



Letters to an Unborn Patriot

Curriculum Unit 98.04.06
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Teachers of social studies are in a critical position, and are in need of progressive tools. Learning cannot happen without a solid background from which to formulate new thought. **Letters to an Unborn Patriot** is a tool for classroom teachers to use when trying to elicit progressive thought in their students.

It seems unlikely in our information rich culture that many of our students arrive at early adolescence with a limited sense of the world around them, but sadly this is the case for many American middle school students. Learners present themselves to their social studies teachers with such a narrow background of ideas that teachers are often forced to compromise the integrity of the lesson material in order to make it understood. As this trend continues throughout elementary and middle school, and then on through high school, a scenario develops which finds college professors faced with a classroom of students unable to grasp the complex topics presented in higher education.

In addition, American History teachers need to develop an atmosphere in their classrooms which encourages consistent reading and rigorous debate about the ideas which formed the basis for our country, and the issues which continue to shape our nation. It is imperative for us to utilize unique approaches, to engage our young learners, and motivate them to think in new ways. We want to see growth in our children and we need them to challenge and sometimes change their own opinions. The letter writing format in this unit provides a “safe” and risk free environment in which this change may take place. Whether students are writing personally, or are acting in a “character persona,” they are afforded the opportunity to explore unique viewpoints within an approachable format.

Because of this dilemma, teachers of social studies are in need of a lesson plan that engages students; to the point where they are willing to expend the effort required to learn complex topics. In an attempt to satisfy this need, I have developed an American History teaching unit that requires students to respond to the events in developing America by writing to their unborn child, or to a real or created character living at the time of the events being studied. Sometimes the student will be asked to adopt the persona of a famous figure in history, other times, the student will act on his own behalf; an onlooker to the action. The student will study each event along a timeline that begins with early Spanish explorers and continues chronologically forward. As each event is discovered, the student must think empathetically, putting himself into the event and becoming part of the action. At this point, the student should be thinking about the decisions that people made, doing so from several viewpoints. After thinking critically about the event and its’ components, the student will then choose a place for himself within that part of history. As a demonstration and an evaluation of the process, the

student will then become a historical character and document his role, thoughts, and ideas in the form of a letter written to a future progeny or to a pertinent figure living at that time. Doing this accomplishes several tasks. First, it forces the student to become emotionally involved with the event. This is a critical factor in emotional development. Secondly, this process forces the learner to see the event from several angles. The ability to consider a variety of ideas is also critical to the developmental process. Finally, the writing of the letter and the developing portfolio of work serves as both an assessment tool for the teacher and becomes a wonderful momento of accomplishment, which will hopefully, motivate the student to do well.

This unit is designed for an eighth grade class studying American History, and model lesson plans will be provided within that area. The ideas and plans though, are easily adaptable for students in grades six through high school, and can be changed to address other historic and social concepts. Extension ideas will be provided which take the lessons a step further, allowing for the inclusion of the community in the project.

To insure successful learning, it is important to provide students with an overview of what they will be studying. One very effective tool is the timeline. There is a very good resource entitled "Timelines of the United States" which is available in almost any teacher store or teacher materials catalog. This publication contains a twenty page "American History Timeline" that can be photocopied and put together by the students at the beginning of the school year. Students can use markers to color the timeline, and ambitious learners might want a timeline of their own to put on the wall of their bedroom and decorate. One trip to the copy machine makes this easy to accomplish.

When teaching a unit such as this, the textbook becomes more of a secondary resource to the classroom. The object is to fill your classroom with a variety of materials, such as readings about separate events or individuals, an atlas or two, and to make use of the many resources available on the Internet for research. I would like to recommend that each of my students purchase a copy of the study reference guide called Handy Homework Helper-U.S. History to keep at home. There are many videos available for rental and purchase, but a word of caution-I find that students often do not focus very well while watching educational videos unless they are given a set of questions to answer.

SUGGESTED LESSON PLANS

Nathan Hale (1755-1776)

Students enjoy learning about the namesake of our school. Nathan Hale contributed his spirit and blood for our country's liberty. He was one of the most famous heroes of the American Revolution. Nathan Hale was born in Coventry, Connecticut, and earned himself much popularity and respect. He was a very well organized young man who attended Yale College (present day Yale University), with the intention of becoming a teacher, which he did at the age of 18. On the eve of the Revolution on 1775, Nathan Hale's patriotism and spirit earned him a position in the Continental Army as a lieutenant. After only a year, Hale was promoted to the rank of Captain in the Rangers fighting group, a group which was renowned for their bravery in dangerous missions.

