



## Letters of Pliny

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# Further Introduction and Context to Each Letter

### Letter 1.9

This letter contains a number of rhetorical flourishes typical in Pliny's collection, including tricola throughout, direct speech in invented dialogues, sudden exclamations and neat word play. He even puns on the addressee's name, writing to Fundanus about the joy of spending time at Laurentum, his estate (Latin *-fundus*). The topic of the letter – the correct use of 'leisure' (*otium*) and the repetitive nature of social duties in Rome – means it should be read closely with our 9.6. This letter is part of a much larger theme in Pliny's writings, as he constantly wrestles with the balance of the business of his roles and of his wish to read and write, preferably in the sanctuary of one of his villas, while the language he uses to refer to his business and duties (*negotium*), as well as to his *otium*, connects the letters across the collection. See the Introduction on *otium/negotium*.

The letter is split into an account of duties at Rome followed by the contrasting relaxation afforded by the quiet of Pliny's Laurentine villa. Pliny directly praises the quality and atmosphere of life outside the urban centre, before concluding with words of encouragement to Fundanus to abandon the city and lose himself in study or leisure. The contents of the letter with its focus on leisure point to its composition taking place when Pliny held no official post in government, dating it to 97 AD.

This letter links with those around it, but ties in particularly closely with its successor 1.10. In both 1.9 and 1.10, Pliny for the first time in his collection of letters expresses his frustration and unhappiness with the number of social engagements and official obligations which life in Rome brings. 1.10 celebrates the intellectual climate of Rome, praising Euphrates the philosopher as an example of how it is flourishing. After describing Euphrates' virtues, however, Pliny laments his lack of time due to official business – this letter was likely written while Pliny was in an official post as prefect of the treasury of Saturn (see Timeline) – limiting his conversations with the philosopher. In his list of duties, which he calls *occupationes*, he includes sitting on tribunals, working with books and writing-tablets



(*libellos, tabulas*) and writing very many letters (*plurimas litteras*) but they are ‘completely unliterary in nature’ (*inlitteratissimas*). Consider such vocabulary alongside 9.6 and the links in Pliny’s presentation of business and leisure are unmistakable. Pliny ends 1.10 by encouraging his addressee to take advantage of such opportunities and engage with and be moulded by Euphrates when in Rome, just as in 1.9 he encourages Fundanus to enjoy more leisure.

While the interplay of 1.9 and 1.10 focuses on the time that city-life consumes, therefore reducing the amount of time available to Pliny to engage in leisure and literary pursuits, 1.8 also connects thematically with 1.9. Pliny is asking for a detailed critique of a speech he gave in his hometown of Comum on donating a large sum of money for a library there.

**Letter 3.16**

This fairly long letter is a straightforward read for the most part. It is clearly set out with ring composition and a logical structure which hinges on repetition of words and direct quotations. In his listing of three instances of behaviour of the elder Arria, Pliny invokes what he calls elsewhere (in 2.20 on Regulus) the ‘law of rhetoricians’ – the principle of providing at least three examples to justify a point, which has been connected to what Pliny’s teacher Quintilian writes in his *Inst. Orat.* 4.5.3. Rhetorical flourishes make the elder Arria more impressive, and Pliny makes her the subject of almost every sentence. The most famous episode of her life survives in the histories of both Tacitus and Cassius Dio, her final words in an epigram by Martial.



## Letter 4.2

Throughout this letter there is a feeling of self-satisfaction at Regulus getting his just deserts, with Regulus portrayed as something of an anti-Pliny, his over-the-top reactions contrasting to Pliny's sense of proportion. Regulus' behaviour as a legacy-hunter (*captator*- see 2.20 for examples) meant he even worked on his own son, and, as Pliny concludes, did whatever he really should not do, at least in relation to his status and the view of his peers. Regulus is known as a *delator*- an informant - from the works of Tacitus. This letter is part of a Regulus cycle, one of a number of letters about the man's behaviour or oratory, both of which offended Pliny. In addition to 4.2 and 2.20, this cycle consists of Letters 1.5, 1.20, 2.11, 4.7 and 6.2.

The particular issues raised with Regulus' inappropriateness in this letter include his lack of restraint, his insensitivity to his fellow-citizens and his lack of taste or sense of decency - for instance aiming for a legacy from his own son or wanting to marry when too old to properly do so. The letter connects closely with 4.7, which continues with a critical account of Regulus' continued mourning then develops into an attack on his flaws as an orator. In Pliny's collection art mirrors real-life: Regulus' importance wanes, as Pliny's waxes, culminating in 6.2, where Pliny records memories of his now-dead rival.

