Introductory notes:

This copy of *Eight or Nine Words about Letter-Writing* is the Fifth Edition dated 1897. The first edition is dated 1890. The booklet was published by Messrs. Emberlin & Son, Oxford, together with the *Wonderland Postage Stamp-Case*, which accompanies it. A series of proof copies were auctioned at Christie’s, New York, in December 1998, lot 21, with various manuscript alterations and corrections made by Dodgson. Dodgson protected his copyright of the booklet and stamp-case by registering them with the Stationer’s Hall, London.

The title is derived from an extract from Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. Benedick says (Act III. scene 2): “I have studied eight or nine wise words to speak to you, which these hobby-horses must not hear.” Dodgson knew his Shakespeare well, often reading the plays or seeing them performed, and several of his works quote relevant lines.

The booklet contains many more words than the title suggests, but is full of helpful advice about how to write a successful letter. It is divided up into four sections – On Stamp-Cases, How to begin a Letter, How to go on with a Letter, and On registering Correspondence. In later editions, Dodgson added a new section for How to end a Letter. Dodgson was frustrated with correspondents who did not answer the questions in his previous letter, or who did not include the date when the letter was sent. In early Victorian times, letter note-paper was expensive, and to make good use of the available space, some people wrote across the first page in a quarter turn direction – making it very difficult to decipher the message. Dodgson was totally against “crossed letters” and even sent plain notepaper to some of his correspondents so they would avoid doing so. Some of his advice was more personal, such as “if your friend makes a severe remark, either leave it unnoticed, or make your reply distinctly less severe.” Dodgson did not always adhere to his own advice.

The last section is about his invented Letter Register, which he began compiling in 1861 to keep track of his relentless letter-writing and the letters he received. Each letter sent and received was assigned a number, which was entered into his register together with a summary of the contents, cross-referencing with the replies he sent or any further correspondence that took place. According to his first biographer, his nephew Stuart Dodgson Collingwood, at the end of his life he had completed 24 volumes of his register, the last number recorded was 98,721. Sadly, the letter register is now missing, presumed destroyed. The register also included other documents, invoices, proof copies of his works, manuscripts and other paper items. The last-known register entry is not an indication of the number of letters he wrote; a
rough estimate would be about 50,000 letters. To this must be added another register
with over 5000 numbers, used for business correspondence in connection with
Dodgson’s curatorship of the Christ Church Common Room. *Eight or Nine Wise
Words* contains an invented sample of Dodgson’s letter register (pp. 25-28) showing
how it was constructed.

The earliest known presentation copy of the first issue is dated 8 June 1890.
Thereafter, it went through many changes and editions until this copy, with “FIFTH
EDITION” printed on the first page. The advertisements of Dodgson’s other works
listed at the back of the booklet indicate the number of each work that had been
issued. For example, for this copy published in 1897 (the last full year of Dodgson’s
life), the 86th thousand of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in red cloth was being
sold, and the 48th thousand of the cheaper People’s Edition of the same work.

For further details, see:

*The Lewis Carroll Handbook* revised by Denis Crutch (Dawson, 1979), pp. 170-173

Carroll-17-wise-words_01:

The full text of the miniature booklet is given in the 44 scans for each of the pages.