

{ } LESSON

Essential Words: Letters of Gratitude to Essential Workers

by Cristeta Boarini,
826MSP, and Skylar
Burkhardt, 826 National

GRADES 4–12

TYPE
INFORMATIONAL
NARRATIVE
PERSUASIVE

COMMITMENT
2 SESSIONS: 1 HOUR
EACH

As students across the country have been sheltering in place, many may feel like there is no way to make a difference beyond the walls of their home. This lesson provides a unique opportunity to change that by calling on students to share their voices in an essential way. Using essential worker’s kindness as their model, students will share gratitude with people who could use it the most.

These friends, family, and community members are going to work every day to care for others, often at great expense to themselves and their own families. Many people are describing healthcare workers, grocery clerks, cleaning professionals, and other essential workers as at the “front lines” of the coronavirus “battle.” While the militarization of this language does capture the danger and courage that encompass many essential workers lives right now, it does not address the nurturing and caring nature of their work. Their work, right now and always, is rooted in service to the community. Let’s take this

opportunity as a community to thank them, not just because they are essential workers, but because they are brave, caring, and essential people.

SESSION 1: BRAINSTORMING, RESEARCHING, REFLECTING

Students will reflect on what they're grateful for, research the range of experiences of essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and practice expressing gratitude.

YOU WILL NEED

- Essential Words—Handout
- Pencil, pen, or writing utensil of your choice!
- Platform to play video (optional)

HOW TO BEGIN (10 MINUTES)

Begin by introducing students to the “Feelings Bank” in the [Essential Words—Handouts](#). Have students circle words they feel describe how they're doing right now. Students may use the blank spaces at the bottom of the page to add their own words if their feelings aren't captured by those provided.

After students reflect, invite those who are interested to share. As many students may currently be processing their emotions and may not feel open to sharing, provide space for students to think and opt in as they feel comfortable. For this reason, it's especially important to remind students who do choose to share (and those who don't) that all their feelings are valid. During a quarantine, so many feelings can be experienced. Some questions to explore as a class include:

How are current events impacting you? Changing your routines? Making you feel?

Use this conversation to introduce letter writing as an opportunity for conversation and connection around the many emotions we are experiencing.

STEP 1 (10 MINUTES)

Gratitude Reflection

Note: This step was inspired by “People, Places, and Things”, a brainstorming activity by 826 New Orleans’ Program Director Kiley Pulphus. You can check out the original activity and find more uses for T-chart brainstorming [here](#).

Using the chart in the [Essential Words—Handouts](#), have students write down a list of people, places, and things they're feeling grateful for right now. Encourage students to get creative with the list—the people, places and things do not have to be people they've met or objects in their home. You can model this by showing a few things you're grateful for. There are lots of examples to choose from: your pet, the nurse who took care of your mom, the sunshine, cloudy days, pencils, the beach, your bed.

If students are struggling to come up with people they're grateful for in their community, you can point them to the work of essential workers. Ask students what kind of jobs or roles are considered essential at this time. Many of the examples in this lesson mention people in the healthcare industry such as

nurses or doctors. Some other roles that deserve our gratitude include:

- Maintenance Staff
- Case Managers & Social Workers
- Workers supporting groceries, pharmacies, and other retail
- Bus/public transit drivers

After 5-7 minutes of writing, invite students to share some of the things they're most grateful for.

STEP 2 (15 MINUTES)

Choosing Your Audience

Next, ask students to choose one person on that list they feel gratitude toward. Note that while the lesson and its examples focus primarily on people in healthcare, we know there are many kinds of essential workers and people staying in place who deserve celebration and support. We urge students to write to any individual who is on their mind during quarantine.

To help students choose their audience, it may be helpful to go over some of the basic needs that essential workers are risking, both during this pandemic and always. Ask students what some of these needs may be. Some possible answers could be:

- Fair Pay
 - Janitorial workers are notoriously underpaid for their essential work, often working for minimum wage. Their work during the pandemic – and always – is literally keeping the country alive. As they navigate for fair pay for this life risking work, they often are met with little support.
- Safety Precautions
 - Many essential workers like bus drivers or retail workers are in close proximity to many people every day. Many of these individuals are not provided with the necessary safety precautions to

keep them safe from the exchange of germs.

