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Letters and The Postal Service: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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I had the idea for a course on letters and the history of the post while thinking about communication. As an inveterate fan of British spy fiction, especially of John Le Carre's convoluted capers, I had come across a book on the origins of intelligence systems in the ancient empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia. The need for communication among people is as old as civilization. What I hadn't known was that the interest in spying and censorship is as old, emerging with the earliest communication networks.

The leap from ancient censorship of mail to present-day wiretapping, from an Assyrian emperor's concern about rebellion to Nixon's anti-Communist paranoia, from the earliest postmasters to CIA undercover operators, isn't merely an imaginative fancy. Issues of privacy, or the lamentable lack of it, in the face of the desire for complete control over the flow of information on the part of rulers or ruling elites, have troubled postal delivery for 5000 years. Modern mass communication systems and sophisticated electronic surveillance techniques represent only the most recent, technological assault on our privacy. Big Brother has been around for a long time.

The history of the mail service contains all the larger social and political concerns of human history.

I was fascinated, of course. But reality asserted itself (after a few paranoid glances over my shoulders, and worries about the odd clicking in my telephone line), and habit as well. As an English teacher and fiction aficionado I have been primarily concerned with writing. I liked the idea of working with letters, both as models for students' writing efforts, and as texts—historical and current—for critical and investigative reading. Letters, after all, range over a variety of topics, limited only by the boundaries of human imagination and interest. People communicate in them about love, sex, wars, death, natural disasters, inventions, triumphs, loneliness. They tend to be short, so that they can be read, discussed, and analyzed at one sitting. Most importantly, they represent a direct communication between the writer and his/her reader. They assume a specific, identifiable audience. Letters in fact harness the elemental human impulse to communicate from one to another, in a written mode, mirroring in embryonic structure the very process that in all likelihood led to the emergence of human language.

There have been suggestions that letters and writing are becoming a mere chapter in the history of the exchange of feelings, ideas, and information because electronic communication devices—telephones, CB radios, video cassettes—are crowding them off-stage. Yet, people still perk up when they discover a letter waiting for them in their mailbox. And the impulse behind the first letters, I believe, can be reclaimed and

reexperienced, particularly when teaching writing.

The goals of this curriculum unit, then, are three-fold; I plan to encourage students:

—To think in new, unexpected ways; to make them aware that they are actors in the learning process.

—To discover writing as a legitimate, indispensable, and pleasurable way of thinking and communicating; and in the process, to discover a new mode of verbal expression for their thoughts, ideas, and feelings.

—To make connections, to peek into the blind spots and dark alleys of what we consider knowledge, to learn to ask questions, and to approach knowledge not as a series of discrete subject categories, but as an integrated whole with interlinked parts.

An important corollary to the last point is the realization that “nothing exists in a vacuum” once you start to talk about it. I remember hearing about the Battle of New Orleans in high school as one of the great U.S. military victories, fought three days after the War of 1812 had officially ended. The news of peace just hadn’t made it to Louisiana in time. I never really understood that the time delay wasn’t due to oversight or carelessness, or an extended drunken spree by an irresponsible courier, but to the conditions of roads and the mail service in early 19th-century America. (It took a minimum of six weeks for a return answer of a letter between Boston and Philadelphia.) In an age when we drive casually to New York, or fly to Europe in six hours, a profounder understanding of conditions in earlier periods is required if we mean to gain some empathetic understanding of history.

Such an investigation is as complex as trying to comprehend the mechanism of social change, or how our environment affects our own behavior and experience of the world. A study of the conveyance of letters has to keep in mind the modes of transportation—runners, horses, coaches, carrier pigeons, bottles abandoned to prevailing maritime currents, ships, airplanes. A detailed knowledge of geography is essential to judge the effects of mountains, rivers, deserts, oceans, and available roads on postal routes and delivery schedules. Human obstacles, such as bandits, Indians, pirates, or national boundaries and wars have an influence on the frequency of mail exchange and censorship. The concerted effort by countries to regulate international mail traffic is barely older than a century (since the convention in Bern, Switzerland, in 1873). Then again, what’s the weather like? The Greeks and Romans did not trust their galleys to the fickle wind gods of the Mediterranean during winter. Mail was conveyed securely year-round only by land. The Romans built great roads, which enhanced not only the efficiency of their postal system, but their military expansion and the spread of knowledge.

The history of the mails also allows for interesting glimpses into the evolution of social and political institutions. In ancient times letters were exchanged for the purposes of official business, providing rulers and nobles with intelligence about goings-on in the outer reaches of their empires, or with progress reports on military campaigns. Only merchants were permitted to carry on private business correspondence. With the increasing importance of the postal communication networks for the administering of vast territories, scribes became a semi-privileged class. Literacy became a ticket to success, stature, and, to a certain extent, power. A similar development occurred during the Middle Ages, as the Catholic Church gained political power. Since letters were exchanged for church business only, monks and church dignitaries became a literate class and a bureaucracy unto themselves.

