

An Epistolary Essay

The Wright-Garner-Maugans Correspondence on Complimentary Closes¹

Charles Alan Wright to Bryan A. Garner, 18 February 1988
[excerpt]

In the last couple of weeks I was looking for something else in one of my reference books and happened to note an article that said that it is incorrect to use “sincerely” as the complimentary close in a letter, and that it must be “sincerely yours.” I have tried to conform to this edict but I find it so confining that I wanted to go back and see what reasons the great authority gave for this. I had thought that I had seen this in Follett, but I cannot now find it there, nor can I find it in *DMLU* [*A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage*]. Do you have any notion where I might have seen this? Do you agree with this?

Sincerely yours,

Charles Alan Wright

Charles Alan Wright to Bryan A. Garner, 3 March 1988
[excerpt]

Did you know that *The Practical Lawyer*, the periodical for which I do reviews of mysteries under the heading “The Fictional Lawyer,” also carries a very good column each month titled “The Grammatical Lawyer”? That column is presently being written for

¹ This correspondence is printed with the permission of Charles Alan Wright, Bryan A. Garner, and James D. Maugans. Mrs. Clement F. Haynsworth, Jr., kindly granted permission to quote Judge Haynsworth’s letter dated 11 May 1988.

them by a Philadelphia lawyer, James Maugans. It was originated by Morton Freeman, and indeed ALI-ABA published in hardback a collection of his columns from 1976 through 1979. Freeman, *The Grammatical Lawyer* (1979).

In pulling his book off of my shelf to find the date, I see that he is the one who says I cannot close a letter with "Sincerely." I enclose a photocopy of page 326 of his book. I do not want to have my confidence in him shaken, but I hope you will tell me on this point he is wrong. I see that you sign your letters "Yours sincerely," but, as I wrote you recently, I find it confining and stuffy to have to include the "yours" in the complimentary close.

Sincerely yours,

Charles Alan Wright

Bryan A. Garner to Charles Alan Wright, 7 March 1988

[excerpt]

I thought you had probably happened upon the suggestion that "sincerely" is an incorrect complimentary close in the Evanses' *Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* [1957], which states: "For some reason the English are perturbed at the custom of many Americans of using the single word *sincerely* at the close of an informal letter" (p. 455). The Evanses seem to give this prejudice little credence. Having just received your letter of March 3, I learn that Morton Freeman's book was the source. He is wrong here. What he ignores, I believe, is that *yours* is understood in the complimentary close *sincerely*. If his reasoning were correct that *yours* must always be included explicitly, then other closing phrases like *cordially*, *fondly*, and the like would be incorrect. Fowler sanctions *faithfully* as a complimentary close in letters to the editor (*MEU1* at 323).

Sincerely,

Bryan

Charles Alan Wright to Bryan A. Garner, 10 March 1988
[excerpt]

[Thank you] for giving me the comforting assurance that I can sign letters “sincerely” and that “yours” can be taken for granted. I certainly had not happened upon the book by the Evanses. I do not own it and never read it. They are far too willing to tolerate every new fad. I agree with you on why Morton Freeman is in error on this point. I quite often close letters “affectionately.” I think that to add “yours” would seem quite stilted, and I think the same principle applies, even if less obviously, to “sincerely.” I do not have at my office the first edition of Fowler, which you cite. I keep that at home. In the office I have only the Gowers edition. I am unclear on how to interpret what is said there. The entry at 332, which I think probably corresponds with what was at 323 in the first edition, mentions “yours faithfully” three times and never sanctions “faithfully” by itself. (I have just noted that even though I think the usage stilted, Fowler says that I do have to add “yours” to “affectionately.”) There is an entry at 185 in which the first item for “faithfully” says “for *yours f.* see LETTER FORMS.” I did not know whether to interpret that as allowing “faithfully” by itself or not, but I no longer care what Fowler thinks now that I know what Garner thinks.

Sincerely,

Charles Alan Wright

Charles Alan Wright to Paul A. Wolkin [Director, American Law Institute], 10 March 1988 [in full]

A few weeks ago I was looking up something in Morton Freeman’s valuable book, *The Grammatical Lawyer*. Quite by accident my eye fell on the final entry in the book at page 326, where I am told that it is wrong to use “sincerely” by itself as a

complimentary close on a letter. Naturally I have obeyed this command, but I found it quite stultifying to do so. Finally I wrote to my friend and former student Bryan Garner, the author of the splendid *Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage*, which we found you already had in your library when the Nominating Committee met there in December. Garner has released me from the bondage of Freeman. He says: [quoting letter of March 7]. I do not think that Morton Freeman was often wrong. I agree with Garner, however, that in this one point he is.