- Resource Supply
 - Masks, sanitizer, and other crucial resources have been in short supply. These resources keep essential workers, their patients and/or customers, and their loved ones safe and healthy.
- Long/Irregular Hours
 - Healthcare members may need to work extended or extra shifts due an overwhelming number of patients needing care. Employees may need to work longer hours to cover for those who are ill or caring for family members. Teachers may work irregular hours to connect with all students and families while caring for their own.
- Lack of Sick Leave
 - Essential workers may not have health care. They may not be able to take extended sick leave and keep their job.
- Inability to see families for fear of spreading the virus
 - Essential workers who are exposed to the virus daily may be self-isolating from their families, causing additional strain for them and their loved ones

As students consider the vast challenges that these workers are facing, it may be helpful to show them articles or videos with messages directly from essential workers:

- [StoryCorps NYC Bus Drivers](#)
- [Ashley Louie, SF nurse](#)
- [Voices From a Covid-19 Unit](#)

Despite these systemic injustices happening nationwide, the inequities essential workers face are often overlooked in the news recounting these heroics. In this step, students will not just acknowledge these difficulties—they’ll ask about them. With these questions, students begin the process of empathy and connection. Rather than assuming we know anyone’s situation, asking questions creates space for essential workers to own their lived experiences.

With these inequities and challenges in mind, what questions do students have for their audience? Write them down on the “Question Bank” section of the [Essential Words—Handouts](#).

STEP 3 (10 MINUTES)

Actions & Impacts

This step helps students think about what the student’s recipient does, why that person is important, and how their actions impact the student.

To begin, ask students to fill in the actions column of the “Getting Specific” page in the [Essential Words—Handouts](#). The action column will consist of real observations of courageous acts from healthcare workers or the target audience of your student’s choice.

To help students come up with a list of essential worker takes, encourage them to think through the chosen person’s daily routine:

- How might their life/job be different now?
- What actions do they have to take now that are different than usual?
- How might they be feeling?

This could also be an opportunity for students to do some research. Students can reference the videos, news, articles online, or stories they've heard from friends and family to come up with a list of actions essential workers are likely taking.

Once the action column is filled in with a few activities, have students go through and fill in the corresponding importance and impact of each action. Use the example of Frank the bus driver to help explain to students that there are two important outcomes we want to think about:

1. Importance: The societal influence these actions have.
2. Impact: The way these actions affect students personally.

STEP 4 (15 MINUTES)

Expressing Gratitude

Your students have described how they're feeling and considered the perspective and experience of essential workers. Now, it's time to bring those two ideas together. The best way to thank someone is not just in the word thank you, but in sharing how others have made our lives better. Share a few examples of this with your students by using this format and thanking them.

“Thank you so much for being such wonderful students!”

OR

“Thank you so much for coming to class every day. Seeing your face every day makes me feel like I’m not alone.”

Ask students how these two quotes are different. What do they learn from the second quote that they don’t from the first?

Explain that by sharing not only WHAT their behavior is, but HOW it makes you feel and WHY, it helps the people we care about understand their specific impact. Provide students with the template for this and have them practice this technique using the “Expressing Gratitude” page in the [Essential Words—Handouts](#):

Thank you ___(name/title)___ for ___(action)___. When you ___(action)___ it makes me feel ___(emotion)___ because ___(explanation)___.

SESSION 2: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Students will write a letter to those who can use our gratitude most. Whether it’s thanking someone for going to work or for staying home, this lesson provides students an opportunity to use their voice to make a difference.

YOU WILL NEED

- Essential Words—Handout
- Pencil, pen, or writing utensil of your choice!
- Paper or a document to write your letter on.

HOW TO BEGIN (10 MINUTES)

Now it's time for students to draft their letter! Begin by having students brainstorm a list of components letters often have. Some options they may come up with include:

- Greeting
- Sign off
- Questions
- Stories
- Pictures
- Tone/Purpose
- Beginning, Middle, End

Now you get to share with students they've already brainstormed content for their beginning middle and end, woohoo! It's time to piece it together.