The first glimmers of democratization of the mails can be traced to the rise of the medieval universities, which set up independent courier systems for their students. The mail carriers often took private letters along if the destinations fit into their routes. The rise of the merchant classes created city states, mercantilism, and the need for increased diplomatic communications. By the early Renaissance, private postal organizations, notably at Thurn and Taxis, were already extending their relay networks all over Europe. Having secured charters and guarantees of safe conduct from the rulers of many countries, they carried private as well as official mail.

As the postal business became profitable (Thurn and Taxis built the first financial empire without extensive property holdings—the predecessor to multi-national corporations), governments forcibly bought out the private mail services and used the tariffs as taxes to support armies and wars for territorial gain. By the middle of the 19th century postal systems in *all* countries had reverted to state ownership. This development proved to be a mixed blessing. While states fixed rates which virtually everyone could afford (in the U.S. Letters were delivered free within cities from 1873 on, free rural delivery was established in 1896), they also asserted state control and authority, facilitating a return to the ancient practice of governmental snooping and censorship.

The desire for relative privacy in correspondence has given rise to a variety of techniques for safeguarding messages from the eager eyes of unauthorized peepers and curious officials. Over four thousand years ago the Babylonians already used clay envelopes to seal their clay “letters.” The Romans secured their diptych wax tablets with leather string. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance great wax seals became popular. Since 1840 when the modern envelope was invented, only simple gum and legal sanctions have stood between epistolary spies and their targets. Yet the unfortunate point must be made that all methods of sealing letters have proven equally unsuccessful.

Nor have codes, ciphers, or secret inks managed to foil the ingenuity of professional sleuths. From simple mirror writing to elaborate replacement schemes and polyalphabetic ciphers, all codes have met their master analysts. But the need for secrecy, especially in politics and warfare, and the need to know what the “other side” knows grows more important as communication networks continue to expand.

The history of cryptology (the study of codes and secret writings) is thoroughly intertwined with the history of postal systems, representing the dark underside of the development of human language and communication.

The very first reference to writing in Western literature already hints at the inevitable connection. In Book 6 of the *Iliad* Homer tells the story of Bellerophon, who is sent by King Proteus to the King of Lycia. Proteus

supplies Bellerophon with credentials, “murderous symbols, which he inscribed in a folding tablet.” Presumably the message said something like, “Treat this man as well as you did Glaukos.” (In Shakespeare’s time, “well” also meant “dead”—hence the dark irony of the play *All’s Well That Ends Well*).

The Roman inspectors of the relay stations along the great postal roads, who also acted as spies and agents for the emperor, were called *Curiosi* , from which we get our word for eager prying or meddling.

With the increase in diplomatic traffic came a greater need for codemakers and codebreakers. In the early Renaissance ancient codes were rediscovered, dusted off for use, and new code systems were invented. Kings, Popes and city states instituted ‘Black Chambers,’ where clerks enand decoded messages, and cryptologists tried to crack the codes of intercepted dispatches. The Black Chamber in Vienna was as notorious as it was efficient, combing every piece of official mail daily in less than three hours. Nearly every document, every letter, contained some portion in code: what Count So-and-so whispered to the Duchess X, what secret alliances were struck in back rooms. Every diplomat (they were known as “honorable spies”) had his personal code book.

By the beginning of the 19th century public outcry against censorship had led to the abolishing of the Black Chambers. The invention of the telegraph in 1843 opened new vistas for diplomatic and military communication, requiring more sophisticated coding systems, since telegraph lines can be tapped, radio waves intercepted, telephone conversations overheard. It also marked the end of secret writing and ciphers in letters. But the job of deciphering telegrams and radio messages still requires working with the written text.

(Encoding messages, and deciphering them, might be good exercises for students. Cryptanalysis demands investigating language—word, letter, and letter combination frequencies—and can be a way for students to see language as a symbolic system that can be manipulated.)

Other spin-offs, depending on class interest and level might include:

- The history of stamps and postmarks.
- Various carrier and communication alternatives to written messages, from smoke signals, drums, and fires, to shouting relays and knot “letters.”
- A history of writing implements and materials; from stylus and quill to typewriter and dictaphone, from wax and clay imprints, papyrus, parchment, and vellum, to cablegrams, airletters, and computer cards.
- A history of the alphabet, from pictographs and ideographs to our own phonetic writing and the implications for thought, communication over distances, and the role of writing in different cultures (the aesthetics of Chinese and Japanese characters vs. the Roman alphabet). Also the development from oral communication to written forms, and the return, via modern technological media, to primarily auditory modes, turning the world into what McLuhan has called “a global village.”
- Letter instruction books: These collections for all social occasions served to educate the sons and daughters of the middle classes as to proper literary behavior, from the 17th to the early 20th century. They provided models for how to respond to an invitation, how to propose marriage by letter (to the girl’s father, then to her), how to correspond with one’s parents, etc. Usually, an

introduction spelled out the correct format: address, salutation, sign-off, etc. Historically fascinating and, by our standards, hilarious and humorous, these epistolary templates might generate discussions (the difference in attitudes and values between past ages and our own), and suggest some entertaining writing assignments (imitating and satirizing the models).

