

PROJECT TITLE: Letters, Windows Into the Past	
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CLASSROOM PRACTICE

1. Teaching Thesis & Guiding Questions:

As students examine how the postal service began and evolved, they will learn how the conveyance of letters and intelligence was essential to our country's cause of liberty. This understanding and visual timeline of how the postal system developed, can help children make the connections that are in order for them to see how many things in history are all interrelated. This lesson begins to develop that cause/effect relationship that will build on further understandings as the students grow older and begin to study more details of our country and its history.

By reading and answering questions about historical letters, students gain an intriguing picture of what life might have been like in that particular time period. This practice provides students with experiences and skills that the textbook will not, offering multiple perspectives on historical events and very importantly helps the teacher engage student interest on a variety of topics during a shorter period of time. Young students will develop their skills of inquiry as they practice summarizing and paraphrasing letters. The students will search for the answers to many questions such as: Who are the parties that are communicating here? When was this letter written? What are they writing about and why is it important? What do you still question about after reading/hearing the letter? This search as they listen, observe and reflect will lead them to conclusions and also wonderings that will carry their learning into further discovery.

Letter writing in the traditional sense has been considered a lost art. Letter writing is a skill that students are likely to need at some point in their lives, regardless of where they end up. With the invention of computers, the internet, cell phones, texting, blogging, and e-mail, letter writing the old fashioned way has practically disappeared. How to understand and write a friendly, formal, persuasive or business letter continues to be a skill needed to obtain a job, converse with a political figure or business and maybe more importantly to convey one's feelings on a topic or issue. Teaching this form of communication is still in our language arts curriculum and lays challenges ahead for teachers whose students do not see letters in their daily lives or even fully understand their importance in especially our past.

The lessons designed here, can be applied to other grade levels as well as other famous people and are an important part of our teaching about history as well as language arts. With e-mail and short messages as

an ever popular way to quickly communicate, it seems more important than ever for students to understand tone, content and style of writing and how that affects the audience to whom they are writing. Even with all the advancements in technology, writing with a purpose and specific audience in mind, continues to be apart of our curriculum and our lives and needs to be taught efficiently, at every level, for our students to grow up to be productive members of society.

2. Suggested Grade Level and Length of Activities

Second Grade

Two (or Three) 40 minute lessons

3. Significance & Relevance:

Selected State & National Standards – Virginia State SOLs

History:

- K.1 The students will recognize that history describes events and people of other times and places by
 - a) identifying examples of past events in legends, stories, and historical accounts of Pocahontas, George Washington, Betsy Ross, and Abraham Lincoln.
- 1.2 The student will describe the stories of American Leaders and their contributions to our country, with emphasis on George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and George Washington Carver.
- 2.3 The student will identify and compare changes in community life over time in terms of buildings, jobs, transportation, and population.
- 2.11 The student will identify George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony, Helen Keller, Jackie Robinson, and Martin Luther King, Jr. as Americans whose contributions improved the lives of other Americans.

English:

Oral Language

- 2.3 The student will use oral communication skills.
 - b) Share stories or information orally with an audience.
 - c) Participate as a contributor and leader in a group.
 - d) Summarize information shared orally by others.

Reading

- 2.8 The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of fiction and nonfiction.
 - d) Ask and answer questions about what is read.
 - e) Locate information to answer questions.

OAH Historical Inquiry Skills

- **Historical Comprehension:** The students will read historical letters with comprehension, to develop their ability to take into account what that information reveals of the individuals involved—their motives and intentions, their hopes, doubts, fears, strengths, and weaknesses. The students are also developing the ability to describe the past through the eyes of those who were there. By reading the letters and answering questions about them, students learn to take into account the historical context in which the events unfolded.

- **Historical Analysis and Interpretation:** The students will use primary sources to analyze cause-and-effect relationships in historical events. The students are considering multiple perspectives of various peoples in the past by reading about their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.
- **Historical Research Capabilities:** The students are formulating historical questions from encountering the historical letters written to Abraham Lincoln or written by him.
- **Chronological Thinking:** Students will tell the story of the U.S. Postal System using a time-line that puts the events in order.

4. Lesson Objectives –

- The students will understand what letters are and how they were delivered during the 1800's.
- The students will identify what historic events encouraged the U.S. mail system to develop rapidly.
- The students will construct a chronological time-line to demonstrate their understanding of the history of our postal system.
- The students will understand that letters are a way of written communication.
- The students will be able to see the importance of letter writing as a form of communication during this time period in our history.
- The students will be able to examine and use historical letters to answer questions and come to conclusions about people and history.

5. Lesson Plans or Instructional Activities – This kit contains two lessons with an optional third.

Lesson one covers the history of our postal system.