Sincerely,

Charlie

Bryan A. Garner to Charles Alan Wright, 28 March 1988
[excerpt]

Thank you also for sending your correspondence with Mr. Wolkin. I thought you might like the added comfort of knowing that the *Britannica Book of English Usage* (1980) — not exactly a heavyweight authority, but not dismissible either — gives

Sincerely (yours)

Cordially (yours)

as common complimentary closes in general correspondence (p. 561). Five sample letters (pp. 551-55) end merely with “sincerely.” *Britannica* also quite rightly sanctions “respectfully” and “fondly.” How is that for a lagniappe?

Sincerely,

Bryan

Judge Clement F. Haynsworth, Jr., to Charles Alan Wright, 11
May 1988 [excerpt]

Thank you also for your review of Garner's *A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage*. I was so impressed with it I have ordered a copy for myself. Moreover, I am delighted to learn that the simple "sincerely" as the complimentary close of a letter is proper and acceptable. It saves me from having been a serious transgressor for many years.

Sincerely,

Clement

Excerpt from "The Grammatical Lawyer," in the *ALI-ABA CLE Review*, 5 August 1988 [This column appeared also in the April 1988 issue of *The Practical Lawyer*.]

"I think the complimentary close should be '*Sincerely yours*,' rather than just '*Sincerely*.'"

"You're absolutely correct. It goes back to our rule that adverbs modify adjectives, verbs, and other adverbs. They do not, however, modify nouns or pronouns.

"When you write '*Sincerely yours*' as a complimentary close, what you are writing, in effect, is 'I am sincerely yours.' In this construction, *sincerely*, an adverb answering the question *how*, modifies the predicate *am*. Without the addition of *yours* — which is a pronoun acting as a predicate nominative — to complete the thought, we are left with the incomplete sentence of 'I am sincerely.' And that doesn't make a great deal of sense. What does that mean, 'I am sincerely'? Sincerely *what*? The answer, of course, is *sincerely yours*.

"The same principle applies to 'Very truly yours,' namely, that *yours* must be included. And, of course, the same rule applies to both 'Yours sincerely,' and 'Yours truly.'"

Bryan A. Garner to Charles Alan Wright, 12 August 1988
[excerpt]

I send you the enclosed column from "The Grammatical Lawyer" because it duplicates Morton Freeman's ill-premised thoughts on complimentary closes. Do you know James Maugans (Professor Snaguam, as he calls himself)?

Best,

Bryan

Charles Alan Wright to James D. Maugans, 6 September 1988
[in full]

I regard your column, "The Grammatical Lawyer," as the best thing that appears in *The Practical Lawyer*. I have written Paul Wolkin and Mark Carroll in the past to tell them how much I have enjoyed your column. I only see the magazine when my own column on mysteries appears, but when I do get a copy of it I always turn to your column and read it with pleasure and profit.

A few weeks ago I was in England and my office sent on to me a photocopy of a letter that had come to my office in my absence. In it a fine young Dallas lawyer, Bryan Garner, who is the author of the excellent recent book *A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage*, called my attention to a column of yours that is reprinted in *CLE Review* for August 5th. In his letter he says that he is sending it to me "because it duplicates Morton Freeman's ill-premised thoughts on complimentary closes."

As you can imagine there is a history behind Mr. Garner's recent letter. In a letter to him on March 3rd I said: [quoting previous excerpt]. In his response of March 7th he agreed with me. He said: [quoting previous excerpt].

I reported all this at the time to our distinguished editor, Paul Wolkin. I enclose a photocopy of his letter to me on the subject.

I am sad indeed to find not only that you disagree on this point but that, having given the readers of *The Practical Lawyer* so much wise guidance on English usage, you have misled them on this point.

Sincerely,

Charles Alan Wright

James D. Maugans to Charles Alan Wright, 12 September 1988
[in full]

Thank you for your letter of September 6 concerning the proper form of the complimentary close to a letter — *Sincerely* or *Sincerely yours*.

