

Letters Writing as a Part of Language Learning



Creator: Dubravka Subotic

Age of students: all ages

The focus of this text is on using letter as a tool for language learning. In contexts of to whom, where and why someone is writing text, language will vary. This is a playful way for students to explore and learn practice of letter writing.

It was December, and I was taking a bus with my 7-year-old son. While we were waiting the bus, we found a Christmas postcard with no name on it. We decided to read it.

hymysi tarttumassa kuin lumi oksaan

Lovely little red bird on snow covered brunch was hand drawn on one side and joyful easy reading handwritten text on the other side. Luckily this was one of those days when we had some time to spend and we were talking about who made it and about who should take it. My child kept talking about the card and wanted to show it next day to his younger brother. What an amazing teaching tool, I was thinking to myself, and started developing this method.



Why write letters?

Writing letters is an art and craft that has been practiced for millennia. It can be practical or emotional. Written words are giving material value to our thoughts. It's making them finalized and giving us opportunity to make moments last forever. It's making us strong and vulnerable as we don't know where and with whom our words and thoughts will end up. Letter is giving us all control and time to express ourselves and rethink every word we put down but is cutting us off opportunity to see reactions of receiver and adjustment to it. In my experience, children love receiving letters. Journey to the mailbox is something we do at our home with big expectations and it brings us so much joy.

The aim of a letter can be

1. Expressing oneself
2. Preserving memories
3. Show our gratitude
4. Talking to future
5. Asking for help
6. Expressing admiration
7. Offering encouragement
8. Leaving a legacy
9. Sending little gifts
10. Replaying to the letter

The aim of the language learning through the letters can be

1. Learning about language and word used by different groups
2. Dialects
3. Handwriting styles
4. History of language
5. Biography of different people
6. Historical events
7. Advocacy
8. Writing text from the text

How to write letters?

Letters are usually individual expression of opinions and experience. But when I teach letter writing, I like to support group work, as in this situation students must think over every word and argue using of it over some other word. Also, by writing in group text is losing personal level and it is easier to present and later play with it. It is important to remember who the person is we are writing for and what words and what kind of language they can understand.

Handwriting style has changed over time, for example some letters have gotten a new shape. In some languages both, the words and spelling, has changed over time. This can offer a chance to look further into history of writing: calligraphy is art of its own that can be explored. You can point to the students that we all have different handwriting styles, for example a doctor and a small child do not write the same way. Understanding of this can help your students to get into the character and understand it better.

You can also play with the material of the letter: what paper do you use, what is the color of it, and could you make your own paper?

For example, you can write a letter to

- Grandparents
- Character in the book
- Author of the book
- Someone from history, maybe some king or kid your age who was living in the past
- Scientist whose discovery you are learning about at a moment
- Artist who made significant painting or sculpture
- Composer of classical music whose sonata you are learning to play
- Any public institution
- Future you

You can also write reply to an existing letter

- Letter from antique shop- inventing characters and writing about them
- Old letters students have found at home
- Letters you find in books
- Letters from historical persons, international and local
- Open letters from public persons

Or you can play and write letter in character

- As a scientist about to discover something that is still not published
- As a famous person (e.g. musician who is waiting for their big concert in 2 days)
- As an athlete who is about to compete for gold in Olympic Games
- As a future president
- As a fighter for ecological rights

It's important to motivate students to take active role in the community. It's basic children's rights to take part in decision making that are considering them and their surroundings. For example, Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex, wrote at the age of 11 to Procter & Gamble to gender neutralize a dishwashing soap commercial on national television. Three months later, P&G changed the commercial.

Example: Letter to grandparents

In this exercise, focus is on intergeneration communication. This is easy exercise and can be done with students of any school age with some adaptations.

Main steps in exercise

1. Situation that triggered writing the letter
2. Development of character who is writing the letter
3. Development of character who is receiving the letter
4. Writing the letter from point of the first character
5. Reading the letter from point of other character
6. Writing reply to the letter from the point of the second character: writing text from the text
7. Reading second letter

Start: Explain task to the students and divide them into groups.

Event: Tell your students to choose any event that really had happen. It can be from this morning on the way to the school, weekend at home or from lunch or lesson at school. This will be the topic of their letter. If you are working with older students, event can be something you were talking about, they saw on television or connected to the subject or book you are using at a moment.

Writing the letter: Choose between strict or wide guidelines. The more structure in the letter you prearrange, the easier it will be to work and play with it.

Pay attention to the students that grandparents to whom they are writing are older people, that for letters must be nicely written for them to read. Remind your students to use words that grandparents understand (do they know the latest videogames?). Challenge your students to find the words how to express they thoughts to the grandparents.

Receiving and reading of the letter: Exchange the letters between groups or classmates, so they would not read and answer to their own letter. From now on, students are stepping into the characters.

Who are the grandparents: You can talk about grandparents of your students, but you can also invent some characters, or talk about historical characters. This is important from the point of the language learning. Words we are using now are not same that have been used 50 or 150 years ago. Older people are talking in a different way than kids and we can see their age and education level in the way they are writing.

Questions to ask about grandparents (fictional or real)

- How old are they?
- Where are they living?
 - Are they from the same area as we are right now?
 - What about if they are from different country?
- What are they doing?
- Do they have the same values as us now?
- How would we write if we know they will not approve our action? And how if we know they will be happy about our adventure?
- Do they understand our words if we have same language but different dialect?
- Do they understand what we are talking about? Computers, Internet, Tik Tok, elevator, sushi, Fortnite?
- Would it be same letter if we are writing to the grandfather or grandmother?
- How educated they are? How should we adapt our language to this?
- What are they wearing?
- Are they funny or strict?
- Is this the first letter they have received in long time or not?
- Who are we to them?

Please take care of the time you have for this task and age of your students. This is list of suggestions that you can select from or you can use as an inspiration to make your own questions. Encourage deeper conversation by asking why they think grandparent is like this.

Writing the reply as a character: Thinking about all above, guide your students to become grandma or grandpa who received letter. Let them write their reply to the letter they received. Remind your students to have fun and be sharp, since they are now picturing themselves as an 80-year-old. As students are not writing letter as themselves, they can explore and revile more than usual. They may use language that is not proper, but this is living language they have heard from older generation and it is something we should value in language learning. Encourage your students to explore their new character!

Reading of the reply as a character: Student who is reading their reply letter should do it in character. First let your students think what kind of voice this grandparent has and do they have an accent. How the grandparents are reading it (easily or word by word, for example)? Maybe you can build character by using object that is characteristic to them (spectacles, etc.).