



WALTER & LEONORE ANNENBERG
PRESIDENTIAL LEARNING CENTER



Letters to the President

A Lesson for Secondary Students

Developed by
The Walter and Leonore Annenberg Presidential Learning Center
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Lesson Plan

In a 1988 radio address in which he discussed education, President Ronald Reagan said, “The education our children deserve is the kind no American should be deprived of, for it’s the basic instruction in what it means to be an American... Jefferson and the Founders believed a nation that governs itself, like ours, must rely upon an informed and engaged electorate.”

Overview

In this lesson, students will learn both to be informed and to be engaged as they learn about an issue that is important to them, and communicate their thoughts on the issue to the President of the United States.

Objectives

Students will be able to (SWBAT):

- Understand the process for sharing their concerns with the President.
- Advocate for an issue of their choosing via correspondence to the White House.
- Analyze primary source documents.
- Utilize research skills to develop ideas around an issue that is important to them.
- Students will submit their ideas to the POTUS using one or more means of communication.

Skills

1. Analytical skills
2. Research skills
3. Composition skills
4. Expository and Persuasive Writing
5. Digital Literacy (Optional)

Classroom Procedures

I. Essential Question(s):How can I communicate with the executive branch?

II. Agenda

- EQ: see above
- Hook: Response to Video “White House Letters to the President”
- Primary Source Exploration: Andy Smith Correspondence with President Reagan.
- Exit Slip

III. Hook(10—15 minutes)

- Go to the White House’s YouTube Channel and show the “White House Letters to the President” <http://youtu.be/eGoomM8QEGk>
- Background – The forty-fourth President Barack Obama was inaugurated in January 2009 with a vow to have a transparent White House. The Obama Administration has made efforts to stay up to date with the latest trends in technology and social media.
- If technology permits, have students either respond to the video through commenting on YouTube. If not, have students respond in their journal.
- Allow students to write for five minutes. Then students should share with an elbow partner. After partner discussion, have a few students share out their responses. “How can we reach our President?”

IV. Primary Source Exploration (30-40 minutes)

- Explain that the President is a representative of the people, but that in order to be heard people must communicate their thoughts and ideas through the right channels. Complaining about a problem is not useful without a proposed solution.

- Distribute copies of Andy Smith’s Letter to President Reagan and his response. Also, distribute Student Handout A from Student Handouts (included). This is a document developed by the National Archives that will help students analyze the primary sources used in this lesson.
- Now, have students decide what their issue is using Student Handout 7A.
- If students are having issues, recommend a visit Letters to the Next President (www.letters2president.org) and show the video “About this project.”
- Have students choose an issue of interest to them and read at least three sample letters regarding that issue.
- Next, distribute Student Handouts B and C (in Student Handout link below). Student Handout B is a graphic organizer designed to help students organize their thoughts for the correspondence. Student Handout C is an example that shows the format for the letter.
- Students should write a rough draft by hand regardless of the mode of contact they ultimately decide to use. Research shows that writing by hand stimulates the brain’s creative powers in ways that aren’t replicated when typing on a computer. (<http://www.productivity501.com/using-different-parts-of-your-brain/88/>)
- After students have completed a rough draft, have them work with a partner or small group to review the various parts of the letter. You might want to model for them the process of writing this letter. Don’t necessarily show them just the finished product, but narrate the decisions you make while writing to help them understand the habits of an effective writer.
- Distribute Student Handout D, which examines the many ways that students can share their message with the president. Read through as a class and ask students to decide which method of communication best fits with their message and their skills as a communicator.
- Have students visit <http://www.whitehouse.gov/contact>
- Show students the various options for corresponding with the White House:
 - Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Flickr
 - MySpace
 - YouTube
 - Vimeo
 - iTunes
 - LinkedIn

V. Exit Slip (5 minutes)

- Students can turn in their rough draft piece of correspondence as an exit slip. A quick review will give you an idea of how well they understood the activity.

VI. Extension

- Visit <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/academic/bts.html> This website has activities that deal with President Obama’s Back to School Speech. Different variations of this speech exist, including a four minute debrief and the full text of the nineteen minute speech. Select from the Menu of Classroom Activities for Grades 7 - 12 for students and choose an option for your appropriate grade.
- With technology changing faster than government bureaucracy can manage, compare the current White House’s policy with <http://clinton5.nara.gov/WH/kids/inside/html/spring00-6.html>. Have students imagine how they will communicate with their President a decade from now.