In September of 1776, General George Washington initiated a plan to send a spy behind the British lines in New York. Nathan Hale immediately volunteered to his superior, Major Thomas Knowlton for the task. Disguised as a Dutch schoolmaster, Hale penetrated the enemy lines in New York to recover vital military

information for the Continental Army. Nathan Hale's mission was successful, but he never managed to get back home. Just as Hale was preparing to retreat back into friendly territory on September 21, 1776, he was arrested by British soldiers. Hale's arrest is suspected to be linked with betrayal by a cousin of his, who was fiercely loyal to the British crown.

After his capture, Nathan Hale was interrogated by the British Commander in Chief, General Howe. It is speculated, but not proven, that Howe attempted to bribe Hale into serving the British. Hale was supposedly offered a high level rank. Nathan Hale solidly refused, and was tried as a spy later that same day. On the following day Nathan Hale was hanged. Before his execution, Hale gave his famous speech, which ended with the quote, "I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."

Nathan Hale was only 21 years old when he died, a fact that many students can identify with as they think about their older friends and relatives who are the same age.

Assignment

Pretend you are Nathan Hale. Write a letter on the eve of your execution, just after your trial, to your wife and unborn child. In this letter you must explain the choice you made in accepting the assignment to become a spy. Remember, you were fairly well off, with a Yale education and a good job. Yet it is your intense loyalty and fierce dedication to the ideals being fought for that drive you to defend your young country. Convince your unborn child that leaving him fatherless is an acceptable price for the promise you make, should the Revolution enable America to become free of England. Convince your wife of her moral obligations and duties in bringing up your child to respect his father's decision, and to love and always want to defend the free states of America.

Alternate Assignment

You are Nathan Hale on the eve of your assignment to be an American spy behind the British lines in New York. Write a letter to your cousin-who is extremely loyal to the British crown and opposes the Revolution. Your cousin claims that the colonists are legally and morally obliged to treat England as their parent country. As such, the colonists should be serving the crown, not rebelling against it. Defend your position as a colonist, and refute your cousins' ideas regarding British rule. Convince your cousin that as a colonist, you have a moral obligation to revolt against England.

Abigail Adams (1744-1818)

The young ladies in American History classes will be delighted to learn about Abigail Adams, who wrote letters to her husband, John Adams, quite frequently while he was away serving in various political capacities. Mrs. Adams's letters were feminist in nature, calling for the political rights of women. Students will enjoy reading her letter to John Adams dated March 31, 1776, just before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Many consider this work to be one of the earliest feminist writings in the United States of America.

During the Revolutionary War, Abigail Adams was often left alone to manage the Adams family farm in Braintree, Massachusetts while John Adams was away on political business. Abigail was reluctant at first to take on this tremendous responsibility; however she became a sound manager of the farm, which she maintained in sound financial condition during the war. Through this experience, Abigail Adams's already patriotic spirit was now also fueled with independence. Abigail Adams saw the sacrifices she made for the war effort as her duty. At the same time that the March 31, 1776 letter was written, John Adams was serving in the

second Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Abigail used rebellious language to call for the political rights of women and her husband commented that she had the cast of mind to be an excellent statesman. (1) Too bad that his reply to Abigail was a bit of a mockery, as he failed to take her seriously.

John Adams (1735-1826)

John Adams served his country well. As an active and influential founding father, he was absent from his wife often, and continued his busy public life as he went on to become Vice-President, and then President of the United States. John Adams made his first entry into politics when he opposed the Stamp Act, and remained active in politics until his death. As President, John Adams is credited with initiating the beginnings of United States foreign policy, and he helped negotiate peace with England, later becoming a minister to that country.

Assignment

You are playing the part of Abigail Adams. The added responsibilities of taking care of the Adams family farm are taking a toll. Yet you are managing your new tasks well, assuming the lead in all financial, business, and everyday activities. However, as an educated woman, you are beginning to see the inconsistency and unfairness of responsibility without control. Convince your husband John that women should have a role in the developing country. In your letter, discuss certain issues that are on your mind, perhaps the right to vote, hold elected office, or work in the business arena. It is important to you that John takes you very seriously, and you need to present your cause not just as his wife, but on behalf of all women. In doing this, you will need to draw on your newfound skills as an example of your effectiveness. You must also use your position as the wife of a successful political leader to show that a change of heart regarding women's rights will have long-term benefits; making his own future generations proud.

