The Letters Nobody Tells You to Write

Open When letters for deployment, basic training and long distance, written for the moments people only talk about once they are in them.

Every list of Open When letters has the same ones. Open when you miss me. Open when you can't sleep. Open on your birthday. They are good letters. They are also the ones you would think of anyway.

This guide is about the others. The week with no word. The date that moves again. The quiet right after a call. The fridge that dies on the drive home from the goodbye. We collected these from military spouses, partners and long-distance couples talking honestly on Reddit and Instagram, and we kept hearing the same thing: nobody warned them about this part.

Each moment below comes with what people in it describe and what to put in the letter, often with a first line to start from. Most are written by the one leaving, before they go, because that is the only time they can be. You can write and seal them free on OpenWhen before they leave, and each one stays closed until the moment on its label.

Deployment

Contact during a deployment is unpredictable. These letters are for the stretches no call can reach, and most are written by the deployed partner for the one at home.

1. ### Open when it's only been a few weeks and the rest feels impossible
   Military spouses describe the first month as grief, not just missing someone. Not eating, not sleeping, doing the maths on the months left. One said she didn't believe people who told her it would get better. Write the letter that says it does, in your voice. Name the first weeks as the hardest, and give them one small thing for tomorrow. First line: "Right now the far end looks impossible. It won't always."

2. ### Open when you haven't heard from me in a while
   Comms blackouts are the moment military spouses name as the worst. People describe checking their phone all day and feeling their stomach drop when another night passes. "No news is good news" is what they tell each other, but it is hard to believe alone. Write it before you leave, while you know you are fine. First line: "If it's been quiet, it's because I can't reach you, not because something's wrong."

3. ### Open when we just hung up and the house went quiet

   As one military spouse on Instagram put it, you can desperately want the call and dread how you will feel when it's over. The phone feels heavier after. This is the letter for every call, so it gets reread. Keep it short and about the next thing, not the goodbye. First line: "That went too fast. It always does. Put the kettle on."

4. ### Open when something breaks the day I leave

   Ask any military spouse and they will tell you the house knows. The car, the dryer, the faucet. One described it as the house seeing his truck leave the driveway and deciding it's time. Make this letter funny and useful: where the breaker box is, who to call, which neighbour owes you a favour. First line: "Of course it broke. It always waits for me to leave."

5. ### Open when you've done every bedtime alone and you're running on empty

   The parent at home describes going from two parents to "essentially single parenting." Every diaper, every bath, every sleepless night. Thanks in a phone call can sound thin. A letter written in advance says you know exactly what you are leaving them with. Be specific about the routine. First line: "I know it's bath, books, two glasses of water and a third trip upstairs. I know you're doing all of it."

6. ### Open when the kids do something new and you weren't there to see it

   Families film the first time tying shoes, the first steps, the lost tooth, so the deployed parent can see it later. This one goes the other way: written by the parent leaving, for the moment the one at home has to tell them about it. Ask for every detail. First line: "Tell me everything. I want to hear it twice."

7. ### Open when the homecoming date moves again

   Extensions come up again and again on r/MilitarySpouse. Families describe the date moving three and four times, and learning to be "happily surprised" if it happens at all. You can't promise a date, so don't. Write the letter that holds steady when the date doesn't. First line: "The date moved. I didn't. I'm still coming home to you."

8. ### Open when I'm home and it still feels hard

   Nobody talks much about the weeks after homecoming. Spouses describe crying only once their partner is back, after holding it together for months, or finding they suddenly can't do anything. Write this one to the partner who stayed, sealed until after you are home. First line: "You carried all of it. You don't have to carry it gracefully now."

Basic training

Recruits hand in their phones, so the direction flips. The recruit writes these before shipping out, for the partner or parents at home. Paper mail is what reaches the recruit.

1. ### Open the night I ship out

   The first night is the strangest one. On r/USMilitarySO, partners describe a phone that suddenly stops lighting up, and two days feeling like a week. This letter is the last thing you say before the silence starts. First line: "You're reading this the first night I'm not reachable. I'm thinking about you anyway."

2. ### Open after my first call from basic

   First calls are short, rushed and often hard to hear. People ask whether it's normal that their recruit was crying, or sounded like someone else. It usually is. Say so in advance, so they don't spend the night replaying it. First line: "If I sounded flat, or upset, or like a stranger, that's the first week talking. Not me."

3. ### Open when you haven't heard from me all week

   Partners at home describe checking the mailbox every day for the first letter. Paper mail to and from training can take a week or two, and it sometimes arrives in a bunch. This is the letter that doesn't wait on the post. First line: "No letter yet doesn't mean I haven't written. It means the mail is slow and I'm busy."

4. ### Open when you get your phone back

   This one goes the other way. The people at home write it, to be opened the day the recruit can finally read it, usually around graduation. Tell them what you did while they were gone and what you are proud of. First line: "Welcome back to the outside world. Here's everything you missed."

Long distance

Long-distance couples have the airport covered. What they talk about is the hours around it.

1. ### Open the morning after the airport

   Everyone braces for the goodbye at the gate. Fewer people warn you about the next morning: the quiet flat, the suitcase you can't bring yourself to unpack. Write this before the visit ends and hand it over at departures. Give them one plan for the day. First line: "Don't unpack yet. Get coffee first. I'll still be gone after it, but you'll feel better."

2. ### Open on a night we don't call

   Couples describe the nightly call turning into an obligation, and then feeling guilty for dreading it. Some fix it by agreeing that some nights are off. This letter holds the place of the call, so a skipped night doesn't read as pulling away. First line: "Tonight we're not calling, and that's fine. Here's what I would have said."

