

Literature Letters

Literature letters are personal expressions that readers create in letter form about novels and stories. The letters are addressed to peers, teachers, or other interested parties, who may or may not have read the literature in question. When the study of literature is extended beyond the classroom community, the students are exposed to a larger literary community. Literature letters allow students to convey their personal responses to literature and share them with other readers who are not in their immediate classroom community and teaches letter writing skills. Here is an example of this extended reading community from one of Katie's tenth-grade students. The letter focuses on Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter*.

Dear Mom:

I have not finished the whole book yet, but I have read enough to know that Hester doesn't like herself that much. She has to wear that scarlet letter on her dress and everyone in her town thinks that she is a bad person because she committed adultery. I think that everyone in the town should wear a scarlet letter because they have sins too. The only difference is that Hester got caught. Are sins only sins when people get caught?

Your Daughter,

Tanisha

Following is the excerpted response that Tanisha received from her mother.

Dear Tanisha:

I think that a sin is a sin if you know that you did something wrong. Just because other people don't know about it doesn't mean that it's not a sin. Do you think that people can overcome the sins that they committed? I think they can. It was a long time ago that I read *A Scarlet Letter* but I did remember how much I admired Hester's courage in the book. Keep reading and let me know what you think.

Love,

Mom

Students' literature letters often show that the letters are personal extensions of self. Literature letters do carry the possibility of expanding students' responses to a literary text. Once the boundaries of constructed, written response are lifted, students can develop a personal relationship with a text. If readers are given the opportunity to freely respond and are encouraged to engage a text, they can become more vested in the literature they read.

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To begin using literature letters, have students respond to a journal prompt that asks them what they like and dislike about the book and why. In a follow-up discussion, have them think about who they want to write to. Once this is done, use the template in Figure 5.4 to continue the conversation. After the literature letters are written, make an additional assignment that requires that they receive a response back from a friend or relative. After these assignments are completed, hold a class discussion or have student's journal about what they learned from the experience. See Exhibit 5.10 for a lesson plan.

Figure 5.4 Literature Letter Template

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| <p>Street Address City, State, ZIP Code Date</p> |
| <p>Dear _____,</p> |
| <p>Introduction (Explain why you are writing this person and what you will be telling him or her.)</p> |
| <p>Body of paper (Share with the person you are writing your experience reading the book: what you enjoy or dislike; be specific, referencing specific quotes from the book, if possible.)</p> |
| <p>Closing (Share what you would like from the person you are writing: whether you think they should read the book, ask whether they have read it before, and soon.)</p> |
| <p>Much Love (Sincerely, Thanks for Reading, or something similar)</p> |
| <p>(Sign your name here) _____</p> |
| <p>(Print your name here) _____</p> |

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Exhibit 5.10 Literature Letters Lesson Plan

| Responding to Literature Through Writing | |
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| Objective | To promote and articulate personal response to literature through writing personal letters and to learn formal letter writing skills |
| Materials | Paper, writing utensils Personal stationery or colored paper |
| Time | This writing activity generally takes 20–30 minutes. Writing literature letters can take as long as one to two class periods, depending on the extent of the responses and the students' skills. |
| Procedure | |
| Step 1 | Review the format for letter writing (see the Literature Letter Template). Use the student samples that are included with this lesson. |
| Step 2 | Instruct the students to write a letter to a parent or a friend about what they have just read. |
| Step 3 | Place the students in pairs and instruct them to read aloud their drafted letter to their partner. |
| Step 4 | Instruct the students to deliver their letters to the person addressed (parent or friend that is not a classmate). Request a response to the letter and return it to class. The responses can be shared in class. |
| IRA/NCTE Standards | <p>2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.</p> <p>3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).</p> <p>5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.</p> <p>6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.</p> <p>11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.</p> <p>12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).</p> |

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