it's complete.

**Don’t filter (yet)**
We'll pare things down later. For now, dump out everything you can think of, and don't worry if it seems boring or like something you wouldn't necessarily point out in a conversation with a friend. Presenting even the boring stuff creatively (or at least efficiently) can be interesting. Your friends do want to know details about you, they just don't want to have to down a Red Bull and a No Doze to get through it.

**The lists**
1. List all the places you or members of your family have traveled this year, for business or leisure.

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2. List all the accomplishments or status changes you can think of - promotions at work, layoff, new job, etc. For the kids, include graduations, scouting honors, or notable sports results.

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3. List all the things that happened unexpectedly - a broken arm, local flood, surprise birthday party, etc.

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4. List anything you (or your family) did for the first time - tried mountain biking, learned to ski, made an apple pie or took an art class. Rode a bike without training wheels, lost a first tooth, learned to read.

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5. List anything else interesting that doesn’t fit into one of the first 4 lists. It might be a great book you read or special item you purchased. Anything interesting that comes to mind.

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Find 10 Photos

Be selective
Look through all of your photos from the last year (this may also remind you of additional items for your lists). Pick 10 and only 10. Be selective. Candid photos work best, but go ahead and include the fancy posed one too if you like. After all, you spent good money on that one.

Try to include a variety -- pictures from different seasons, individual photos, group photos, indoor photos, outdoor shots, pictures from home and other locales. But only 10. This isn’t a yearbook, just the highlights will do.

Pick An Angle

Go with your gut
Every good story has an angle. A particular point of view, a common lens for viewing different elements of the narrative, a running joke. Take a look at your lists and your photos. Which items seem to pop out at you? Which photo is your eye drawn to immediately?

Those are the memories that excite you most, and those are definitely the ones you should build your letter around. Writing about the things that interest you most will make your letter interesting -- your energy and enthusiasm will shine through. Trust your gut and go with instinct here. Don’t think about your selections, just pick ‘em.
Less is more
Museums don’t crowd rooms with artifacts like a garage sale. They selectively display and feature just a few items from their vast collections. This makes the viewing experience clean, clear and memorable. And that’s what you need to do with your letter.

Better to tell a few stories well than to rush or ramble through a series of disconnected anecdotes and facts. Also, brevity is key.

Be selective
You’ve identified the highlights - those items that immediately caught your eye when you glanced back at your lists and photos. Those are your featured items. Plan to give those items prime real estate and more space for supporting details.

Now, look at the rest of your items. What ties into a theme with your featured items? Highlight those.

What do you want to keep, but don’t necessarily fit in neatly? Those are your sidebar items (more on this in a bit).

What can be left out? Hint - at this point everything that’s left should be omitted. Yep, don’t be afraid to leave a bunch of stuff on the cutting room floor. It’s ok, Martin Scorsese does it all the time.
Presentation is Key

Arranging your letter may be the most effective way to make it interesting. Choose a format - it could be organized like a newspaper (my favorite), a playbill, a website, a blog, anything fun that allows you to present your information clearly. You can even make up your own format. Here are some guidelines.

Pictures
The eye is drawn to pictures. Use them to call attention to items you want to highlight. Vary the size - large, medium, small. If you’re going to embed them in a text narrative, arrange them in a reverse “C” formation on the page to catch the natural movement of the eye along the page. Crop them! Most photos taken casually are not framed in the most interesting way. Today’s software makes it easy to adjust your photos - cropping will make them more interesting. Play around with other adjustments too (make photos black & white, add a border, create a photo collage, etc.).

Columns and Sidebars
Make your letter more readable by using columns to separate stories or topics. Use sidebars for lists - this helps them stand out and stand on their own. Title a sidebar “Travel” and put a simple list of locations or a set of small photos. This allows you to convey a lot of information without taking up a lot of space (or your readers’ time), leaving more room for your “featured items.” If travel is something you’re featuring, put something else in the sidebar. You get the idea.

Titles, subtitles, and changing fonts
Take a lesson from the bloggers in this age of information overload. Popular blogs feature posts that are short, punchy and eye-catching. Notice how little text goes by before another subtitle is inserted, a
bulleted list is added, or a quote is indented. Anything that breaks up the flow of straight text will make your letter more readable. You can also use **bold fonts** to highlight certain words or *italics* to convey a certain tone of voice. And, yes you can even use emoticons too ;-) 

**Go Do It!**

Wow. You made it this far. Now I know you want to write a better holiday letter. So go do it!

Make some quick lists. Find 10 photos. Pick an angle. Curate. Arrange everything in an engaging presentation format. And most importantly - don’t be boring!

You’ll be glad you did. And so will everyone on your mailing list.

Happy Holidays!