

## Literacy Tips



Tips for middle school educators on various topics such as grammar, writing, reading, spelling, vocabulary, cooperative learning and more.

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### Tip #78: Letter Writing

You have survived testing week and hopefully your students feel successful with their performance. Now is a really good time to look for teaching opportunities that distract us all from the anxiety connected to high-stakes testing. This week's email tip addresses the performance standards for reading and writing but with a lot of humor mixed in. And we all need a bit of humor to help us unwind.

Let's tackle letter writing. Is it in the grade level expectations? You bet. Additionally, there are GLEs that deal with revision and editing, which are taught ongoing in all of our classrooms.

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#### ***Book Pass***

Ask your librarian to pull a set of 30+ books from the shelves that combine letter writing and literature. You will be amazed at what is out there from such classics as the picture book *The Jolly Postman* by Allan Ahlberg to the young adult novel *Letters from Rifka* by Karen Hesse. If you haven't seen *Love Letters* by Arnold Adoff, you are going to definitely want to include it. [Use the Book Pass strategy](#) to allow everyone in the class a minute or two to preview each book. Randomly distribute a book to each student. Arrange desks in a circle. Use a stopwatch allowing 1-2 minutes of viewing time, and then have students pass books to the right. In a half-hour, students can survey 15 - 20 books. Use a Book Pass form and ask students to record observations or things they don't want to forget about the books they saw. Allow time at the end for a whole class discussion. Find out the background knowledge of your students' understanding of writing friendly letters and/or business letters.

#### ***Inside Writing***

Do you need a 2-week stand-alone unit that explicitly teaches students how to write and format business letters? *Inside Writing* is an excellent resource that uses the six traits, rubrics, student models, and a step-by-step process to reach the struggling writer. If you haven't used one of these nine *Inside Writing*



units yet this year, this might be a good opportunity to do so. A "canned" program? Absolutely, but this way you do not need to spend valuable time reinventing the wheel. Check with your department chair for where these resources are located in your school. There is a letter writing unit at each grade: 6th (teal), 7th (purple), and red (8th).

### ***Six Parts of a Business Letter***

The *Write Source 2000* has a mini-unit, too. Look at pp. 241 - 250. To begin with, students learn the six parts of a business letter: heading, inside address, salutation, body, closing, and signature. A "brain-compatible" way to teach this is by preparing six different informational slips of paper with these parts and explanations on them. Color-coding the paper makes group work even easier.

[Attached are blackline masters you can use](#) that list the six parts of the business letter and their functions. Make multiple copies of each attachment and slice apart.

Randomly pass out a slip of paper to each student and tell them to read it over and be prepared to teach the information to others in the room. (Some of these excerpts are longer than others, so place those strategically into the hands of your more fluent readers.) Tell students to re-read it at least three times and then try to subvocalize what they might say to others in the room about the topic. This rehearsal time is essential to level the playing field in your class with the various abilities represented.

After students are experts on their letter part, challenge them to form groups with the six different parts of a letter represented. If you have color-coded the paper, students only have to seek out others with different colors. If you have not color-coded the paper, students walk around discovering who has what letter parts as they try to form a group of six. Once groups are formed, students

proceed in the order of a letter. The student expert on the heading goes first, followed by the student expert on the inside address, etc. Send them back to their seats to silently read p. 242 that reviews all six letter parts.

This cooperative learning strategy, jigsawing, covers a lot of information in a short amount of time and gets students out of their seats moving around. Because students are responsible for each other's learning, ownership in the activity rises. *If I have to teach my part of the letter and face my peers, then I am going to try that much harder.*

To show mastery on this skill, have students create their own business-letter sampler showing proficiency in three kinds of business letters: a request letter (p. 248), a letter stating a problem (p. 249), and an application letter (p. 250). Ask students to choose their best effort and then teach them the rules for addressing envelopes. Provide postage for students (ask the PTSA?) and have them mail this letter. Over the next week or so, keep track of the responses that students get back.

### ***Letters with a Twist***

There are a number of authors who have published books of letters based on the premise of writing to large corporations using pseudonyms. These collections are extremely funny and will hook even your most reluctant students. A word of caution! These books typically aren't categorized as teen or adult, so you will have to preview the material carefully in advance. I have used the *Lazlo Letters* by Don Novella with great success. Use Post-It notes to flag the letters of highest interest. For example, the letters going back and forth to McDonald's is a great place to begin. Don't expect all related letters to be next to each other. Many are interspersed throughout the book as the time between correspondence lengthens. Don Novella has two more



volumes of politically oriented letters out that might interest more mature readers.

*Idiot Letters* by Paul Rosa was well received by my 8th graders. I have not used *Letters from a Nut* by Ted L. Nancy, but it falls into this same genre of writing sometimes referred to as "prank letters." Jerry Seinfeld writes the introduction to the book causing many readers to speculate that he really is Ted L. Nancy. There are two more books in this series. Finally, preview *Wilbur Winkle Has a Complaint* by Wilbur Winkle. It, too, is a book of complaint letters written back and forth to large corporations.

The term "prank letters" bothers me enough that I probably wouldn't share that label with students. The *Lazlo Letters* was written in 1977 and has an authentic sounding voice to it. These later copycat books seem to get more and more exaggerated and outrageous causing readers to question their quality and even the humor.





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## **The Inside Address**

The inside address gives the name, title, and address of the person or organization you are writing to.

- If the person has a title, make sure you include it. (If the title is short, write it in the same line as the name, separated by a comma. If the title is long, write it on the next line.)
- If you are writing to an organization or a business, but not a specific person, begin the inside address with the name of the organization or business.

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## **The Salutation**

The salutation is the greeting. Always insert a colon after your salutation.

- Use Mr. or Ms. Plus the person's last name. Do not guess at Miss or Mrs.
- If you don't know the name of the person who will read your letter, use a salutation like one of these:
  - Dear Store Owner:
  - Dear Sir or Madam:
  - Dear Burlington Little League
  - Attention: Customer Service

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## **The Body**

The body is the main part of the letter. It should have single-spaced paragraphs with double spacing between each one. (Do not indent the paragraphs.) If the letter is longer than one page, make a heading on the second page. List vertically the reader's name, Page 2, and the date at the top left-hand margin.

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