EXAMINING A LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT

Directions: One of the jobs of a historian is to play the role of detective. Like a detective, you must examine evidence and come to a conclusion about what it means. In this case, you will examine a letter from a student to President Ronald Reagan. The chart below was developed by the National Archives and is used to examine primary sources. Fill in the chart as you read through the letter with your teacher.

1) Type of Document (Check One)

<input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper	<input type="checkbox"/> Map	<input type="checkbox"/> Advertisement
<input type="checkbox"/> Patent	<input type="checkbox"/> Telegram	<input type="checkbox"/> Congressional Record
<input type="checkbox"/> Memorandum	<input type="checkbox"/> Press Release	<input type="checkbox"/> Census Report
<input type="checkbox"/> Letter	<input type="checkbox"/> Report	<input type="checkbox"/> Other

2) Unique Physical Characteristics of Document (Check one or more)

<input type="checkbox"/> Interesting letterhead	<input type="checkbox"/> Notations
<input type="checkbox"/> Handwritten	<input type="checkbox"/> "Received Stamp"
<input type="checkbox"/> Typed	<input type="checkbox"/> Other
<input type="checkbox"/> Seals	

3) Date(s) of document:

4) Author or creator of document:

5) Position (title) of author or creator:

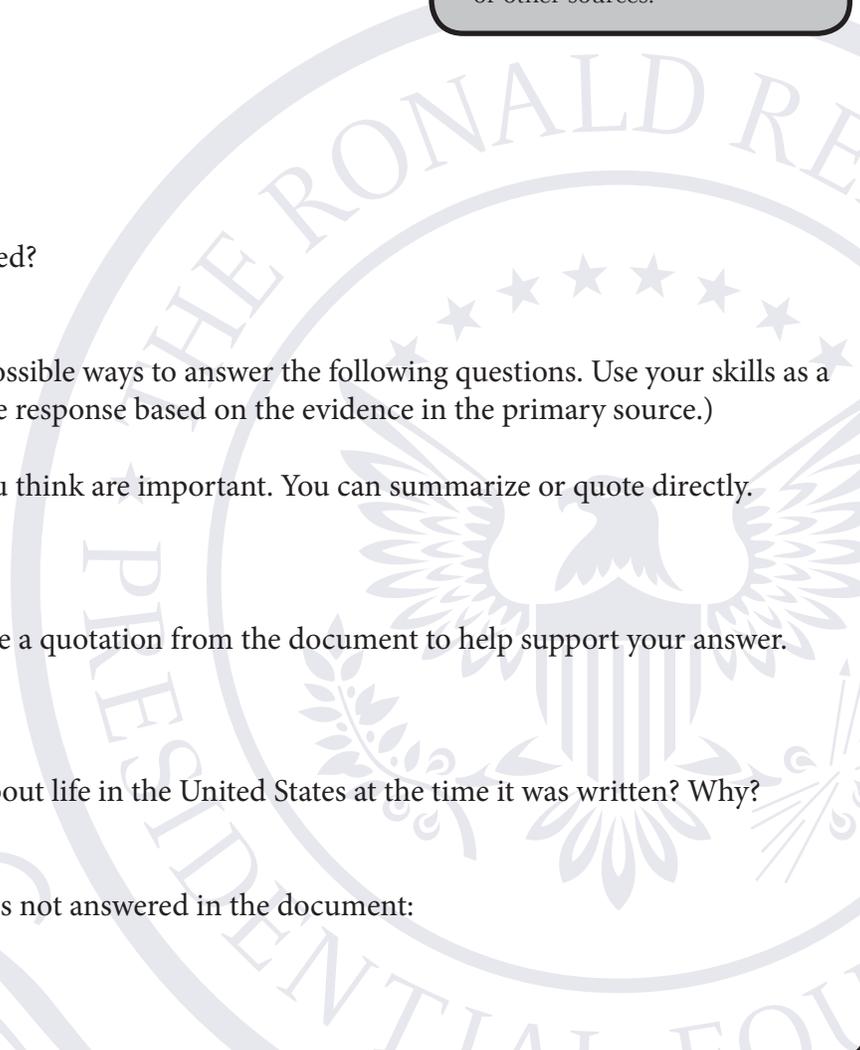
6) For what audience was the document created?