Alternate Assignment

Your job is to reply to your intelligent, gifted, and loving wife, who has written to you in a surprising tone in a recent letter full of new ideas. As her husband, you love and respect your wife. As a statesman, you know that she is intelligent, hard working, and persuasive. But at this time of political turmoil, there is no way that you can entertain any of her requests for female equality. In your letter, you need to be loving and caring, but also straightforward and honest. Why do you feel that it's in the country's best interest to leave decision making in the hands of men? In his response to Abigail, John Adams mentions that he was not aware of "another tribe, more numerous and powerful than all the rest" who were growing discontent. Find a more delicate and caring way to demonstrate John Adams's feelings. How is the decision to leave the decision making of the unfolding United States in the hands of men a wise one, even for the moment?

Alternate Assignment

While portraying the part of either John or Abigail Adams, write to your children and grandchildren about your disagreements with each other. Do this in a way that provides an opportunity for your children to learn from your own experiences. As Abigail, you may want to teach your sons to be more sensitive and nurturing toward women, or perhaps to be much more appreciative. How could John Adams be more supportive toward Abigail? What would Abigail say to a daughter that would prepare her to be the independent woman that Abigail herself was forced to become? Conversely, what would John say to his son, (who would later become president), are there any mistakes that he is ready to acknowledge, so that he may instruct his young son on balancing a career and a family life? How would John write to his daughter or granddaughter; how would he better prepare a young woman for the demands of being married to a busy, active, politician? Perhaps John

might let an inkling of responsibility show through, as he ponders in writing his behavior in leaving Abigail to run all family matters while he is away for such long periods of time.

Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur (1735-1813)

This lesser known American, a farmer, was born in Normandy, France. At the age of 20, he joined French forces fighting the French and Indian war, serving as a mapmaker. Four years later, Crevecoeur completed his military tour of service and settled in America. After several years of traveling within the States, Crevecoeur married and bought a farm in New York. Eleven years later, Crevecoeur wrote *Letters from an American Farmer*, and returned to Europe. His work was first published in 1782, and is known for introducing the concept of the “amalgamated man” into American culture. In *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crevecoeur describes the ethnic patchwork of America with pride and dignity. Appreciative of the simplicity of the agrarian lifestyle, Crevecoeur’s letters are a celebration of the majesty and beauty of our country. (2) The ever politically opportune Benjamin Franklin and George Washington recommended these works to potential American immigrants. Crevecoeur’s letters will engage the diversity of students in your classrooms, and many learners will enjoy learning about the promise America held for the poor, who came with nothing but hope to a new land.

Assignment

Posing as Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, write a letter to your friends back in France, telling them about your adventures in America for the last five years; since you first arrived. Persuade your friends to cling to the promise of hope and success that you have seen come to pass. Remember that leaving familiar surroundings, friends, and loved ones can be very scary, and is not a decision to be made lightly. So in your correspondence, you need to be very specific about the realities of the new country, and provide information which would be helpful to your friends. What kinds of skills do these people have, what kind of work can they expect to find, and what will the quality of life be like immediately upon arrival? Be sure to describe in your letter, as Crevecoeur did, an appearance of a wealthy lifestyle. Detail the wages, working conditions, climate, foods, and culture of the farm community. Exactly why did Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur feel lucky, as if he were the “Lord of a Great Manor?” In his letters, Crevecoeur was trying to dispel prejudicial feelings that Europeans felt toward American colonists. What were these prejudices, and why did Crevecoeur feel so strongly about trying to present America in a positive light to Europeans?

Alternate Assignment

Using the same ideas and concepts above, write a letter to your unborn child detailing your experiences since you have arrived in America. Discuss your early arrival, penniless and not knowing anyone. How did you buy land? What was your first job? Talk about the fear of leaving your homeland, and explain why you do not regret your decision to come. Remember, you need to explain the concept of an “amalgamated man,” as you experienced it, to your progeny.