—For more advanced students:

- 1) Longer letters, famous correspondences, fictional letters.
- 2) Epistolary novels.
- 3) A history of the art of letter writing in 17th and 18th century

England.

—Calligraphy, manuscripts, and printing

—Handwriting analysis

—An analysis of Junk Mail

—Mail-order Catalogues

—An examination of postal terms might provide an interesting opportunity for venturing into etymology, the ironies of linguistic change, and the metamorphoses of meaning: POST (posta, from Latin: *ponere*, to place) originally referred to the relay stations, where horses and traveling provisions were “placed” along the Roman highways for the benefit of official messengers. It is amusing that the stationary (also an interesting word:) places gave their name to the system that transports the mail. MAIL originally referred to the protective leather pouches (in the sense of chainmail) that covered dispatches against rain and robbers. Clearly the messages were considered so important that the simple object in which they were carried now covers all that the postman brings. STAMPS referred to the post markings stamped on the letter to indicate that tariff had been paid. When “little bits of paper” were invented (by Roland Hill in 1840) to facilitate the pre-payment of letters, the original “stamps” lent them their name—permanently.

The areas of interest relating to letters and the mail service are virtually limitless. Students could rummage through attics for old letters and stamps; or visit local post offices; or research the history of one of America’s oldest mail routes, the Boston Post Road. Pen pals could be contacted in other countries.

I have collected letters according to their content. My suggestions are by no means exhaustive. They represent my own interests and efforts at categorization:.

War Letters	Letters concerning Death
Love Letters	Prison Letters
Letters from Exile	Letters to the Editor
Letters to Children	Business Letters
Travel Letters	Letters to Parents
Political Letters	Miscellaneous Letters

Investigating individual letters can be an adventure in reading.

Since letters are written by real people, there is probably no subject, no issue, no idea reflecting human concerns that can't be found in their pages. Great inventions were first announced by letter, great discoveries, too. Columbus wrote Queen Isabella about his exploratuibs among "the Indian natives." Baber, a Turkish Mogul, described the failure of an attempt to poison him.

The specific content of letters can be used as a springboard for further discussion—for the light shed on a historical figure, period, event; for the many ways of facing traumatic situations, from the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius that buried Pompeii (Pliny the younger to Tacitus) to facing a firing squad (Dostoyevsky to his brother); for the range of emotions in love and marriage, from mercenary calculations (Du Barry to an admirer) to mad passion (Napoleon to Josephine); for the experience of prison, from pathetic pleas for life (Ann Boleyn to Henry VIII) to eloquent, political optimism (Martin Luther King from a Birmingham Jail).

But to understand a specific letter, studying its social and historical context may also become necessary. Although the "Last Letters from Stalingrad" are moving documents representing the anguish of any doomed soldier, local details and references and the almost universal tone of angry despair become clear only if one knows something about the German Third Reich, the Nazi mythos of heroic self-sacrifice for Hitler, as well as the military situation of the 6th German Army, surrounded by the Russians, hopelessly cut off from their supply lines, and abandoned to the bitter Russian winter. Against that background the opportunity to write a final letter (and the men knew this) means something quite different the passionate, lively letter Admiral Nelson wrote to his wife on the eve of the Battle of Trafalgar. He didn't know then that he would not survive his greatest victory.

Similarly, a discussion of British pluck and optimism during the Victorian Age will deepen one's understanding of Robert Falcon Scott's last letter to his wife, addressed with supreme detachment "To my Widow," and his "Message to the Public," in which he explains the reasons why the Antarctic expedition failed. Both were written during a blizzard in sub-40-degree weather, while he waited for death to overtake him.

The study and reading of letters, then, can become as much a method, a perspective for exploring particular subjects, as a subject matter in itself.

Finally—writing itself. I believe that writing is a process intended to establish a relationship between writer and reader. It is not a process in a vacuum. Except for certain poets who “live in the zodiac of their own wit,” and schizophrenics in all walks of life who carry on conversations with themselves by themselves, all writers assume a reader, an audience. In a sense, writing represents a dramatic act.

Therefore, in teaching writing the author-reader dyad must never be forgotten. In fact, it should be placed in the foreground whenever we require students to put a pen to paper. Correctness, grammar, rules for spelling and punctuation are means to the goal of clear communication, and should be treated as such. If they become the end of writing instruction and assert the primacy of a “correct” product, they subvert the very reason for writing by severing the essential connection between writer and audience. In an age when people rely less on written discourse than oral and visual modes, it is essential to reestablish the importance of the process of communication. Otherwise writing will become lifeless and irrelevant to its practitioners.

