



A letter to you

Letter-writing is a significant element of our current and future literacy expertise. There are also deep literary, historical and geographical meanings associated with the writing – or construction – of letters and messages.

For young children, the writing and receiving of a letter is a visible social application of the power of communication, and the skills required. It provides practice in purposeful composing and responding to text.

The early years classroom

Keep the focus on the communication, the message. Provide the necessary materials and opportunities for students to understand the fundamentals of literacy.

When: early in the year, and once a term, allocate a week/fortnight for focusing on letter-writing. This may be at a specified time, or children may be able to choose for themselves as



part of daily activities, and post letters when completed. Collection and distribution of letters can be formalised with a set time for the mail to be delivered from the post-box.

Why: children are generally familiar with the sending and receiving of letters and cards from home. Letter-writing can have a familiar and authentic context for children writing.

The more school literacies mirror real life or new literacies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), and are introduced as a natural extension of what a child has learned within their home and preschool community the more likely a child will be motivated to master school literacies, of which learning to write is one part.

Mackenzie 2011 p. 322

Who: all students in the class, the class teacher. Others can join in to receive and respond: support personnel, the Principal, librarian, office staff, canteen helpers, ground staff, bus drivers, and parents.

Where: a dedicated writing space in the classroom, where materials are always on hand.

What: any/all of the following:

- examples of real letters – written by the teacher to the students; thank you/birthday cards, telling parents what we saw/heard/did/learned today; books about letter-writing (see link in Online Resources below)
- papers/envelopes of different colours, sizes, textures, shapes; envelopes with windows
- pencils, pens, felt-tip pens of different colours, grades, thicknesses
- date stamp – adjustable; rulers
- list of names of students in the class, and the teacher's name
- stickers/stamps for sending letters – Australia Post ones are usually rectangular
- post box – labelled, with the time that letters are to be posted by – negotiated with students
- letter cards to support early letter formation if children want to use them

Keep the focus on the message. This is not the time for a writing or a handwriting lesson.

Prioritising letters and word, print conventions and accuracy could be making the writing process unnecessarily difficult for some children and ignoring the research which reports

strong, reciprocal relationships between drawing and writing particularly during writing acquisition.

Mackenzie 2011 p. 324-325

Stage 2 classroom

The more formal layout for traditional letter-writing can be introduced, as well as some of the formalities of emails. Both handwritten and word processing formalities can be taught.

Make it fun, and draw on students' imaginations for ideas.

While some of the rigidity has gone from business letters, there are still relatively strict letter formatting conventions. See Resources (below)

Stage 3 classroom

Teach formal letter-writing formats. Make opportunities for students to use them.

Explore Twitter's limit of 280 characters – what can you say in that limit?

Teach email conventions and courtesies. Try [here](#) for information to sort and share with students. See Resources (below)



Ideas for writing:

- Write letters to the natural world – the wind, the moon, the sky, the rain; a tree in the playground, the plants in the gardens; tie ‘letter ribbons’ to plants on windy days – but always clean up after yourselves
- Write a letter to the school - a building, a path, the library, to former students/teachers/ principal
- Link letter-writing with a book being read – write to a character, to the author (usually contactable through the publisher), invite the author to your school and prepare and include questions students would like answered; to the librarian; to another class recommending or not
- Write a letter to any of the school personnel thanking them for what they do
- Write to themselves in a letter that is to be sealed and kept – like a time capsule – until the end of the school year; add to the stash each year and open them at the end of Year 6.

Broaden the scope for older writers:

- write to previous teachers, or figures from history; use historical or geographical contexts for letters (as in the tried but tired ‘Letter from the Goldfields’)
- explore the ways letters have been used to find out about the sea currents with ‘drift bottles’
- investigate stories about [letters in bottles](#)
- work out ways we could write letters and have them delivered without polluting the oceans or the air
- investigate the ‘messages’ sent into space with Voyager 2. Check [NASA](#). [This blog](#) includes the list of sound recordings. Track Voyager 1 & 2 to see where they are. Write to NASA and to our own space stations at [Parkes](#), or any one of the other [41 stations](#).
- follow and communicate with the [International Space Station](#). In these troubled times it is so good to see another example of international cooperation.



Reflection

What is the magic of letter-writing? I have recently had the opportunity to engage in a bit of personal letter-writing with some of my neighbours. It began with my invitation, and I followed-up with a 'thank you for visiting' letter.

Then this:

PLEASE SEND SOME MORE MESSAGE CARDS WHEN YOU HAVE THE TIME LOVE T

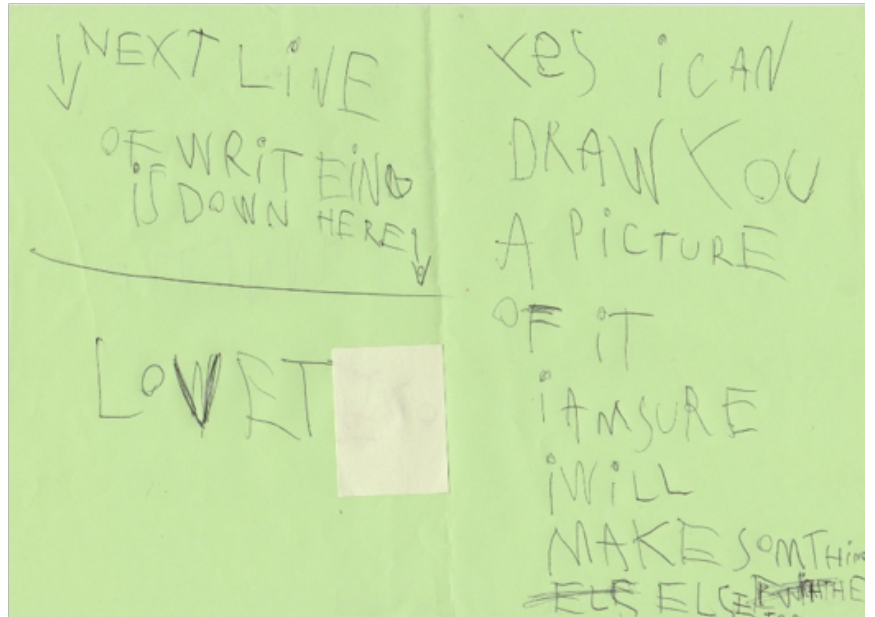
I sent some boxes for building structures, and tape, with a comment that I was sure they could make something interesting,

THANK YOU SOOO MUCH FOR THE BOXES i AM BUILDiNG A CARDBOARD ARCADE LOVE T



The formalities of the letter itself are being observed, starting with 'Dear ...' and finishing with 'love'. The letters include maps, drawings, invented games and reflections.

Children's writing must be purposeful. These children are creating their own reasons for writing, by extending for different purposes. The skill of the letter-writer is increasing, and the awareness of audience is strong.



I am particularly impressed with the instructions regarding navigating the text.

Online Resources

Australian Curriculum: [English: Sequence of content F-6 Strand: Literacy](#) Pages 10-14 *Texts and the contexts in which they are used.*

An excellent list of books about and involving letter-writing (many of which will be in the school library) is in [Good Reads](#)

[Australian Government content guide](#). The Australian Government Style Guide is currently being digitized

Wikihow provides a solid reference point for your information, including typical layouts and formats at [Write a Letter](#)

A set of lesson plans (not necessarily directly applicable to our students) is at [Reading Rockets](#)

Historical, Biblical and other significant correspondence references can be explored by students

References

Mackenzie, N. (2011) *From drawing to writing: What happens when you shift teaching priorities in the first six months of school?* in *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* Vol. 34, No. 3, 2011, pp. 322–340