The first step of beginning the letter is choosing tone. Tone is one way that students are able to make their thank you letter unique and personalized. Their letter can be comforting, it can bring joy, it can even make readers laugh. To do this, it may be helpful to revisit the feelings bank. Using another color, students may circle one to two words that answers the following question:

What emotions do you hope the recipient(s) of your letter feels after reading it?

STEP 1 (10 MINUTES)

Introducing Yourself

Now that students have chosen a tone, it's time to begin the introduction. Explain to students that the beginning of their letter should address the following question:

Who are you, and why are you writing?

Now it's time to write! If students would like more guidance they can use the "Introducing Yourself" page of the [Essential Words—Handouts](#) to begin their introduction. This handout features examples students may choose to share while leaving room for students to individualize their introduction.

As students are sharing who they are and how they feel, encourage them to return the question to their audience. The introduction is a great time to ask questions that remind essential workers that we are all humans with feelings and backstories. Students can return to the "Question Bank" handout to look for questions they may want to ask or answer.

After students have written their introductions invite students to share the first part of their letter or ask questions about this section.

STEP 2 (15 MINUTES)

Action

Introduce the middle section of the letters to students as an opportunity to use their research and details they collected in the "Getting Specific" section of the [Essential Words—Handouts](#). Explain that these questions, facts, and specifics will show the letter recipients that the students have been paying attention to them, their work, and the sacrifices they are making. Provide the following

prompts to students for their writing:

What meaningful interactions have you had with hospital staff (or your chosen audience) before the pandemic? What have you heard about the person you're writing to and the work that they're doing?

Students can continue to refer back to the “Question Bank” handout and ask questions that guide the conversation and tone of the letter. For example, in this section students may share a personal experience with a healthcare worker then ask questions about how the worker felt in that moment. Alternatively, if a student is writing about challenges essential workers are facing, the student may lift up their audience by asking about their sources of strength or hope.

STEP 3 (15 MINUTES)

Gratitude

At last it's time for students to dig into their gratitude. Point students to the “Expressing Gratitude” handout. This section of the letter is where they plug in the what+how+why format of expressing gratitude they wrote in the previous session. They can use the thank you's they practiced on the handout, or write new ones for the letter. It's also an opportunity to reinforce their desired tone. Students should write with the following prompts in mind:

Why are you grateful for their work, how does it impact you? How do you want to make them feel?

Using the “Question Bank,” students should return the questions to their audience as they share their own answers. Some questions students might ask and/or answer include:

- Who and what are they grateful for?
- What brings them hope?

- What makes them laugh?

STEP 4 (10 MINUTES)

Finishing Touches

With their draft in place, students can use the final 10 minutes to finish their letters and add any finishing touches. Students should begin by revisiting the tone they selected at the beginning of this session and re-reading their letter with that in mind. Students may add a few extra lines to enhance their tone, or add other creative elements to their letter. Some creative opportunities for students include:

- Adding a self portrait
- Drawing portraits of the workers
- Creating a border with some of the other things they're grateful for from their T-chart.
- Making a hard copy of the letter using their favorite pen.

If students finish early and have extra time, they can go back to the “Feelings Bank”. Ask students to think again how they're feeling. They can mark the document using a different color of pen, or underline words instead of circling. Invite students to share their answers if they're comfortable. This process can also be done with the following prompts.

Have your feelings changed since we started? Why/why not?

How does it feel to express gratitude?

STEP 5

Conclusion

Thank students for sharing their essential words! Every word of kindness makes an impact, so ensure students have a plan for sharing their powerful writing once it's finished. If students are not sharing their letter with someone they know, please consider sharing it with 826 National where we'll be organizing and distributing letters to essential workers.

How to share and submit your letter:

1. Share or send your letter directly to the recipient you know!
2. Collect letters to send to your local hospital, grocery store, favorite restaurant, or other essential business.
3. 826 National is collecting letters to essential workers from students like you! By sharing your letter with us, you'll have the opportunity to have your words featured in a collection of letters shared with essential workers nationwide. [Submit your letter here!](#)