More pragmatically, it will mean little or nothing to a generation of students raised on TV and comics. We may be able to teach some of them how to manipulate prose mechanically, with luck even according to the rules. But we will not be able to teach them how to think on the page, or to care about what they write.

If, however, grammatical correctness and syntactical rules take the backseat in the teaching of writing, students can begin to discover their own personal voice, a voice that can change depending on whom it addresses. As in day-to-day conversation, we write differently depending on our audience. Thank-you notes to grandparents sound more intimate than abstracts for curricula units.

Letters are an ideal medium for the practice of writing, since they immediately imply a *specific* audience. Assignments can still take the form of arguments, descriptions, comparisons and contrasts. But they will not focus primarily on the structure of the assignment, but the question, “For whom am I writing this?” or “With whom am I trying to communicate?” Content clarity and exposition can be discussed in terms of “Does this communicate to the reader, the recipient of the message?” rather than, “Does this follow grammatical rules?”

Without the reader, the significant other, writing becomes a solipsistic exercise, a technique, devoid of intensity and care, and the sense of what it means to be human at the most basic level—to share and communicate. We must turn students on *first* to writing. They must experience the rewards before they can commit themselves to the rigor and the tedious, painful portions of the process.

Instead of a Definite Schedule —

I like to think of this curriculum unit as a centipede with a body of mail and its many feet planted in various related fields. Or, like Ptolemy’s universe, as celestial spheres revolving in epicycles around the earth and its postal history. Or, as an alphabet stew, which mixes up letter writing and reading, thickened with junk mail, spiced with code and cipher puzzles, colored with invisible ink, and certified with a Stamp of approval.

For me the main virtue of the unit lies in its flexibility and wide range of inter-related topics, unified by letters, mail history, and communication.

It allows for a thorough integrating of a number of disciplines:

—Letters can be read as background for particular historical periods, figures, events.

- Or they can be used to generate discussions about particular questions in social studies.
- In writing they provide models for prose style, organization of thoughts, ideas, and feelings, as well as approaches to particular issues. Reading and writing letters facilitates a fruitful interaction which breaks down the traditional separation of those two skills.
- Cryptology combines mathematic and language (since most codes and ciphers rely on number substitution for letters, and on arithmetical manipulation).

I intend to teach the history of the mail service twice, first as a general history of communications and postal development, and then again, as a history of cryptology. Although they go hand in hand, there are several benefits in separating them:.

- It allows for clearer exposition initially. There is much to be understood about communication networks independently of the cloak-and-dagger stuff. (Terrain, carriers, etc.)
- The overall chronology of postal development can provide a useful context for a discussion of intelligence gathering and the accompanying history of cryptology.
- The history of the mails can emphasize geographical and demographic issues; the history of codes can stress political developments.
- Treating the same historical periods from two very different perspectives can give students a beginning understanding of how historical events are interconnected (the rise of city states in the Renaissance—the increase in diplomatic traffic—the spread of mail routes—the need for codes). Covering the same ground at two different times makes it possible to demonstrate the connections, instead of presenting the material all at once as a complicated tapestry.

I hope to saturate the classroom environment with letters, to concentrate on the reading and writing of letters, and on the history of mail services, including as many off-shoots as possible as an occasional change of pace.

Sample Lessons and Assignments

A. General Outline for Reading and Analyzing Letters :

(Should be modified, depending on the particular letter.)

(Can be done orally or in written form.)

Who wrote the letter?

When was it written?

Who was the recipient?

Why was the letter written? (Pick out some phrases from the letter that show why.)

What can you tell from the letter about the writer? (Is the writer male/female, young/old, a government official, a military leader, happy, impatient, desperate, cool, sad?)

If the writer is a person of historical importance, do some research about his/her historical role, situation, time.

What is the relationship between the sender of the letter and the receiver? (Wife-husband, father-son, sisters, friends, enemies, President-citizen. Give some examples from the letter that indicate the relationship—salutation, intimate or formal phrases.)

How does the sender feel about the addressee? (Give some examples from the letter that make this clear.)

Make a list of the contents of the letter. (Description of the weather, account of how the writer feels at that point, account of what happened to him the day before. Often a letter contains more than one issue.)

How would you classify the letter in one or two words? (Love, Prison, Business)

What is the tone of the letter? (angry, sarcastic, witty, depressed) [This is a slightly different question from ‘How does the sender feel about the addressee?’ since it asks the student to focus on the language rather than the writer.]

Are there any phrases that the writer likes to use?

Are there any phrases that sound odd to you? How would *you* say them?

What did you think of the letter? The writer? Why?

Would you like to receive such a letter? Explain. Why/why not?