7) Document information (There are many possible ways to answer the following questions. Use your skills as a historian/ detective and write the best possible response based on the evidence in the primary source.)

- List 3 things the author said that you think are important. You can summarize or quote directly.
- Why was the document written? Use a quotation from the document to help support your answer.
- What does the document tell you about life in the United States at the time it was written? Why?
- Write a question to the author that is not answered in the document:

KEY TERMS

- NATIONAL ARCHIVES:** The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is the nation's record keeper. The preserve valuable records from the United States Federal government. These records belong to the people of the United States, and NARA preserves and provides access to these documents.
- PRIMARY SOURCE:** A first hand account of an event. Primary sources can be letters, diaries, documents, videos, recordings or other sources.



CONNECTING WITH THE PRESIDENT

Student Handout **B**

Directions: One of the great things about the United States is that our government, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, is “of the people, by the people, for the people.” That means you have a say in what happens in our country, and that you can share your ideas with your parents, your community, and even the President of the United States. Use the graphic organizer below to help you write a letter to the President about an issue that is important to you.

Paragraph 1: Introduction of Who and Why

- Name: *My name is* _____
- About You (Grade, school, relevant activities or groups): _____

- Why you are writing: *I am concerned about* _____

Paragraph 2: Explain the Issue

- List two specific reasons your issue concerns you: *One reason I am concerned is* _____

Another reason I am concerned is _____

- How the issue affects you and/or others: *This issue is important because* _____

Paragraph 3: Your Proactive Suggestion

- Explain what specific action you'd like the president to take: *One way to solve this problem is* _____

FORMAT FOR LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT

Student Handout

C



WALTER & LEONORE ANNENBERG
PRESIDENTIAL LEARNING CENTER

1234 Civics Drive
Beverly Hills, CA 90210
July 4, 2011

Heading

Your address and the date you wrote the letter

President of the United States
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20500

Address

Name and address of person to whom you are writing

Dear Mr./Mrs. President:

Salutation

A formal greeting

In the introductory paragraph, you want to be sure to introduce yourself and explain the reason you are writing in the first place. Be sure to include your name, your grade, and your school when you introduce yourself. You might also want to include an interesting fact or two that relates to your letter. For example, if you are a part of student government, or if you are involved with a service organization, you can include that information here. When you introduce your reason for writing, you should state your reason as clearly and simply as you can. There will be plenty of room to explain yourself in the next paragraph.

In this paragraph you will provide more information about your issue. You should try to give at least two specific reasons that explain why this issue is a concern to you. You should talk about how this issue affects you or those around you. Use the most compelling examples to help convince your reader of the importance of this issue.

In your final paragraph, you should suggest a solution to your concern. Nothing positive comes from complaining about an issue without any ideas about ways to solve the problem. In this section of your letter, you will present an idea for how to address your concern. Be sure to think carefully about this, and to write about it as clearly as you can.

Body

The text of your letter

Sincerely,

Closing and Signature

Concerned Student

A polite final closing and your name

HOW DO I CONNECT WITH THE PRESIDENT?

Student Handout **D**

Directions: In the 21st Century, there are more ways than ever before to communicate with elected officials. The proliferation of the internet and social media means that you can share your ideas with the president through writing, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, just to name a few. In fact, if you visit the contact page on the White House website, there are more than 10 different ways to connect with the president. Visit <http://www.whitehouse.gov/contact> and discuss with your teacher the best way for you to share your message to the president. Then check the appropriate box and read the reminders for your chosen method.

Method 1: *Writing*

Options

- 1) Letter
- 2) E-mail

This is for me. I'm going to write
the president:

If you are a strong writer, and can clearly convey your ideas using words, you should write to the president. Once you have written your letter, you can either put it in an envelope and mail it to the president. You can also use your computer to e-mail your letter to the president. If you choose to write, remember to:

- Proof read and revise your writing before sending.
- Make sure the quality of your writing and your thoughts are worthy of the president.

Method 2: **Video**

Options

- 1) YouTube
- 2) Vimeo

This is for me. I'm going to make a
video for the president:

If you are a strong speaker, have a flair for the dramatic, and have access to a video camera, you should create a video for the president. Once you have written a script, you can work with a team to film, edit, and add any titles or soundtrack you need to enhance your video. You can use your computer to upload your message to the president. If you choose to make a video, remember to:

- Carefully edit your video to ensure it is of the best possible quality.
- Practice what you will say and the way you will say it before turning on the camera.

