

# Writing a 'thank you' note is more powerful than we realize, study shows

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New research from The University of Texas at Austin proves writing letters of gratitude, like Jimmy Fallon's "Thank You Notes," is a pro-social experience people should commit to more often. The gesture improves well-being for not only letter writers but recipients as well.

Published in *Psychological Science*, research conducted by assistant professor of marketing in the McCombs School of Business at UT Amit Kumar and Nicholas Epley at The University of Chicago asked participants, in three different experiments, to write a [letter](#) of gratitude to someone who's done something nice for them and then anticipate the recipient's reaction. In each experiment, letter writers overestimated how awkward recipients would feel about the [gesture](#) and underestimated how surprised and positive recipients would feel.

"We looked at what's correlating with people's likelihood of expressing gratitude—what drives those choices—and what we found is that predictions or expectations of that awkwardness, that anticipation of how a recipient would feel—those are the things that matter when people are deciding whether to express gratitude or not," said Kumar.

Kumar says anxiety about what to say or fear of their gesture being misinterpreted causes many people to shy away from expressing genuine gratitude.

"I don't think it's a societal thing," said Kumar. "It's more fundamental to how the human mind works and a well-established symmetry about how we evaluate ourselves and other people. When we're thinking about ourselves, we tend to think about how competent we are, and whether we are going to be articulate in how we're expressing gratitude."

Kumar says what is significant about the research and its results is that thank-you notes and letters of [gratitude](#) should be written and sent more often.

"What we saw is that it only takes a couple of minutes to compose letters like these, thoughtful ones and sincere ones," said Kumar. "It comes at little cost, but the benefits are larger than people expect."

**More information:** Amit Kumar et al, Undervaluing Gratitude: Expressers Misunderstand the Consequences of Showing Appreciation, *Psychological Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797618772506](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797618772506)

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