Would you want to send such a letter to someone? Why/why not?

How would *you* answer the letter? (Jot down some phrases and ideas)

—A possible writing assignment:

Have students reply to the letter with a letter of their own. (Either with their own reaction, or trying to imagine what the original recipient might have said.)

For more advanced writers: Have them reply, trying to imitate *the style* of the original writer.

—Students could work in small groups (of 4 or 5 each), reading the letter out loud, discussing and analyzing it together. Dividing up the questions, they could complete the written analysis as a group effort.

—Another possible group project:

Each group receives 2 or 3 letters with a similar theme: Group I: Love Letters; Group II: War Letters; Group III: Letters about Death.

The students must analyze the letters for similarities and differences. (A sheet of questions helps them focus their ideas and be as specific as possible.)

They might draw some general conclusions about how people from different ages respond to similar situations—do human beings really change all that much over time?

This might also be a good way to introduce students to Style.

I would expect to do this particular exercise late in the course, *after* students have become familiar with analyzing individual letters.

B. Cryptology :

Imagine you're sitting in a dungeon, awaiting execution for treason. The jailor unlocks the oak door and hands you a note from your servant. He's read it with suspicion, but has decided there's nothing unusual about it. You know better. There's a message hidden, and, if you can discover it, you may be saved.

Worthie Sir John—Hope, that is the beste comfort of the afflicted, cannot much, I fear me, help you now. That I would saye to you, is this only: if ever I may be able to repaye that I do owe you, stand not upon asking me. 'Tis not such I can do: but what I can do, bee you very sure I wille. I knowe that, if death comes, if ordinary men fear it, it frightens not you, accounting it for high honour, to have such a rewarde of your loyalty. Pray yet that you may be spared this bitter, cup. I fear not that you will grudge any sufferings; only if by submission you can turn them away, 'tis the part of a wise man. Tell me, as if you can, to do for you any thinge that you woulde have done. The general goes back on Wednesday. Resting as your servant to command.

R.T.

(from Bernice Kohn—see Bibliography: “E”—Cryptology)

In the actual case, the French count asked to go to the chapel for a last prayer. When his guards came for him there, they discovered that he had vanished into the proverbial “thin air.”

Hint: The punctuation is important!

Obviously the jailor was no cryptanalyst, or he would have smelled a rat because of the labored syntax, the odd punctuation (the comma before “cup”), and the curious spelling (“bee”): also the unnecessary “as” in the phrase “fell me, as if you can.”

During WW I the U.S. telegraph monitors “sniffed” out the following press cables, sent by the Germans. Their “funny sound” gave them away:

PRESIDENT’S EMBARGO RULING SHOULD HAVE IMMEDIATE NOTICE. GRAVE SITUATION AFFECTING INTERNATIONAL LAW. STATEMENT FORESHADOWS RUIN OF MANY NEUTRALS. YELLOW JOURNALS UNIFYING NATIONAL EXCITEMENT IMMENSELY.

The first letter of each word spells out the message.

Just to be sure, the Germans sent a second message, disguised appropriately as the second letter of each word:

APPARENTLY NEUTRAL’S PROTEST IS THOROUGHLY DISCOUNTED AND IGNORED. ISMAN HARD HIT. BLOCKADE ISSUE AFFECTS PRETEXT FOR EMBARGO ON BYPRODUCTS, EJECTING SUETS AND VEGETABLE OILS.

In the rescue note to “Worthie Sir John” the third letter after each punctuation mark makes up the hidden message.

—Students might try to hide messages by making up a plausible plain (surface) text. Other students could try to decipher them.

—Another method involves pricking pinholes above or below the letters in a newspaper article to spell out the message. The Germans used this means of hiding their communiques as late as WW II, dotting the appropriate letters with secret ink.

C. Writing Assignments :

—The students read a short story, and write a letter to one of the characters, praising or criticizing his/her behavior.

—Write a letter that will seduce the guy/girl of your dreams.

—Write letters to:

favorite movie stars politicians

famous athletes upon their victories and/or defeats

Santa Claus

a dead relative, sharing the things you didn’t when he/she was alive

an unborn brother or sister, describing what he/she can expect coming into this world

—Write: a suicide letter

(The trick here is to specify

a convincing lie

a letter of apology

an angry letter

a letter to the editor

a letter when you have only 30 minutes left to live

either the recipient, or the topic)

—Write a Group Letter: Students sit in a large circle. Each puts the name of an addressee at the top of a sheet of paper. Then, with every word the letter passes to the next person, going clock- or counterclockwise, until it returns to the original sender, who signs it.

This exercise tends to elicit a cornucopia of 4-letter words from many students. If you're comfortable with it, that can lead to a good discussion about obscenities—their function, what they hide, what they attack.

—Write 3 letters about the same difficult subject (an abortion, an accident, an argument with your parents) to 3 different people—your girl/boy friend, your grandparents, your minister.