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1846)

Thomas Jefferson embraced an agrarian system as his ideal society. He was the “Lord of his castle and land” and saw the new United States as a great farming nation. Toward the last third of his life, Thomas Jefferson began to think about how he wanted to be remembered, and even went so far as to design his own tombstone. Jefferson saw his three greatest accomplishments as these: author of the Declaration of Independence, father of the University of Virginia, and author of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom.

Jefferson often elevated this last accomplishment above all others, as he relished religious liberty. Yet at the same time, it is not clear that Thomas Jefferson even believed in God. Jefferson sought to isolate religion from politics, because he felt that religious divisions had caused political havoc in history. When the Danbury, Connecticut Baptist Association wrote to the newly elected President to ask him to set aside a day of fasting and prayer for thanksgiving, Jefferson delicately declined.

Thomas Jefferson was a writer of many letters, both in business matters and to his family and many friends. When Jefferson served as president in Washington, D.C., his family stayed in Virginia, at Monticello. Jefferson started writing to each grandchild as soon as the child learned to read, and he expected letters in return. These letters to and from the grandchildren are filled with such things as updates of the family's health and activities; the latest news from the garden, and progress reports for a contest as to which of two grandchildren could learn to write the alphabet first. Thomas Jefferson demonstrated affection for his distant grandchildren, and his note to then five-year-old Ellen Wayles Randolph reads, "I have given this letter 20 kisses which it will deliver to you: half for yourself, and the other half you must give to Anne (Ellen's older sister)." (3)

When Jefferson wrote to the children, he frequently included items that he clipped from newspapers, such as poetry, stories, and riddles, which the children kept in scrapbooks. Following is a riddle that Jefferson mailed to his granddaughter, Cornelia Jefferson Randolph when she was eight years old. The point of the riddle was to "figure out how to read these lines to make them true, no matter what you think of it at the first reading."

I've seen the sea all in a blaze of fire
I've seen a house high as the moon and higher
I've seen the sun at twelve o'clock at night
I've seen the man who saw this wondrous sight. (4)

Jefferson suggested to Cornelia that he selected these lines because she was just learning to write, and they would be a good lesson to convince her of the importance of minding her stops in writing. Here is the solution:

"I' seen the sea. All in a blaze of fire, I've seen a house. High as the moon and higher, I've seen the sun. At twelve o'clock at night I've seen the man who saw this wondrous sight."

Assignment

You are Thomas Jefferson and you miss your wife, children, and grandchildren, who are back in Virginia at Monticello. Because you desire their love and attention through correspondence (and since the telephone has not yet been invented), your letter to your family must contain two elements. First, you must persuade your family to write more by enticing them with the fascinating details of your Presidency. Give your family some specific problems and events to spark their interest and get them writing! Secondly, create a "language riddle" for your family to solve, so that they will be encouraged to write soon. The riddle must be something that is indicative of the years 1801-1809. After you write you letter, be sure to attach an answer key, just in case!

Clara Barton (1821-1912)

In 1861, Clara Barton was a clerk in the U.S. Patent Office, and she welcomed the Massachusetts Sixth Regiment to Washington. These young men were from her hometown, and she knew many of them. Barton saw immediately what they lacked: towels, handkerchiefs, serving utensils, thread, needles, preserved fruits, blankets, candles, all the items necessary for basic comfort which the army seemed unable to supply. For one year Clara Barton devoted herself to soliciting supplies, and then volunteered as a nurse. While on the battlefield, Barton saw how truly unprepared the Union Army was to cope with the slaughter of war. Wounded men on the field called her the “Angel of the Battlefield.”

In 1869, Barton traveled to Europe and encountered the fledgling International Red Cross Movement, which had been founded five years earlier by businessman Henri Dunant, and worked with this organization. When she returned to the United States, Clara Barton was determined to found an American branch of the organization that gave aid to war victims and provided medical supplies and services at the front. In 1881 Clara Barton formed the American Association of the Red Cross. One year later the U.S. Senate ratified the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick of Armies in the Field. Under the terms of the agreement, neutrality and safety of medical personnel and civilian volunteers, as well as the humane treatment of the wounded, were guaranteed.