Method 3: **Other**

Options

- 1) Facebook or MySpace
- 2) Twitter
- 3) Flickr or other photo sharing site

This is for me. I'm going to send my
message to the president through
Facebook, Twitter, or Flickr:

If you enjoy sharing images, ideas, and links through sites like Facebook, Twitter, or Flickr, you should consider using social media to share your message with the president. Depending on your chosen medium, you can comment, send a brief message, or share a photo related to your issue. If you choose social media, remember:

- Whenever you post something online, anyone in the world can see it. Be sure it accurately represents both you and your ideas in a positive way.

Received SS
1984 MAY -9 AM 10: 36

Andy Smith
400 London Pride Road
Irmo, South Carolina 29063

April 18, 1984

Dear Mr. President,

My name is Andy Smith. I am a seventh grade student at Irmo Middle School, in Irmo, South Carolina.

Today my mother declared my bedroom a disaster area. I would like to request federal funds to hire a crew to clean up my room. I am prepared to provide the initial funds if you will provide matching funds for this project.

I know you will be fair when you consider my request. I will be awaiting your reply.

Sincerely yours,

Andy Smith
Andy Smith

226267

4612

PP 014-01

WJ

509803

WE

PP 0050

JV

May 11, 1984

Dear Andy:

I'm sorry to be so late in answering your letter but, as you know, I've been in China and found your letter here upon my return.

Your application for disaster relief has been duly noted but I must point out one technical problem: the authority declaring the disaster is supposed to make the request. In this case, your mother.

However, setting that aside, I'll have to point out the larger problem of available funds. This has been a year of disasters: 539 hurricanes as of May 4th and several more since, numerous floods, forest fires, drought in Texas and a number of earthquakes. What I'm getting at is that funds are dangerously low.

May I make a suggestion? This Administration, believing that government has done many things that could better be done by volunteers at the local level, has sponsored a Private Sector Initiatives Program, calling upon people to practice voluntarism in the solving of a number of local problems.

Your situation appears to be a natural. I'm sure your mother was fully justified in proclaiming your room a disaster. Therefore, you are in an excellent position to launch another volunteer program to go along with the more than 3000 already underway in our nation. Congratulations.

Give my best regards to your mother.

Sincerely,

X

Andy Smith
400 London Pride Road
Irmo, South Carolina 29063

RR:plr 5pmna

5/11/84

MANUSCRIPTS

To Andy Smith 400 London Prize Rd.

Jensen Co. Carolina 29063

Dear Andy

I'm ~~sorry~~ ^{sorry} to be so late in answering your letter but as you know I've been in China and found your letter here upon my return.

Your application for disaster relief has been duly noted but I must point out one technical problem; the authority declaring the disaster is supposed to make the request. In this case your mother.

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May I make a suggestion? This administration, believing that govt. has done many things that could better be done by volunteers at the local level, has sponsored a Private Sector Initiative Program, calling upon people to practice volunteerism in the solving of a number of local problems.

Your situation appears to be a natural. I'm sure your Mother was fully justified in proclaiming your room a disaster. Therefore you are in an excellent position to launch another volunteer program to go along with the more than 3000 already underway in our nation's - congratulations.

Give my best regards to your Mother
Kinley BZ

Dear Mr. President:

I have an idea to help countries avoid war. When two countries are having a war they can play basketball. The winner gets to make the decision about the thing they are arguing about. I think that you are doing a good job.

I like horses and jellybeans like you do.

Your Friends,

Lonnie George

P.O. Box 375

Lone Pine, Calif.

93545

me T

DEAR MR. PRESIDENT,

I HAVE AN IDEA TO HELP COUNTRIES AVOID WAR. WHEN TWO COUNTRIES ARE HAVING A WAR THEY CAN PLAY BASKETBALL. THE WINNER GETS TO MAKES THE DECISION ABOUT THE THING THEY ARE ARGUING ABOUT.

I THINK THAT YOU ARE DOING A GOOD JOB.

I LIKE HORSES AND JELLYBEANS LIKE YOU DO.