Or, write about a happy event (a party, a day at the circus, your first date) to your parents, your best friend, and/or John Travolta.

Reading Material for Students

The following selection represents only a small sample. I have picked according to my own interests and concerns, with an eye toward what might appeal to teenagers. Except for a very few, these letters are all quite short (1-2pp).

Love Letters:

For unadulterated, out-and-out passion there is little that can top the examples below:

—the Napoleon-Josephine correspondence (1796-1810).

—Jean-Jaques Rousseau to the Countess Sophie D'Houdetot (June 1757) for some real tortured longing.

—Mary Wollstonecraft to Captain Gilbert Imlay (Nov. 1795) after he had abandoned her.

—John Keats to Fanny Brawne (1820) while he was suffering from tuberculosis.

—Franz Liszt to Countess D'Agoult (1850) with whom he had three children and a stormy ten year relationship.

—James Joyce to Nora Barnacle (Nov.-Dec. 1909), probably the most delicious, pornographic interchange between two separated lovers in the history of letters.

—Gabriele D'Annunzio, the Italian Futurist poet, to an unidentified lady (March 1920).

Some counter-examples of stabler, married relationships, abounding with warmth, affection, humor, and mutual support, even in periods of disagreement:

- the letters of John and Abigail Adams (1764-John's tenure as 2nd president of the U.S.).
- Jane Welsh Carlyle to Thomas Carlyle (June 1846) writing about the misunderstandings his birthday greetings caused.
- the Lord Nelson-Lady Hamilton correspondence, especially the letter he sent her before the Battle of Trafalgar, which he won, while losing his life (Oct. 19, 1805).
- Samuel Clemens to Mrs. Olivia Clemens (1880) who continued to cherish her.

Finally, some examples of love gone awry, or being carried on with more than sheer emotion:

- the correspondence of Henry VIII and Ann Boleyn, beginning while Henry is still married, and ending on a pitiful note, with Ann pleading for her life when Henry had tired of her (1536).
- Samuel Johnson at 73 offering sour congratulations to his erstwhile friend, Hester Thrale, on her marriage.
- DuBarry to M. Duval, laying out the economic groundrules of their relationship in no uncertain terms (April 1761).

Letters to Children:

- Martin Luther to his son Hans describes the Garden of Eden (1533). None of the sternness we've come to expect from Lutheranism.
- Longfellow describes his three daughters to a young friend of theirs (Aug. 1859).
- Hawthorne sends a "kiss" to his little daughter Rose.
- Benjamin Franklin in a letter to his daughter explains why he prefers the turkey to the eagle for America's emblem (Jan. 1784).
- Balzac, vacationing on the coast, misses his son, and tells him so.
- Lewis Carroll to a small friend describes a strange illness that overcame him as a result of her absence, and the stranger cure the doctor prescribed.

Letters from Prison:

—Madame Roland to Leonard Buzot (June 1793). A future victim of the Terror writes with love, courage, and unshaken ideals.

—The letters of Sacco and Vanzetti (1921-1928) to each other and to friends and supporters are among the most moving documents in human communication.

Sacco's letters are particularly interesting for the change in his written English as he applied himself to learning the language more systematically. Curiously, his passion and strength are unmistakable, regardless of his verbal skill. Vanzetti, who read and studied furiously during his seven year imprisonment, never gives up. He writes with a raw, angular eloquence of his feelings, ideas, hopes.

—Gramsci's letters to his family and friends radiate with the inner strength of a man with a "pessimistic mind," and an "optimistic will." He writes of the boredom of Mussolini's prisons; but his quick, analytical temper never lets him rest or despair for long. (1928-1936).

—Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963) defends his tactics of non-violent confrontation, his willingness to "break laws," and the effect of his presence in Birmingham. This is a relatively long letter, but the prose is clear and straightforward.

—Eldridge Cleaver's letters from Folsom Prison describe his daily routine, his delinquent past, his awakening to the positive nature of his blackness. This leads to an angry, yet eloquent indictment of racist America (1965). Some sections of these letters may be syntactically difficult for poor and intermediate readers.

War Letters:

—Aurelian, Emperor of Rome, orders Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra to surrender, and she defies him. A brief, spirited exchange (3rd Century A.D.).

—Joan of Arc before the Battle of Orleans demands that the British surrender (1429).

—George Washington writes to the Continental Congress about the terrible winter at Valley Forge, and the unpardonable lack of supplies (Dec. 23, 1777).

—Toussaint L'Overture commands ruthless warfare against the French soldiers in Haiti (1802).

—A.R.P. Arden to his wife (Oct. 13, 1940) describes the terror of the bombing of London during WW II.

—Anonymous soldiers of the 6th German Army, surrounded by Russian forces at Stalingrad, write their last letters home. Their anguish, anger, despair, and almost certain knowledge of doom give these messages a special quality. They are among the most heart-rending documents from the front lines of any war (1942).