Under the leadership of Barton, the domestic program of the Red Cross provided peacetime relief during forest fires, epidemics, and earthquakes. Clara Barton left a legacy of volunteer nursing, female humanitarianism, and organized aid for the care of victims of war and disaster that would give comfort and hope to millions.(5)

Assignment

Pretend you are Clara Barton. Write to your unborn child about your experiences in working with the wounded and sick in the battlefield. As a woman from Massachusetts, you are working on the side of the union and may even harbor strong feelings about slavery. As a humanitarian, you are possibly torn and infused with feelings of compassion for all the wounded and sick. Discuss with your unborn child your ideas about war, medical care, and the direction of current medicine. What are your plans for making a difference; how will you direct your efforts? Do you have a message for the women of the confederacy? Perhaps you have ideas for combining the efforts of the “Angels of the Battlefields” on both sides of the front. If so, then you need to weigh your patriotism against your humanitarianism. What will you say to your unborn child about your thoughts regarding this dilemma?

Catherine Beecher (1800-1878)

Catherine Beecher had definite ideas about the role of women in the 19th century. Her father, Lyman Beecher, was a prominent Presbyterian and congregational preacher and founder of the American Bible society. He was a leader of many 19th century reform movements, including abolitionism. Catherine Beecher was certainly influenced by her fathers’ beliefs, and wrote several letters and essays on slavery and abolitionism, with emphasis on the duty of American females regarding this issue. Beecher saw the peculiarity of a voluntary association in one section of the country trying to awaken public sentiment against a moral evil in another section of the country. Women, according to Beecher, were particularly important in fighting this cause, and must, as good Christians, aid the abolitionist cause. (6)

Catherine Beecher also felt strongly about women’s education, and promoted girls’ education at private seminaries. Like many other educated women of her time, she felt that new female academies were needed

to train women to be the mothers of the sons of the Republic. After all, the enlightened citizenship of the new country would depend on these young men. Likewise, Beecher argued that women were naturally more nurturing and thus better suited to teaching, and championed women as grammar school teachers. In 1823, Catherine Beecher founded the Hartford Academy and in the 1840's she campaigned to send women west to teach.

Assignment

Pretend you are Catherine Beecher. Write a letter to be read by young women, both from the north and the south, encouraging interest in the teaching of young children. You must unify these women in the common cause of leading America's youth to academic excellence, and admonish them to put away their differences regarding slavery issues. In your letter, you will need to convince the women of the south that they will not be able to entertain their pro-slavery views in either their teacher training, or in their practice. Finally, you will need to instill in these women the desire to take their training to the western frontier, in order to educate young people in the developing areas of the country. Tell your readers that they will be training the youth of today to be the politicians and patriots of tomorrow, and share your enthusiasm for educating the young in a new land, and a new era.

Alternate Assignment

Write a letter to your future progeny from the point of view of Catherine Beecher. Why is educating young women important in the mid 1800's? Why does Catherine Beecher put so much emphasis on women as grammar school teachers? Why does Catherine Beecher see women as particularly important in the fight against slavery? As you adopt the role of Catherine Beecher, try to see these issues from her point of view and write accordingly, even if you somewhat disagree with her feelings.

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)

Many schoolchildren know the popular, and often fictional, stories, which revolve around our 16th president. Social studies class provides a wonderful opportunity to debunk the myths, and teach accurately the life of this talented and influential leader. Lincoln was elected to the presidency on the Republican ticket, and led the nation through the civil war. He wrote many letters and speeches during his time in office, often separating his personal feelings about slavery from his intense desire to preserve the union. Personally, Lincoln wished that all men everywhere could be free. But his paramount objective in the struggle of the United States was to preserve the Union. More than anything, Abraham Lincoln put forth many times that he would save the Union and do so in the shortest way possible under the Constitution. However, he was not willing to do so by endorsing the continuation of slavery. It seems that a debate exists among historians concerning the depths of Abraham Lincoln's personal beliefs about slavery. Like many other students of history, I was tempted to interpret a much-publicized letter Lincoln wrote to editor Horace Greeley in 1862 as indifference toward the issue of slavery. (7) I have been encouraged, however, to place this work in the larger context of his other letters, speeches, and actions. Lincoln is not known to have ever supported the expansion of slavery into the territories, and felt that it would die out in the south without federal governmental action. Finally, Lincoln believed that the intent of the framers of the constitution was to direct slavery toward its own extinction. There are many works written about the life of Lincoln and the issue of his feelings about slavery is one that will provide many lively debates in your classroom.