You have heard the evidence for the prosecution; but before you convict me of grammatical heresy, perhaps you will hear the evidence for the defense.

To the charge of disagreeing with Bryan Garner, I plead guilty. To the charge of misleading my readers on this point, I plead most definitely not guilty!

The primary evidence against me seems to be the appearance of the word *faithfully* in a list of suggested complimentary closes on page 323 in the first edition of *Modern English Usage*. Based on this single entry, Mr. Garner extrapolates the omission of *yours* in this instance to apply equally to “*cordially, fondly, and the like*” and finally to *sincerely*. Thus he arrives at the conclusion that *yours* need never appear in a complimentary close because “*yours* is understood.”

But Mr. Garner’s evidence is only half the evidence. Indeed, a good deal less than half the evidence, if you consult the source of authority that Mr. Garner cites to support his proposition. If you examine the other entries on page 323 (copy enclosed), you will notice that *every* other entry (including *yours sincerely*) includes the word *yours* in the recommended complimentary closes. Thus it

would appear that the entry *faithfully* (without *yours*) is an aberration rather than a foundation for building a general rule for the proper form of the complimentary close.

In support of my contention that *faithfully* (without *yours*) is, at best, an exception, I refer you to page 332 of the second edition of *Modern English Usage* (copy enclosed). There you will note that not only does every entry from the first edition continue the use of *yours* but also *faithfully* has now acquired a *yours*. Whether this was to correct a misprint in the first edition or was the result of a reconsideration of the point I cannot say. But regardless of the reason the entry now includes *yours*.

If the analysis I presented in my article, which I believe is quite sound, does not convince you of the correctness of my position, I hope that this appeal to authority will.

The defense rests.

Sincerely yours,

James D. Maugans

Charles Alan Wright to James D. Maugans, 14 September 1988
[in full]

Thank you for your letter of September 12th. I regret to say that neither your appeal to reason nor your appeal to authority persuaded me.

I am sending on a copy of your answer to Bryan Garner with great confidence that he will answer for himself. I cannot refrain, however, from first interposing a word of my own between you two experts.

I do not read the passage from his letter that I quoted in my letter to you of September 6th as using *MEU1* as the "primary evidence" against you. It seemed to me that he was making an argument based on reason and that he offers two reasons, both of which seem to me persuasive, why "yours" is not required.

The first, and in my judgment the more important, of these is that it is unnecessary because “yours” is understood in a complimentary close. Certainly there are many instances in which words are understood rather than articulated and in which the rules of grammar take into account the unarticulated word. I had an extensive correspondence a year or so ago with a distinguished English mystery writer, Michael Gilbert. In his book *Flash Point*, which was recently reissued and which I reviewed for the September 1987 issue of *The Practical Lawyer*, he has a sentence in which the narrator says: “Actually he is the same age as me.” Gilbert at first tried to defend his usage, but I think eventually he could not escape the force of the many authorities I mustered, including Fowler, Follett, Bernstein, *The Oxford Miniguide to English Usage*, and others for the proposition that “me” would be simply incorrect. It must be “I” with “am” understood. I agree with Bryan Garner that in a complimentary close one can have the “yours” understood or we could even understand “I am, Sir, yours” if we are old-fashioned enough to prefer that usage.

I agree also with Bryan Garner’s second reason, though I would give it much less weight. If “yours” must always be used, then such expressions as “cordially” or “fondly” would be incorrect. I think that these are correct and indeed the fault lies the other way. I think the recipient of a letter signed “cordially yours” or “fondly yours” would laugh aloud at such a terribly stilted usage. I recognize that Fowler gives his blessing to “yours affectionately,” and I suppose that might barely pass muster. If I were ten years older than I am, perhaps I could close a letter to a goddaughter with “yours affectionately,” but I certainly would not think I could use that for anyone with whom I had a closer relationship.

It is interesting to see that in *MEU2*, perhaps because of the influence of Gowers, “faithfully” has been converted into “yours faithfully,” but I do not think this undercuts Bryan Garner’s argument. I thought he was referring to that as an interesting example and not as an element of his proof. Indeed when I wrote him in March, responding to the letter in which he set out the arguments for omitting “yours,” I expressed some doubt about the

reference to Fowler, since I also looked at *MEU2*, but I said: "I no longer care what Fowler thinks now that I know what Garner thinks."