—Ho Chi Minh exhorts his countrymen to liberate Vietnam while France and Japan are otherwise

occupied during WW II (1941).

Letters of Death:

- Agrippina, Nero's mother, pleads to her Emperor-Son for her own life (1st century A.D.).
- Sir Walter Raleigh to his wife on the eve of his (supposed) execution (1603).
- Dostoyevsky to his brother Mikhail (Dec. 1849) describes what it felt like a minute before he was to be executed.
- John Brown's farewell letter to his family the night before he is executed (Nov. 1859).
- Abraham Lincoln "consoles" Mrs. Lydia Bixby on the loss of 5 sons in the Civil War (Nov. 1864).
- Robert Falcon Scott's last letters from the Antarctic: *To the Public*, accounting for the failure of the polar expedition, and *To My Widow*. Grim, detached, the last of the British heroes (March 1912).
- Virginia Woolf writing to her husband Leonard on the morning of her suicide (March 1941).
- Che Guevara's letter of farewell to his parents (publ. 1967).

Miscellaneous Letters:

- Pliny the Younger to Tacitus on the eruption of Vesuvius, which buried the city of Pompeii (79 A.D.).
- Henry IV of Germany lambasts Pope Gregory VIII and tells him, "Get thee down to everlasting damnation"—in our words, "Go to hell" (Jan. 1076).
- Baber, first of the "Mogul" Emperors, describes the failure of an attempt to poison him in a letter to a friend (Dec. 1526).
- Benjamin Franklin breaks off a longtime friendship with William Strahan, a member of the British Parliament, over issues concerning the American colonies (1775).
- Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State, one of the first examples of a

Black man's legal, non-violent protest against racism and slavery.

—Bill Nye, an original American wit, becomes Postmaster of Laramie, Wyoming, and offers his “humble” services to the Postmaster General Frank Hatten (Aug. 1882). This letter has a marvelous style, grandiose and humorous at the same time.

—Joseph Conrad, feeling suicidal, writes a letter of despair to Edward Garnett (Aug. 1898). An eloquent, painful letter from someone in the throes of writer's cramp.

Bibliography

A. Letters : The following collections contain all the letters mentioned in the previous section on Student Reading Materials .

Agee, James. *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971.

Baldwin, James. “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation” in *The Fire Next Time* . New York: The Dial Press, 1963.

Brockway, Wallace & Winer. *A Second Treasury of the World's Great Letters* . New York: Simon & Schuster, 1941.

Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice* . New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1968.

Dell, Ernest F. *Love Letters of Famous Men and Women* . New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1941.

Ellmann, Richard. *Selected Joyce Letters* . New York: The Viking Press, 1975.

Fall, Bernard, ed. *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution* . New York: Signet Books, 1967.

Frankfurter, Marion and Gardner Jackson. *The Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti* . New York: The Viking Press, 1928.

Gentry, Curtis. *Fifty Famous Letters of History* . New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1930.

Hickok, Jane. *Calamity Jane's Letters to Her Daughter* . San Lorenzo: Shameless Hussy Press, 1976.

Last Letters from Stalingrad . New York: Signet Books, 1965.

Lavan, George, ed. *Che Guevara Speaks* . New York: Grove Press, 1968.

Lawner, Lynne, ed. *Letters from Prison , Antonio Gramsci* . New York: Harper and Rowe, 1975.

Schuster, M. Lincoln. *A Treasury of the World's Great Letters* . New York: Simon and Schuster, 1940, 1968.

By far the most widely ranging and useful collection of letters I've come across. It's available in paperback, and well worth the price.

B. Longer and/or Literary Letters , Epistolary Novels : An Introductory List

Most of these selections require a fairly sophisticated reader, probably advanced, college-bound Juniors or Seniors.

Letters: Abelard and Eloise,
 Letters

Austen, Jane, *Letters*

Baldwin, James, *The Fire Next Time*

Fallaci, Oriana, *Letter to an Unborn Child*

Kafka, Franz, *Letter to His Father*

Montagu, Lady Mary, *Letters*

Pope, Alexander, *Letters*

Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Letters of a Young Poet*

Swift, Jonathan, *Letters*

Twain, Mark (S. L. Clemens) *Letters from the Earth*

Epistolary Fielding, Henry,
Novels: *Shamela* (satire on
 Richardson's *Pamela*
)

Grass, Guenther, *Dog Years*

Lewis, C. S., *The Screwtape Letters*

Harris, Mark, *Wake Up , Stupid*

Richardson, Samuel, *Clarissa Harlowe Pamela* (only for masochistic letter freaks)

Smollet, Tobias, *Humphrey Clinker*

Two good books for background on the Art of Letter Writing:

Irving, William H. *The Providence of Wit in the English Letter Writers* . Durham: Duke University Press, 1955.

