



© 826 DIGITAL 2022

LESSON

Dear Election

by 826 New Orleans

Grades 6–12

TYPE

NARRATIVE

PERSUASIVE

COMMITMENT

1 Session: 1.5 Hours

A central piece of American democracy is freedom of speech and expression. We work together to create a better society by using our voice, and our vote, to express opinions, perspectives, and ideas as part of a continuous, nation-wide conversation. Often missing from this conversation is the crucial perspective of young people, the next generation who will inherit the country and be most impacted by many of the policies currently up for debate.

In this lesson, young writers have an opportunity to write a letter expressing their views on issues that matter to them around an election. It could be to a political candidate, a family member, their future self — anyone impacted by the election and its outcome.

Like all people, young people have a diversity of perspectives to offer. This lesson offers a general framework for making space for their perspectives. While some students will be ready to write a rigorous argument for the Green New Deal, others might be more inclined to use this opportunity to express to a family member about why LGBTQ+ rights are important to them. The important framework of this lesson is to ensure the things students have to say speak for themselves, and that this letter delivers their truth.

The lesson is based on a writing workshop from [826 New Orleans](#). In the weeks following the 2016 presidential election, young people ages 8-18 across New Orleans wrote letters to Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, friends, family, and their future selves. These student letters were published in [I Want You to Know Something About Me](#), a book that showcases the depth and breadth of what matters most to New Orleans' youth. The lesson also features student mentor texts from 826 Boston's [My Generation Can: Public Narratives for Community Change](#) (2019), a book by 12th Graders at Boston's Edward M. Kennedy Academy for Health Careers.

Session:

YOU WILL NEED

- Scratch paper
- Paper and writing utensil and/or access to a computer and printer
- Optional: Copies of, or access to, the full texts of student writing excerpts featured in this lesson: [*I Took my First Steps...*](#) by Maria and [*My Uncle Nilton...*](#) by Ryan
- Optional: Mailing supplies, if you'll be able to provide them for students

BEFORE YOU START

Before you teach the lesson, we recommend researching options for finding contact information of elected officials in your state. [USA.gov](#)'s landing page for finding contact information is a good place to start, but your state or county may list information more succinctly elsewhere. Alternatively, students could research this information in advance or as part of the lesson. Remember, students may also write to family, friends, or other important local figures.

Set the stage for open and respectful discourse by reviewing frameworks for critical conversations. We recommend [Fostering Civil Discourse Guide](#) from Facing History and Ourselves and [Let's Talk](#) from Teaching Tolerance.

HOW TO BEGIN (15 Minutes)

STEP 1: Warm-up Discussion

Begin by guiding students through a discussion about their views, hopes, and fears around the election that they could express in a letter.

1. Optional: Depending on your grade level, time available, and the election you're planning around, you might choose to scaffold this discussion by asking students to first fold a piece of scratch paper into three parts. Label each section with the following headings:
 - Country
 - City
 - Community

2. Introduce the open-ended questions below. Students should spend 5 minutes jotting down their answers. Encourage students to focus their attention on the questions (and sections, if they completed the above step) that feel most salient to them. For example, they may choose to spend the entire time writing about hopes for their community, or they might respond to what they would change about our country.

- What do you want to change?
- What do you want to stay the same?
- What are your hopes for the future?
- What worries you most?

3. Pair students to discuss their ideas with each other, then share out as a class. Note ideas from the group that are specific and expansive enough for a letter.

4. To wrap the discussion, pose the questions: Who's responsible for creating this change? What advice do you have for them? What action(s) do you wish they would take? Students can either list their responses in their notebooks or share their ideas as a whole group. Either way, acknowledge their ideas and perspectives, reminding students that they can make a difference by making their voice heard.

Step 1 (15 Minutes)

STEP 2: Dear _____

1. Now that students have an idea of what their message might be, they should consider who most needs to hear it. Remind students that political change and the exchange of ideas doesn't just happen at the highest level of government, but in all levels, and especially outside government. Students can return to their notes and identify someone to address their message to — it could be someone who is impacted by the election, someone they disagree with, or someone who needs to hear their crucial perspective and experience.
2. Whether your students choose to write to a city council member, their state governor, a grandparent, a friend, or their future self, their audience will change the direction of their letter. Sometimes, they might change their topic based on the audience, and that's fine.
3. We recommend giving students the opportunity to look into their local, state, and national representatives, in order to understand the variety of audience they have.

Step 2 (15 Minutes)

STEP 3: The Opening

1. In the opening of the letter, students should focus on introducing themselves to the reader in an effective manner. But first, it's important for students to think about what they want their reader to know about them. Have students note aspects of their identity that are most important to share in their opening, or

discuss as a class what's important when introducing yourself.

