

## How to Write Good Letters to Children

The Kilns,  
Headington Quarry,  
Oxford

[26 June 1956]

Dear Joan—

Thanks for your letter of the 3rd. You describe your Wonderful Night v.[ery] well. That is, you describe the place & the people and the night and the feeling of it all, very well—but not the *thing* itself—the setting but not the jewel. And no wonder! Wordsworth<sup>1</sup> often does just the same. His *Prelude* (you're bound to read it about 10 years hence. Don't try it now, or you'll only spoil it for later reading) is full of moments in which everything except the *thing* itself is described. If you become a writer you'll be trying to describe the *thing* all your life: and lucky if, out of dozens of books, one or two sentences, just for a moment, come near to getting it across.

About *amn't I*, *aren't I*, and *I not*, of course there are no right and wrong answers about language in the sense in which there are right or wrong answers in Arithmetic. “Good English” is whatever educated people talk; so that what is good in one place or time w[oul]d. not be so in another. *Amn't* was good 50 years ago in the North of Ireland where I was brought up, but bad in Southern England. *Aren't I* w[oul]d. have been hideously bad in Ireland the very good in England. And of course I just don't know which (if either) is good in modern Florida. Don't take any notice of teachers and text-books in such matters. Nor of logic. It is good to say “More than one passenger was hurt,” although *more than one* equals at least two and therefore logically the verb ought to be plural *were* not singular *was*! What really matters is:—

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth (1770-1850), English poet.

1. Always try to use the language so as to make quite clear what you mean and make sure y[ou]r. sentence couldn't mean anything else.
2. Always prefer the plain direct word to the long vague one. Don't *implement* promises, but *keep* them.
3. Never use abstract nouns when concrete ones will do. If you mean "More people died" don't say "Mortality rose."
4. In writing. Don't use adjectives which merely tell us how you want us to *feel* about the thing you are describing. I mean, instead of telling us a thing was "terrible," describe it so that we'll be terrified. Don't say it was "delightful"; make *us* say "delightful" when we've read the description. You see, all those words (horrifying, wonderful, hideous, exquisite) are only like saying to your readers "Please will you do my job for me."
5. Don't use words too big for the subject. Don't say "infinitely" when you mean "very"; otherwise you'll have no word left when you want to talk about something *really* infinite.

Thanks for the photos. You and Aslan both look v.[ery] well. I hope you'll like your new home.

With love,  
yours  
C. S. Lewis

(C. S. Lewis: Letters to Children, Edited by Lyle W. Dorsett and Marjorie Lamp Mead, New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone Edition 1995 [1985], 63-64)