3. ### Open when what you miss most is being held

   On long-distance forums, the hardest thing people name is not talking, it's touch. They trade hoodies and sleep with a soft toy, and admit it "doesn't completely solve the aching." Don't pretend a letter replaces a hug. Describe one you remember, where you were and how long it lasted. First line: "I'm thinking about the hug at the station, the long one."

4. ### Open when we finally meet and the first few minutes are awkward
   Couples meeting for the first time, or after a long gap, say the first fifteen minutes were awkward and the rest was easy. Saying so before it happens takes the pressure off. Read it at arrivals. First line: "If the first few minutes feel strange, good. That's normal. Give it a quarter of an hour."

Moving abroad

When someone moves countries, the letters run in three directions: to the one who left, from the one who left, and to the partner who moved for you.

1. ### Open the day you land, when it suddenly feels real
   People who move abroad describe crying through the flight and the first days, and a "what have I done" feeling that hits as the plane lands. The arrival day is known in advance, so it is the easiest letter to write before they go. First line: "You just landed and it probably feels enormous. You don't have to decide anything today."
2. ### Open when you're celebrating and I'm not there
   From the one abroad, to the people at home. Expats describe the birthdays, weddings and babies they watch through a video call, and how a card "doesn't feel the same." Write it for the next big day you will miss. First line: "Somewhere there's a cake and I'm not next to it. Save me the corner piece."
3. ### Open when you miss home and I'm the reason you left it
   On r/expats, people who moved to a partner's country describe giving up a career, friends and family, and carrying most of the weight of that decision. This is the letter from the partner whose country it is. Name what they gave up, specifically. First line: "I know what you left to be here. I don't take it lightly."

Repeat goodbyes

Pilots, truckers, offshore crews, rotational work. Some couples don't have one long separation. They have the same goodbye every week.

1. ### Open when you're heading back out after a day home
   A trucker's wife on Instagram put it simply: nothing beats those 24 hours together before he hits the road again. A letter for this moment gets reused, so keep it about the rhythm, not one trip. First line: "Back out again. I'm already looking forward to the next 24 hours."
2. ### Open when you're home and I can tell you how hard it was
   Partners of people on rotation describe holding back worries mid-rotation so they don't add stress, and saving the hard conversation for when they're home. Write it during the stretch and seal it until they're back. First line: "I didn't say this while you were away, on purpose. Now you're home, here it is."

3. Open the first night we don't have to say goodbye

   For every couple counting toward the end of the distance. People who close the gap say the best part is the first boring Tuesday night together. Write it now, however far away that is. First line: "No airport tomorrow. No alarm for a flight. Just us, being boring."

Plan the set before they leave

Sit down together, or alone with a coffee, and fill this in before you write a word. Most people end up with eight to twelve letters.

Who is leaving, and for roughly how long:

Which direction each letter goes (who writes, who opens):

Dates that will pass while you are apart (birthdays, anniversaries, holidays):

The hardest week you can already predict:

Something at home that will break, run out or go wrong:

How it usually feels right after a call ends:

A memory with a place and a date in it:

Something small and real waiting at the end:

The letter that is only funny:

If they could open just one, what it would say:

Before they leave: the checklist

- ☐ Write in the last two weeks, not the last night
  The last night belongs to the people you love, and tired letters sound tired.
- ☐ Decide who writes which way
  For a deployment, both directions work: the one leaving writes for home, and home writes for them. At basic training the recruit has no phone, so the recruit writes before shipping, and paper mail is what goes the other way.
- ☐ Send the links before they go, and test one
  Make sure the first letter opens on their phone while you can still fix it together.

- [ ] **Plan for signal**
  Digital letters need a connection to open. If they will be somewhere without one, add a few paper letters for the field.
- [ ] **Ask about mail cut-offs**
  Paper mail can take weeks. Ask the unit or your family readiness contact when mail stops being worth sending near the end of a deployment, and use sealed letters for anything after that.
- [ ] **Date-lock the dates**
  Birthdays and anniversaries that fall while they are away can be locked until the day, so they cannot be opened early.
- [ ] **Leave homecoming undated**
  Label it for the moment, not the day. Dates move.
- [ ] **Keep each letter to about a minute**
  The good ones get reread, and short ones survive rereading.
- [ ] **Explain the rule**
  One at a time, when the label matches the moment. Tell them it is fine to open one on a bad day it was not quite written for.

Questions people ask

What should I write to someone in basic training?

Send paper mail, and keep it ordinary: what you ate, what the dog did, who asked about them. Ordinary news is a piece of home they can carry through the day. Avoid questions that need an answer, since replies are slow. Save sealed digital letters for the day they get their phone back.

How many Open When letters should I write for a deployment?

Eight to twelve is a good set for a long deployment: the predictable moments from this guide, plus any birthdays or anniversaries that will pass while they are away. Range matters more than number.

Who should write the letters, the one leaving or the one staying?

Either, and ideally both. Most of the moments in this guide are written by the one leaving, because they can predict the silence, the broken appliance and the moved date. The one staying can write for the person away, as long as they will have signal to open them.

What if the homecoming date changes after I have written a homecoming letter?

Label homecoming letters for the moment, such as "open the week before you come home", rather than a date. Then add the letter for when the date moves, so a change has something waiting for it.

Is it normal to be doing fine while they are away?

Yes. Some partners say they feel guilty for coping well, especially in the first weeks of training. It is a common reaction that people rarely post about. A letter that says "it is okay if you are okay" is worth including too.

Write it tonight. They open it at the right moment.

Seal an Open When letter for free at openwhen.cards