2. The way a student introduces this information can vary widely depending on their audience. Will they address their senator formally, as a sign of respect? Do they know their uncle responds well to humor? Would framing their introduction as a personal narrative pull a reader in? Have students look at the two openings by [Maria](#), the first from her public narrative and the second from her letter to a state representative expressing the need for youth-oriented community spaces. In small groups or as a class, discuss which is more effective, and why. Remember to emphasize that there is no right answer! Students should write their opening with an approach and tone tailored to their intended audience.

Ex 1:

Dear Representative Copping,

My name is Maria and I am a graduating senior at the Edward M. Kennedy Academy for Health Careers. My ELA class is working on a project about social issues that affect our daily lives and the quality of life in our communities. I am writing to draw your attention to the lack of community spaces for young people in Boston, but more specifically in West Roxbury.

Ex 2:

I took my first steps in a small farming village in the northern part of Greece named Loudias. It was there that I learned how to talk, love my family, support my community, and give what I have. I grew up in a place where everybody knew their neighbor, where everyone said “hi” to each other. Ever since childhood, it was instilled in me to value family, community, and culture and this shaped the way I understood the world to be.

Step 3 (20 Minutes)

STEP 4: The Details

1. After students write their introduction, they should consider details that best support their purpose for writing. These details will make up the body of their letter. Once again, have them write down ideas, personal stories, and/or reasoning that supports their point, or have a discussion as a class of what kind of details they could include.
2. Depending on their audience and topic, some may choose to go a more personal, narrative route that focuses on their story. Others may choose to back up their points with research. For most, there will probably be a mix of two. Ask students to compare the two examples below, both details from [Ryan's letter](#) discussing the struggle to gain US citizenship for many immigrants. Which detail do they find more effective? More engaging? Again, students should keep their audience in mind as they choose and develop details to include in their letter.

Ex 1:

My uncle Nilton was a 17-year-old Cape Verdean when he came to the United States looking for a better life. He was a smart kid with a good heart and a lot of dreams, but he struggled a lot as an immigrant. Even though he finished high school with a 4.0 GPA, he couldn't go to college because he had overstayed his visa. He felt sad and disappointed with the situation knowing that he had American friends who went to Harvard. After high school, he started working at McDonald's at the age of 19. Many members of his family were talking about going back to Cape Verde, but he was the only one who didn't want to go because he was determined to make it.

Ex 2:

In Boston, there could be up to 180,000 undocumented immigrants, many of them good Cape Verdean people like my uncle. Did you know that there are more Cape Verdeans living abroad than the 500,000 who live on the islands? (4) It is crucial that we find a way to resolve this issue so that good people can stay in this country, even if they are undocumented. One way to do this is to provide them a path to citizenship.

Step 4 (10 Minutes)

STEP 5: The Closing

If a strong opening grabs the reader's attention, a strong closing leaves the reader with a lasting impression. An effective conclusion can be the difference between inaction and inspiring real change. As students get ready to conclude their letter, ask them to return to their purpose for writing — what do they want their reader to do, feel, or think about? The conclusion should remind their audience of that purpose in a new, perhaps unexpected, way. Introduce three ideas for closing a letter:

- **Close with a call to action:** What do you want your reader to do? Be clear, keep it specific, and make it achievable. For example, you can urge your older brother to register to vote or call upon your state representative to vote against a bill.
- **Reframe your position in a new light:** if you've already shared a personal story in your letter, think about relating the same idea from a different perspective or viewpoint in which your reader could relate.
- **Share gratitude for past action or support:** When possible, acknowledge examples of past support from your reader and explain why their support was meaningful.

Step 5 (20 Minutes)

STEP 6: Revision

Ask students to refine their letter using one or more of the revision tips below:

- **Cut the clutter:** To hold your reader's attention, make sure every word counts. Search your letter for words to cut and sentences to make more concise.
- **Strong verbs:** Circle all of the verbs in your letter. Replace any weak, general verbs with strong and precise ones.

- **They say / I say:** Strong writers don't only effectively communicate their point of view; they anticipate and address the views of others. Imagine your letter in the hands of your audience. What might they say or do in response? Write down a response from their point of view, then go back to your letter to add a counterargument that addresses their likely response.

Step 6 (10 Minutes)

Conclusion: Visioning the Future

To close the lesson, ask students to share, either verbally or by adding to a class list, the most urgent call to action from their letters. After the group shares, ask: Can you imagine a future where all of your calls to action are answered? Why or why not? In addition to delivering their letters, what can they do to move closer to that future?

Finally, if you're able to provide envelopes and stamps for students who opt to physically mail their letters, make space for students to sign, address, and get their letters prepped to send!