Covers English letter writing as a literary phenomenon from the early 17th to the early 19th century.

Winn, James. *A Window in the Bosom* . Hamden: Archon Books, 1977.

Excellent introduction to the letters of Alexander Pope. Chapter 2, "Precedents and Predecessors" traces Classical and French influences for further background.

C. Letter Instruction Books:

Kelley, M. *The Polite Letter Writer* . Philadelphia: 1839.

The Pocket Letter Writer . Providence: B. Cranston and Co., 1839.

Jerrold, Douglas. *Punch's Complete Letter Writer* . London: Bradbury and Evans, 1845.

This book is a satire on letter manuals of the period, and should be read after some examples of the real thing.

D. Postal History :

Bowyer, Matthew. *They Carried the Mail* . Washington: Robert B. Luce, Inc., 1972.

A history of the American Mail Carrier from Colonial times to the present. The best book on the current state of the U.S. Post Office (facts and figures).

Dvornik, Francis. *Origins of Intelligence Services* . New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1974.

The most detailed account on the communication and spy networks of the ancient empires in the Near East, Greece, Rome, China, and of the Golden Horde. Rather dry.

Konwiser, Harry. *Colonial & Revolutionary Post* . Richmond: Dietz Printing Co., 1931.

Solid introduction with good pictures.

Scheele, Carl. *A Short History of the Mail Service* . Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1970.

The introductory work in the field, from ancient postal routes, through the Renaissance, Thurn and Taxis mail systems, right into the 20th century with airmail and electronic communications. Written mostly from the point of view of the U.S. mail service.

Norton, Frederick. *A Yankee Post Office* . New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse & Taylor Co., 1935.

Tells the story of the Guilford Post Office and its Postmasters. Readable, but a little tedious in the amassing of all the necessary historical details.

Sneer, Edward. *The Village Post Office* . Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, Inc., 1964.

About the mail service in Southport, Ct. Not as interesting or well put-together as *A Yankee Post Office* .

Zilliacus , Laurin . *From Pillar to Post* . London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1956 .

By far the most readable of the bunch. Does from an English perspective what Scheele does for the U.S. Not as complete and compulsive, it conveys better than any other book the vast cultural and life style differences in previous time periods, and the implications for the mail services.

E. Cryptology : Codes and Spies:

Foot, M. R. D. *Resistance : European Resistance to Naziism 1940-45* . London: Eyre Methuen, 1976.

Overcompulsive in detail, trying hard to be the seminal work in the field, nevertheless it has an excellent section on communications, codes and ciphers (Chapter 5: "Technicalities"). Also great for some hair-raising

escape stories.

Gardner, Martin. *Codes , Ciphers , and Secret Writing* . New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972.

A light, readable introduction to the mathematical aspect of codes with good examples, and a few brainteasers for the people who are tired of the Sunday Times Crossword Puzzle.

Kahn, David. *The Codebreakers* . New York: The MacMillan Co., 1967.

This is it, folks. The final word on Cryptology. 1200 pages worth. From ancient times to the Cold War. Detailed descriptions of every imaginable code, cipher ever invented. Sections on codes in literature. Chapters on Pearl Harbor, the Battle of Midway, and the Japanese master code: Purple, in WW II. Detailed discussions of cryptography, cryptanalysis, and steganography. Fascinating, well-written, the ideal tome for a rainy vacation on Block Island.

Kohn, Bernice. *Secret Codes & Ciphers* . Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1968.

The shortest and most superficial text—basically for grade schoolers. But it includes tramp and hobo signs, and basic, straightforward explications of elementary codes.

Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49* . New York: Bantam Books, 1967.

A novel based in part on the history of the mail service, and a “possible” cloak and dagger postal conspiracy in Southern California, which had its origin in Italy around 1200. “Paranoia strikes deep.”

Wright, Ernest Vincent. *Gadsby : A Story of Over 50,000 Words Without Using the Letter “E”* . Los Angeles: Wetzel Pub. Co., 1939.

An orthographic compulsive’s dream, the book is a testimony to the letter it ignores so categorically. Especially interesting is the paragraph on page 110, which tries to explain what a Post Office is, since words like “place, office, house,” are off-limits.

F. Handwriting Analysis:

Sara, Dorothy. *Handwriting Analysis* . New York: Harper and Rowe, 1967.

A basic introduction. One of those “how to” books from the time when handwriting analysis threatened to become the newest pop-psychological fad.

G. History of Communication — General :

McCluhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy : The Making of Typographic Man* . New York: Signet Books, 1969.

Hailed as “the oracle of the electric age” when it first appeared, McCluhan’s provocative analysis of the history of communication is often tendentious and incorrect in its details, yet ultimately convincing about the differences in perception and result from written and oral modes. Contains fascinating details on the development of the alphabet, writing, printing, and reading.

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