Assignment

You are a young professional working in the office of the President of the United States during the civil war. Because you have been working alongside Abraham Lincoln, you are sensitive to his feelings about slavery, and especially about preserving the Union. Write a letter to your unborn child describing the racial tension present in the country during this time. Talk about the constant stream of visitors to the President, trying to convince him to adopt their own point of view regarding slavery and the Union. Remember, the preservation of the Union is more than an issue of slavery. There are serious economic considerations at stake for the Southern States, whose lifestyles stand to change drastically if the abolitionists win. Who would visit the President of the United States from 1860 to 1856? Here is your chance to be a “fly on the wall” of the oval office, and describe the tension you experience. It is important that you think about the issues carefully, and infuse your own ideas into your letter!

Unit Culmination and Extension Activities

Hopefully after a year, or even a term of letter writing, your students will be motivated about American history. My personal goal for my students is for them to develop a love and appreciation for our country, and to want to become an active part of its history. As the collective future biography of America, students have many levels at which they may become more involved, both now, and as adults. Students can take a pledge to vote in every election, national and local, from the time they are old enough, and throughout their lives. Now is the time for children to learn about voter registration and absentee ballots. A wonderful culminating activity might be for students to participate in a voter registration campaign.

While students are getting excited about their country, they may want to know more about their own town and neighborhood. I have solicited several local politicians to write their own “Letter to an Unborn Patriot,” in order that my students will see the vision these people hold, and why they desire to serve the public. Encourage your students to solicit office-holders in your local area to do the same. Students can even begin with the administrators in their schools, the PTO president, the student council president and the local state representative. What made these public servants want to endure the pressures of their jobs, what legacy do these people hope to leave? Young adolescents have a tendency to think that all political officials, as well as school administrators, make a great deal of money, and are constantly deluged with a variety of job-related “perks.” Social studies class is a good time to learn otherwise. Another project I intend to have my students complete is a “Social Action Project.” My students will have to team up into pairs and identify, plan, initiate, and carry out a “positive action” which results in an improvement either in the school, neighborhood, or greater community. By drawing on the theme of letter writing that they have performed all year, my learners will be required to use these skills to make a difference and to enact positive change. Their projects might involve implementing after school care for the young, organizing an errand running service for the elderly or physically challenged, canvassing the neighborhood to solicit support for a stop sign or a traffic light, the list is endless. As teachers we are often frustrated by what we sense as a need for immediate gratification in our youth, and we are often tempted to label our children as products of a “gimme culture.” By raising the bar of expectation and providing meaningful tools for growth, a letter writing campaign designed to set the stage for positive change just might be a very effective motivator for our adolescent history students. With this in mind, I have designed two handouts for your students, in order to focus and direct their efforts. Spend time brainstorming ideas, and review the sheets “How to Write a Letter to the Editor,” and “How to Write a Letter to a Public Official” with your classes. They just might become proactive change-agents! Their finished projects might spur them to write yet another “Letter to an Unborn Patriot,” one which has as its goal a story,

which is the students', own!

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

1. Look for any rules printed in the magazine or newspaper you plan to write to. Usually you will find these at the end of the Letters column. If you can't find what you need, call the newspaper on the phone and ask if there are any special instructions.
2. If your project or concern is school related, you might want to use school stationery. This will make your letter look more important.
3. Try to type or word-process your letter. If you can't do this, you can hand write your letter. Make sure that it is neat and readable. Double-space your letter to make it easier to read.

4. Include your return address and signature. Editors usually won't print anonymous letters.

5. Begin your letter:

To the Editor:

End your letter:

Sincerely,

(your signature)

(your name typed or printed)

(your grade, school, or organization)

6. Your letter should be brief and clear. It should not be mushy or difficult. Don't repeat yourself. Your letter does not need to be long. Do not use slang.

7. Your concern should be something that is of current interest, or could quickly become of interest to others.

8. Never accuse anyone of anything without proof, and never write anything libelous (something that can make someone look bad unfairly), that could get you into trouble! You want to solve problems, not create them!

9. If you are writing because you think that something should be done, give a few reasons why!

10. Never send an "open letter," addressed to some public official, to a newspaper or a magazine. It will end up in the editor's trash.

11. Don't send the same letter to more than one newspaper. The editor would like your work to be original!

12. Proofread your letter for mistakes before sending it. But even if your letter isn't perfect, the editor will make any needed corrections. You should also know that letters to the editor are often shortened to fit the

space in the newspaper. Don't be surprised or upset if this happens to yours.