Sincerely,
Charles Alan Wright

Bryan A. Garner to James D. Maugans, 16 September 1988
[in full]

Professor Wright has kindly — or perhaps not so kindly — suggested that I respond to your recent discussion with him about *sincerely* as a complimentary close. I am glad to give you my thoughts. As you know, in writing on this subject you stumbled onto terrain that he and I had thought we rather thoroughly traversed.

I would frame the issue rather differently from you. I see the question as being whether your ruling that *sincerely* alone is "incorrect" as a complimentary close can be sustained, not whether I have laid "a foundation for building a general rule for the proper form of a complimentary close."

What struck me in your column — apart from your erroneous labeling of *yours* as a "predicate nominative" when the case is clearly possessive² — was your implicit statement that *I am* is understood in

Sincerely yours,

but that *yours* somehow cannot be understood in

Sincerely,

Nothing is magic about *I am* that allows it to be understood, while other words like *yours* are disallowed from being understood. I

² Curme terms this use of a pronoun the "predicate genitive."

have a brief discussion of the general phenomenon in *Modern Legal Usage* in the entry entitled "Understood Words."

Complimentary closes are by their very nature, and have long been, elliptically phrased. One thinks of the 19th-century writers who merely put "&c." after *I am*, for the reader to supply whatever he thought appropriate. What is one to make, for instance, of complimentary closes in letters between good friends that read merely

Yours,

or

Best,?

The reader simply supplies what is missing. Even then, complimentary closes do not make literal sense: "I am yours [in whatever way]?"

I do not know which of my letters Professor Wright sent you, but I added, in a letter of 28 March 1988:

I thought you might like the added comfort of knowing that the *Britannica Book of English Usage* (1980) — not exactly a heavyweight authority, but not dismissible either — gives

Sincerely (yours)

Cordially (yours)

as common complimentary closes in general correspondence (p. 561). Five sample letters (pp. 551-55) end merely with "sincerely." *Britannica* also quite rightly sanctions "respectfully" and "fondly." How is that for a lagniappe?

One would think enough ink has been used up on on this point. I hasten to add, however, that I own probably one of the fullest collections of dictionaries of usage anywhere, and I cannot find any support for your position that *sincerely* alone is wrong, or even less good than *sincerely yours*. I would pronounce it less formal, but no less acceptable.

I hope you will reconsider what you have mistakenly told your readers, because pronouncements such as yours are likely to give rise to the types of linguistic superstitions that benefit no one.

Your “ruling” indicts many of our finest writers, including the incomparable Charles Alan Wright, who habitually closes his letters in the way that you would forbid. In looking through Edmund Wilson’s collected letters, I find that in 1939 he closed two letters to Harry Levin, that great Harvard English professor, by using *sincerely* without saying whose. See Wilson, *Letters on Literature and Politics 1912-1972*, at 181-82 (Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1977). (Wilson’s complimentary closes varied greatly.)

Another great writer and poet, Randall Jarrell, wrote a letter to Edmund Wilson on August 5, 1941, and closed with *sincerely*. See *Randall Jarrell’s Letters* 49 (Houghton Mifflin 1985). Jarrell frequently used *affectionately* without *yours*. You will also find, in the *Letters of E.B. White* (Harper & Row 1976), that White often signed off with *sincerely*.

What is worse than convicting you of a simple mistake, are we to convict Wright, Wilson, Jarrell, and White of using a solecism? With best wishes,

Sincerely,

Bryan A. Garner

P.S. After finishing this letter, I found an entry on the complimentary close in a book I recently added to my library, J. Harold Janis's *Modern Business Language and Usage in Dictionary Form* (1984). Janis writes, "The particular expression chosen is determined by the nature of the letter and the tone desired" (p. 98) and gives the following list:

Formal and deferential	Respectfully yours Respectfully Very respectfully
Merely polite	Yours truly
For general correspondence	Very truly yours Yours very truly
For more warmth	Sincerely yours Yours sincerely Sincerely Very sincerely
Informal	Cordially yours Cordially Very cordially
Very informal and personal	As always As ever Fondly.

