



THE MEN AND WOMEN OF LETTERS

26 Letter-Writing Activities

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INTRODUCTION

The Men and Women of Letters program is a flexible curriculum-support platform for use with middle-grade through college language-arts classes. It can be supported by or be a supplement to a variety of textbooks and materials based on the important, but declining, art of writing and reading letters. Twenty-six lessons connect the background of each letter of the English alphabet to famous letters and letter writers from history and literature, facilitating student analysis and the writing of original letters based upon the lessons' themes. The Men and Women of Letters activities support the Common Core State Standards for Reading and Writing across subject areas, especially power standards for integration of ideas, for reading and writing a variety of text types and purposes, and for production and distribution of writing.

The term “man of letters” has been used for centuries to describe persons of learning like William Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, Thomas Jefferson, and Mortimer Adler, among many others. Famous women of letters include Abigail Adams, Mary Shelley, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Lillian Hellman. Writers, professors, editors, researchers, public speakers, and generally educated individuals who engage in public discourse all qualify as *Homo literati*, and the increased technological speed and complexity of communicating in the twenty-first century make classical information processing an even more important art and craft to preserve.

This program is simple, adaptable, and direct, contributing additional components of letter-learning and -writing to traditional course textbooks and curricula. Activities centered on the reading and writing of letters can be completed at virtually any literacy level in a four- to six-week period or over the course of the entire school year. Students use what they learn to write letters to each other, to pen pals at other schools, and to businesses, politicians, or celebrities. Successful completion of a lesson earns that student a “letter” from A to Z, and students work to earn all 26 letters in the alphabet. Familiar metaphors in sports and literature can be woven

in to support student learning as they earn class “letters” on their way to eventually becoming a Student of Letters. These individual letters become marks of success in the teacher’s gradebook, and some students may wish to record letters earned for each lesson A through Z in their notebooks (or teachers may give stickers or cards).

Lessons are in alphabetical order, and each includes a list of objectives and background information in addition to illustrations of that letter in a variety of languages. Finally, there is a recommended letter to read and a suggested type of letter to write. For instance, Booker T. Washington’s 1904 letter to the *Birmingham Age-Herald* is suggested for P—a Letter of Protest. Students read and discuss this letter, and then they write their own letter of protest. Analysis grids are included to help students take notes on the rhetorical strategies of classic letter examples. Student letter rubrics provide guidance as they write their own letters and offer a structure for teachers to use as they review them. While additional notes and suggested procedures are included as guides, there is a great deal of flexibility for teachers to send the letters or not, or to customize the resources for their own use. Word games like Scrabble could be incorporated, for example, or students may also wish to create and trade cards of famous writers. Successfully completing the entire course earns that student the title A Man of Letters or A Woman of Letters, along with a certificate of accomplishment and perhaps their own trading card.

After “lettering” over 26 days or weeks, students can then receive their “letter jacket” (paper handout or T-shirt), becoming a “varsity letterman” or “varsity letterwoman” for the course. (Teachers who engage in this option may explain to their students and athletic directors that these are different from the varsity letters earned through participation in sports.) Some principals may be open to including these activities on official school letter-jackets in recognition of student academic success.

Whatever the teacher and students’ choices may be for these activities, have fun writing!



APPLICATION LETTER

Notes to the Teacher

- Every student will eventually need to write a letter of application or a cover letter, whether applying to a college or a job. Researching additional examples and sharing each other's work may give students templates, tools, and techniques to share for these important life events.
- For sample job application letters, search about.com and similar resources.
- For more on college application letters, search Huffington Post and others.
- Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) was an Italian Renaissance artist, inventor, mathematician, and classical man of letters. His full letter to the Duke of Milan included six additional points, and he did get the job.

Duration

- Recommended time to complete lesson:
45 minutes with discussion

Procedures

1. Tell students that each of them will soon be writing numerous letters of application as they continue their careers or education. The first impressions that are made on potential employers or admissions counselors influence the applicant's chances of being hired.
2. Have students read the application letter from Leonardo da Vinci and look up any vocabulary or historical context as necessary.
3. Have students then fill in the grid below with da Vinci's rhetorical strategies and list of skills, then fill in their own.
4. Research addresses and preferences for companies and colleges to which students wish to apply, taking note of important information such as the name of the personnel director, or the division of the company to which the letter should be sent.
5. After completing the chart, have students write their own letters of application.

DISMISSAL LETTER



Directions

- Read the history of the letter *D*
- Read the provided classic letter of dismissal
- Fill in the Analysis Grid
- Write a letter of dismissal

An ancient Egyptian hieroglyph that represented a door developed into the English letter *D*. The Semites called this *daleth*, and the Phoenicians transformed this symbol into a triangle, which then became the Greek *delta*.

The letter *D* stands for a below-average grade in many schools or the second note on the standard musical scale. *D* is the tenth most frequently used English letter and can stand for *drag*, *diameter*, *deuterium*, or a wider-than-average shoe size.

Dd		Hebrew	
Cuneiform		American Sign Language	
Egyptian		Morse Code	
Phoenician		Signal Flags	
Greek		Semaphore	
Cyrillic		NATO	Delta

Analysis Grid

Rhetorical Strategy	President Truman's Letter	Student Response
Introduction		
Termination of services		
Reasons		

Name _____

Date _____

Fan Letter

Student Rubric		Needs Improvement 0-74	Admirable 75-86	Excellent 87-100	Total
Appropriateness	40%				
Specific details	40%				
Extras	20%				



Helen Keller to Herbert Hoover, 1958



K

*Seems
together*

mailed
ARCAN RIDGE
WESTPORT, CONN.

Helen Keller

December 18, 1958

Dear Mr. Hoover,

Humbly I beg your pardon for not acknowledging sooner your generous donation to my work for the blind of the world. I have been away with Miss Thomson on a holiday in Atlantic City. She has been ill for a long time, but I am thankful to say that she is now on the road to recovery.

What especially warmed my heart was the assurance that your donation went to the American Foundation for Overseas Blind. It is a special pleasure for me to thank you and to say how proud and happy I am that the cooperation of you and many other friends has built up an undreamed-of bridge of assistance to the blind throughout the globe in their gallant struggle for knowledge and usefulness.

With deep esteem from Miss Thomson and myself,
I am,

Cordially yours,

HELEN KELLER

Mr. Herbert Hoover

The Waldorf-Astoria Towers

New York City