In the immediate context of Book 4 this letter highlights the contrast between Regulus and his behaviour with his societal equals. In 4.1 Pliny shows his own devotion to his family, as he writes to his wife's grandfather about their excitement at visiting him. The letter also notes Pliny's standing in the community, for the delay to their visit is due to his dedicating a shrine he has had built in a town; this town was local to an estate of his, and Pliny was its patron. In 4.3 Pliny celebrates the literary works in Greek of a fellow-Roman, written in retirement. But he starts with praise of his addressee's political career, which links neatly to his achievements in literature but also stands in stark contrast to the career of Regulus, thus damning Pliny's rival all the more.

The letter is full of exaggerated language, while Regulus is the subject of a large number of sentences and the son often the object, frequently placed as the first word. The letter starts with the focus on him, before switching to the son, then returns to Regulus before ending in Pliny's voice - a voice dotted throughout the letter in the form of adverbs.



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Pliny's readership would read the theme of excessive grief at the loss of a child in the context of Cicero's epistolary account of his feelings at the loss of his daughter Tullia.

**Letter 4.19**

This letter is formal and courteous throughout, full of praise of Hispulla directly and through the positive comments about Calpurnia. The language is studied, with balance and the use of *tricola* reinforcing Calpurnia's attributes, which are shown to span across aspects affecting Pliny's life at home, in court, during recitations and with regard to Pliny's own writings. Calpurnia is also linked to her aunt verbally.

This letter provides some insight into Pliny's views on the role of a wife and the importance of women being *exempla* (see also 3.14). It should be read alongside 7.5 for an example of Pliny's direct communication with Calpurnia (she also receives Letters 6.4 and 6.7). Roman marriages did not stem from love but from practical and political purposes. Yet there is no reason to doubt that Pliny's affection for his wife is genuine and it should not be judged harshly by modern standards, as is the case with his views on women. Though there are literary elements to his correspondence with his wife and her family, Pliny does show moments of sentimentality and even love. We cannot be sure, but their marriage did last well over a decade and, it seems, until Pliny's death.

The letter is part of a cycle either to Calpurnia or about her. Hispulla is the addressee of only one other letter (Letter 8.11), in which Pliny notifies her of Calpurnia's miscarriage. The letter preceding it in Book 8 is similar, but written to Calpurnia's grandfather Fabatus. This man receives a number of letters on business matters not related to family, but Letter 4.1 is an exception, written when Pliny and his wife were about to visit him. In its immediate context, this letter is couched between two short letters praising works of literature by the recipients, which are in turn surrounded by further letters connected to women – Letter 4.17 on Pliny defending Corellia, a daughter of Rufus (1.12), and Letter 4.21 on the death of two sisters, daughters of the stepson of Fannia (see 3.16).



### Letter 8.8

This letter, in describing a natural phenomenon, should be read along with 8.17 on the Tiber flooding. Here we have an account of the beauty of water, not its potential for destruction. This peaceful description is mirrored in a letter a little later in Book 8 (Letter 8.20) which discusses Lake Vadimon.

Pliny's interest in the natural world cannot be separated from that of his uncle, the Elder Pliny, whose scientific investigations surely informed Pliny's writings, with his employment of precise and technical descriptions. Similarly Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones*, especially sections specifically dealing with water, were most likely in Pliny's mind during composition. Water fascinates Pliny – Letter 4.30 is about a spring at Lake Como, while one of the chief attractions of his villas appear to be proximity to water. The focus on the *otium* in this letter contrasts with that of *negotium* in Letter 8.9, and here is a juxtaposition of letters similar to 1.9 and Letter 1.10. Within Book 8, this letter fits with remarks Pliny makes in Letter 8.21 that he likes to mix serious works with more playful ones. The less serious nature of this letter, and that of Letters 8.20 and 8.21 for example, comes amidst a number of letters in this book concerned with death, grief and anxiety, such as the deaths of slaves (8.16), anxiety over the Tiber floods and a friend's safety (8.17) and the death of a young man, Junius Avitus, in Letter 8.23.

This particular site, the river Clitumnus, is referenced in other literary works, including the poetic works of Virgil (*Georgics* 2.146) and Propertius (2.19.25), as well as Pliny's contemporary Statius (*Silvae* 1.4.129). One of the main aspects which the poets dwell on, that this water was known from antiquity because cattle drinking from it turned white, is nowhere mentioned by Pliny. The focus of this letter is two-fold, initially being the water and its source itself – the subject is *fons* for much of the early parts - before moving on to the divine elements. Typical of Pliny is the frequent use of balanced couplets, polyptoton, chiasmus and tricola, as the language aims to reflect the natural beauty in its neat form, with poetic touches. There are verbal structural elements too, such as the water being so clear that you can count coins, pebbles or tree reflections, unlike the woody and obscure surroundings, and the letter starts and ends on a colloquial note. In contrast, the description of the water and the shrines remains formal, and the Latin in places becomes quite hard to disentangle, seemingly to mirror its subject matter.