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO A PUBLIC OFFICIAL

1. Often the best time to write a legislator is a month or so before the legislative session begins. He has more time to read and think about your letter. A week or so after you send your letter, call the legislator on the phone to jog his memory. Most state legislators prefer phone calls at home, and publish the number that they want you to use.
2. Make sure that your letter includes your return address and your home phone number. You might get a letter or a phone call in return.
3. State your purpose in the first sentence. If you're writing to support or oppose a bill, identify it by number and name at the beginning of your letter.
4. Stick with one issue per letter. Don't try to eradicate crime, improve schools, and save the whales in one letter.
5. Letters to officials should be as short as possible, only a few paragraphs at most, whatever it takes to get your point across.
6. Yes, you may disagree with a public official, even the President of the United States! But you must do it politely. Never write a rude letter, and never threaten!
7. It is always nice to give a compliment. Including something good about what a public official has done shows that you are an involved citizen, starts your communication off on a positive note, and might make the legislator more willing to listen!
8. You do not need to apologize for taking up the legislators' time. His job is to listen to people, even young people! Being a student might just work in your favor.
9. If you should write to a legislator other than the one who represents your area, send a copy of your letter to your own representative. Not only is this good manners, but you may get help from your representative, too!

Notes

1. Sue Davis, *American Political Thought* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1996) 85.
2. Richard C. Sinopoli, *From Many One* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1997) 176.
3. Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, (<http://www.monticello.org/Day/cabinet/fun.html>).
4. Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, (<http://www.monticello.org/Day/cabinet/fun.html>).
5. Paul LeClerc, et al. *New York Public Library American History Desk Reference* (New York: Macmillan, 1997) 338-339.

6. Paul LeClerc, New York Public Library American History Desk Reference, et al. 314-315.

7. Benjamin P. Thomas, Abraham Lincoln: A Biography (New York: Random House, 1968) 273.

Bibliography for Teachers

1. Davis, Kenneth C., *Don't Know Much About History*, Avon Books, New York, 1991.

This book begins with the question "Who really discovered America?" and continues through to the Iran-Contra affair. Kenneth Davis dishes out American History in eight easy to digest chapters, each beginning with a series of questions designed to promote better comprehension. Written with humor and candor, Davis includes fascinating facts to explode long-held myths and misconceptions. His work reveals the very human side of history, which is often neglected by textbooks.

2. Davis, Sue, *American Political Thought*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1996.

This is a book intended for use as a textbook for undergraduate courses in American Political Thought. It begins with an overview of what Davis refers to as "The Four Themes," which include Individual-Community, Liberty-Equality, Democratic Ideas and Practices, and The American Dream. The nine chapters are infused with Davis' commentary, followed by selected readings as the larger portion of each chapter of study.

3. LeClerc, Paul, et al. New York Public Library, *American History Desk Reference*, Macmillan, New York, 1997.

This very large volume is a good desk and classroom reference for frequently sought information about American history. The American History Desk Reference contains a great amount of information of all facets of American History, from its pre-colonial days to the present. Virtually every history making American is included. Complementing this information are timelines, maps, biographies, and a detailed, easy to use index. 4. Ravitch, Diane. *The American Reader-Words that Moved a Nation*, Harper Perennial, New York, 1991.

This anthology is a marvelous collection of text and images, which provides a broad and accurate journey through the American experience. Ravitch is careful to show the contributions of diverse Americans, and how each has articulated our common, democratic ideals. Teachers will find Albert Shanker's endorsement a fitting reason for including this work as a resource in the classroom. In this volume teachers can access such works as Frederick Douglass's 1852 Independence Day address, Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "self-reliance," and an excerpt from the Supreme Court opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

5. Sinopoli, Richard C. *From Many One*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, 1997.

This is an intellectual, broad anthology of America, which spans the period from the Declaration of Independence to 1995. This work is thematically grouped into five parts, each with its an introduction written by Richard Sinopoli. Teachers will find that the attention given to diverse minority writings, including a wide range of ideas about gender, immigration, race, and religion, make this book a very useful professional tool.

6. Thomas, Benjamin P. *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography*, Random House, New York, 1968. 7. Web Site, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Inc., <http://www.monticello.org/Day/cabinet/fun.html>, November 15, 1996.

This is an invaluable web site with first-hand resources for sale, as well as commentary about Thomas Jefferson and his family. Some of the information is free, and may be downloaded easily.

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