The students will understand what a letter is and how they were delivered during the Age of Lincoln. Students will look at an original envelope from the pony express. They will listen to a book and watch a video about the history of mail from early times to the present. They will construct a time-line to illustrate their understanding of the development of our U.S. Postal system over time. Students will understand what historic events facilitated the development of the mail system. They will project futuristic predictions of mail delivery.

Lesson two covers listening/reading historical letters from the Age of Lincoln and answering questions about that time period.

Students will work in small groups to answer questions and record information about an original letter that was written in the 1800's. The students will apply this information to what they already know about Abraham Lincoln and summarize some of the events that were going on during this time period and draw conclusions about Abraham Lincoln and the people who lived during this time period. The students will understand how important letter writing was during this time period.

Lesson three is (optional) a letter writing lesson where the students choose a person to write a letter to.

6. Technology (if applicable) -

The video shown in lesson one, "The Quirky Ways of the Postal Service," is from the website: www.Smithsonianmag.com. The letters in lesson two can be shown projected directly from the website: <http://memory.loc.gov> or printed as hard copies. They can also be listened to on computers with headsets with the audio files provided. Letter writing and samples can be projected.

7. Modifications, Differentiation, and Extensions -

Pairing students for several of the activities allows for students of varying abilities to be put together. Students with varying reading levels can listen to the audio files so the letters are read to them. Allowing pairs and groups to discuss their answers before sharing them helps the insecure/unsure learner. Higher level learners will enjoy conducting further research answering some of their “wondering” questions. Extensions include writing to our current president, writing to another famous person they are interested in (for example an author or sports figure), beginning a pen pal writing project with another class either in our country or out, beginning a school letter writing project such as “Wee Deliver” an in-school postal service.

- “Wee Deliver” In-school Postal Service – Set up a postal system in your school and promote literacy, teamwork skills, and a sense of community. A starter kit for the program includes: a videotape, teacher’s manual, cancellation and “return to sender” stamps, poster, distribution case, and carrier bag. To obtain a free starter kit, send the name and address of your school, contact person and telephone number on a 3x5 index card to: Literacy Initiatives, Corporate Relations, U.S. Postal Service, Room 10541, 475 L’Enfant Plaza SW, Washington, DC 20260-3100.

8. Related Materials & Resources -

Lesson plans for all three lessons with question sheets, copies of letters, recordings of letters, video, websites and lists of other materials needed are provided in the three separate folders.

9. Annotated Instructional Bibliography –

Edwards, Owen (May, 2010). *A Rare Pony Express Artifact*.

Retrieved March 30, 2011 from <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/A-Rare-Pony-Express-Artifact.html>

Summary: This is a photo of rare correspondence carried by a vanished courier. It was recovered two years later, in May 1862, when the mail pouch from that doomed pony express mission was recovered.

Gibbons, Gail (1982). *The Post Office Book, Mail and How It Moves*.

New York. Thomas Y. Crowell Jr.

Summary: The history of mail from early times to the present for very young children. The author takes readers step-by-step through the mailing process, from the moment the letter is dropped into a mailbox until it reaches its final destination. She includes a glossary and a brief history of message-sending.

Postal Pack for Elementary School Students, (1994).

Retrieved March 5, 2011 from <http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/educators/4b-curriculum.html>

Summary: Collection of illustrated activity sheets that teach about postal transportation history, and encourage letter writing and an appreciation of stamps and historic letters.

Pope, Nancy and Moore, Meredith, narr. *The Quirky Ways of the Postal Service*.

<<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/multimedia/videos/The-Quirky-Ways-of-the-Postal-Service.html>>

Summary: A short video (5:09) that shows over the years, the mail has been delivered by train, donkey, bus, truck and even rocket.

Images and photographs for U.S.P.S. (teacher-created modified) timeline retrieved April, 2011 from www.google.com/images

All letters written to Abraham Lincoln or that he wrote, retrieved April, 2011 from <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/malhome.html>

Classroom/ K-3 Lessons: White House Historical Association. *"Every Day is President's Day at the White House."* Retrieved April 2011 from <http://www.whha.org>
Summary: A packet of lessons for K-3 revolving around the theme, "Every Day is President's Day at the White House." There are lesson activities and a corresponding teacher's text giving information about our current and past presidents.

Letter Generator , retrieved April, 2011 from http://readwritethink.org/materials/letter_generator/
Summary: The Letter Generator tool is designed to help students learn to identify all the essential parts of a business or friendly letter, and then generate letters by typing information into letter templates. A sample letter is included, and students can learn about the parts of a letter by reading descriptions of each part. Once students have become familiar with letter formats, they are prompted to write their own letter using a simple template.

Letter and envelope templates retrieved April, 2011from <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/writingletters/government/president/>