Charles Alan Wright to Bryan A. Garner, 20 September 1988
[excerpt]

My wife certainly enjoys your literary style. Almost the only time I ever hear her laugh out loud is when she is reading one of your letters. There were chuckles last night as she read the copy of your letter to Mr. Maugans

Sincerely,
Charlie

James D. Maugans to Charles Alan Wright, 26 September 1988
[in full]

Thank you for your letter of September 14, continuing our discussion on the correct form of the complimentary close.

I am sorry to hear that neither reason nor authority can convince you of the correctness of my position. I must confess that I find your arguments and authority equally unpersuasive.

Although it is true that in some instances words can be understood rather than articulated, I do not believe that this is one of those instances for the grammatical reasons I set forth in my article. (The example of the omitted *am* seems to me to be wholly inapposite. That is comparing apples and oranges.)

Since both Fowler and Gowers approve *yours affectionately*, I am certain that they would also approve *cordially yours* and *fondly yours*, although you find them "stilted" and would not use them for anyone with whom you had a close relationship. I, too, would not use either expression for anyone with whom I had a close relationship, but then neither would I use *cordially* or *fondly*, which I find equally stilted. But that's just a personal preference, not a grammatical one.

The position I advocate is supported not only by reason but also by eminent authority (Fowler, Gowers, Freeman). You may,

if you choose, follow Mr. Garner. I prefer to cast my lot with the established authorities.

Sincerely yours,

James D. Maugans

Bryan A. Garner to Charles Alan Wright, 3 October 1988
[in full]

We have a word for it — *mumpsimus* — but somehow we have allowed it to become obsolete. A story from the early 16th century has it that an ignorant English priest, when corrected for saying *quod in ore mumpsimus* instead of *sumpsimus*, replied to his critic: “I will not change my old mumpsimus for your new sumpsimus.”

By extension, the word came to refer to stubborn adherence to a mistaken verbal form in the face of correction, or to a person determined to perpetuate a wrong usage or word. The most recent use noted by the *OED* is from 1862.

Of course, here we have an example of the “mumpsimus invert,” that is, one who, despite gentle correction to show the acceptability of a term he has wrongly obelized, persists in his ill-founded prejudice. He has cast his lot indeed!

Best wishes,

Bryan

Charles Alan Wright to Bryan A. Garner, 5 October 1988
[excerpt]

Every time I receive a letter from you my vocabulary is enriched. I never before heard the word *mumpsimus*, and sometimes I go months on end without using the verb *obelized*.

Incidentally even if *OED* shows the most recent use of *mumpsimus* as 1862, Random House 2d has quite a full entry for it without any suggestion that it is obsolete.

. . . If [these letters should ever be published], that could provide a contemporary example of *mumpsimus* that the editors of the *OED* can include in the Second Edition that I understand is to be published next year.

Sincerely,

Charlie

James D. Maugans to Bryan A. Garner, 24 October 1988
[in full]

Thank you for your letter of September 16, dealing with the question of *sincerely* and *sincerely yours*.

Before I respond on that point, I would like to digress for a moment and address my “erroneous labeling of yours as a ‘predicate nominative’ when the case is clearly possessive.” It is true that “Curme terms this use of a pronoun the ‘predicate genitive,’” but Curme also says (in a slightly different context, but not so different as to invalidate the point):

The fact that we cannot supply a noun after *yours* . . . shows plainly that the old possessive genitive in all these cases has become a substantive adjective form, or we may call it a possessive pronoun, for in fact, . . . the substantive form of an adjective is a pronoun. But it should be clearly understood that this pronoun is not the genitive of the old personal pronoun, but the *nominative* of the new pronoun, formed from the substantive form of the possessive adjective. (Vol. II at p. 527. Emphasis added.)

What he has to say two pages later, however, seems to be directly on point: “The substantive forms are also used as nouns, . . . ‘Yours truly’ (at the close of a letter).” (*Id.* at 529.)

Therefore, I believe that my labeling *yours* a predicate nominative was correct.

On the question of *sincerely* or *sincerely yours*, I’m afraid that we will have to politely agree to disagree. The only hope for reconciling our differences is your statement that you would consider *sincerely* “less formal.” Because the column deals with writing on a formal level, perhaps this is where our disagreement exists.

In any event, thank you for writing. I always enjoy hearing from others who share my interest in the language.

Sincerely yours,

James D. Maugans