### Letter 8.16

This letter is part of a theme of Pliny's thoughts on his slaves as illness and death afflicts them. In Letter 8.1 his reader Encolpius is named, and in addition to this letter Letter 8.19 references Pliny's sadness at both his wife's miscarriage and the health of his slaves. But themes of slavery and of masters – such as the dangers faced, exemplified by the murder of Larcus Macedo by his slaves, 3.14 – appear in no fewer than sixteen letters. Pliny's treatment of slaves and views on slavery cannot be considered out of context. Indeed Pliny appears to be fairly progressive in his allowance of his slaves to make wills, even though their property has to remain within Pliny's household. He also sees his slaves as people to an extent, realising that they have their own emotions, and aims to be humane. Letter 5.19, on the illness of Pliny's freedman, Zosimus, shows that Pliny himself can be sensitive to the feelings of others and should be considered in light of his correspondence about and with his wife Caplurnia (see 4.19 above and read alongside 7.5).

Both Cicero and Seneca wrote letters about slavery and slaves, and there can be no doubt that Pliny is not only aware of these accounts but is engaging with them himself - verbal echoes with Seneca's Letter 47 are not coincidental. He ensures he puts his own stamp on his letter, not just in the treatment of the topic but in the artistry of his prose. The syntactical brevity corresponds to Pliny's state of mind on the matter, while the themes of *doleo/dolor* and *solacium* are worked in throughout. The focus of the letter is structured so Pliny's feelings and actions make up the start, before the slaves themselves become the subjects. The situation is then assessed in terms of how it has affected Pliny, which opens up the opportunity to reflect on how man treats fellow man, which is the reflective note the letter ends on.



**Letter 8.17**

This letter and its context are discussed in greater detail in the Introduction.

A letter which is clearly about the flooding around Rome, contains various layers which make it worthy of close study. Pliny had held an official post which oversaw the Tiber river, so here he speaks with authority. He sets out the floods as somewhat reflective of the current regime at Rome, and ends with discussion of the difference between grief and fear. He does this in a very structured way, for instance using *istic* for this purpose and varying how he describes the damage: the Tiber in the present tense, the Anio in the past tense, followed by what was witnessed by those affected. The descriptions become longer each time, and the use of *tricola*, forceful verbs and superlatives create a strong image of what Pliny is concerned with. The influences of the Elder Pliny and of Seneca are felt throughout and this is not the only letter in the selection about water – see the introduction to 8.8 on this.



## Letter 9.6

This letter showcases Pliny's literary artistry, with frequent word-play, chiasmus and clever turns of phrase throughout. The theme of how Pliny uses his leisure, and how others use theirs, is frequent throughout the Letters. This letter appears to interact with letters written by Cicero and Seneca, Roman letter-writers who preceded Pliny: Cicero (*Ad Familiares* 7.1) wrote of his own distaste for entertainments in the arena, focusing on theatrical plays and wild-beast hunts, while the philosopher Seneca in Letter 7, musing on the danger of crowds, suggests that nothing is worse than idling at games, specifically criticising the fights between convicted criminals during the lunch-break at gladiatorial combats. There are some verbal echoes of these letters in Pliny's account, and all three writers share both a sense of moral superiority in not being attracted to popular spectacles and a readiness to mock the interests and attitudes of ordinary Romans.

The themes of this letter seem to connect it to its immediate context in Book 9. In Letter 9.5 Pliny praises the addressee Tiro for carrying out his work (this is a Roman's *negotium*) in administering justice in the province of Baetica in Spain, where he is governor. He particularly notes that Tiro's actions have led to him being loved by lesser men and highly regarded by the leading men (9.5.1: *ita a minoribus amari, ut simul a principibus diligere*) but praises him for protecting the distinctions between men of differing ranks and status (9.5.3: *ut discrimina ordinum dignitatumque custodias*).

Our letter 9.6 moves from business (*negotium*) to leisure (*otium*) and this specific word is used in 9.6.4 with reference to Pliny's time spent engaged in writing (*in litteris*), in contrast to others who waste time in the most idle pursuits (*otiosissimis occupationibus*), meaning the Circus Games. But the theme of class remains and 9.6 pointedly refers to how chariot-racing breaks down the distinctions between men of upper classes (Pliny's *graves homines* in 9.6.3) and the common crowd (*vulgus*), much to Pliny's disgust.

Letter 9.7 continues the move away from *negotium* to *otium*, as Pliny writes to Romanus (the recipient of 8.8 about Clitumnus) about his building work on a villa. Pliny is going to have similar work carried out on two of his houses on the shore of Lake Comum, where Pliny relaxes and engages in his *otium*. He writes of the pleasures which both houses bring, one in particular being ideal for the leisurely pursuit of fishing, while the names he attributes to the



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houses, Tragedy and Comedy, perhaps recall the idea of popular entertainment, but here referenced to show Pliny's wit in contrast to the disapproving tones of 9.6.