YOUR FRIEND,
LONNIE GEORGE

067203

4612

PR014-01

10016

RE-002

1105-01

1105-02

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

March 22, 1982

Dear Lonnie:

I received your letter and want to thank you very much. Thanks, too, for your suggestion about ending war. I don't know whether we can work something like that out. You know, there are some countries where they don't play basketball. But, I promise you, I'm going to do everything I can to see that we have peace.

Thanks for your picture with that nice looking horse.

Best regards,

Ronald Reagan

Master Lonnie George
Post Office Box 546
Lone Pine, California 93545

820322

Remainder of letter

To Lonnie - With Very Best Wishes
Ronald Reagan

HANDWRITING FILE

To Lonnie George P.O. Box 546 Lone Pine Calif.
93545

Can you
send him a
picture of me
on how I look
with that letter?

Dear Lonnie

I received your letter and want to thank
you very much. Thanks too for your suggestion
about ending war. I don't know whether we can
work something like that out. You know there are
some countries where they don't play basketball.
But I promise you I'm going to do everything I
can to see that we have peace.

Thanks for your picture with that nice looking
house.

Best Regards
RR

March 22, 1982

Dear Lonnie:

I received your letter and want to thank you very much. Thanks, too, for your suggestion about ending war. I don't know whether we can work something like that out. You know, there are some countries where they don't play basketball. But, I promise you, I'm going to do everything I can to see that we have peace.

Thanks for your picture with that nice looking horse.

Best regards,

SI RR

Master Lonnie George
Post Office Box 546
Lone Pine, California 93545

RR:AVH:pps

RR Dictation

Encl: RR Photo

911 Brentwood Dr.
Lake Villa, Ill.
60046
Nov. 18, 1980

President elect - Ronald Reagan
c/o The White House
Washington D.C.

Dear Mr. Reagan:

Hello my name is Julie Wessel. I have blondish hair. I'm 11 years old. I have 6 cats, a dog, and a bird. I love animals! When you become president in January do you think you can please try to do something for the little baby seals in Canada! It's so cruel, what they do to them! When I get older I'm going to be a Veterinarian.

Do you think you can lower the taxes a little or at least try! And maybe even the prices? The cost of living these days is very high! We manage pretty good, but every once in awhile there are things we would like to do, or get something, but we can't because it's too expensive or we don't have any money. For instance I want a pair of Calvin Klein jeans but \$34 or \$35 is a little expensive.

We voted for you we think you'll be a good prez.

Yours, Truly
Julie
Wessel

41330 Lincoln Dr.
Antioch Illinois 60002
Nov. 20, 1980

President-elect Ronald Reagan
% The White House
Washington D.C.

Dear President-elect Reagan:

I think you should try harder than Carter to get the hostages out. But still try to get the inflation down from fifteen percent to five. For instance when Ford was in office gas cost 76¢ now that Carter is in office gas has gone up to \$1.76. So I'm hoping you will lower it back to 76¢ per gallon than a \$1.76 per gallon.

P.S. Congratulations on your victory over Carter and Anderson.

Sincerely Yours
Wayne Trapp

4
YA-1

Antioch Upper Grade
800 Highview Drive
Antioch, IL 60002

President Ronald Reagan
The White House
Washington D.C. 20515

003242

Dear President Reagan:

I am a sixth grade English teacher. As part of a lesson on writing business letters, I asked my students to write letters to you, our new president, in order to share their observations and opinions with you.

Although my students are only eleven years old, their concerns are genuine, and they are quite aware of many of the conflicts in our world. Yet, as you will see from their letters, they are also full of hope for the future and confidence in your ability to lead us. I share their optimism.

I hope you enjoy the letters. Best wishes. We are all behind you.

Sincerely,



Penelope A. LeFew

February 12, 1981

003242

4612

FG, PR 014-01

Dear Girls and Boys:

Thank you for the generous support you expressed in your letters.

I encourage you to watch for news on how policy develops in those areas of special interest to you. In this way, you will best learn answers to the many questions you raised about the direction of the new Administration.

Your views are a welcome message that you care about the welfare of America. I hope that you will always involve yourselves as concerned citizens dedicated to the progress of our country.

With my best wishes always,

Sincerely,

RONALD REAGAN

Pupils of Miss LeFew's
Sixth Grade Class
X Antioch Upper Grade School
800 Highview Drive
Antioch, Illinois 60002

✓ Enclosure: Inaugural Address

RR/AVH/gjc
YP-4

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Children's Letters

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