

LETTER TO A PUBLIC OFFICIAL

LESSON PLAN



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Teacher Overview: After discussing several national issues using *Close Up In Class* resources, students will choose one of the issues most important to them and write a letter to a public official about that issue. Students will examine a sample letter and analyze the different components in the letter. Students will then identify which public official is best positioned to influence their chosen issue. In their letters, students will explain the issue, their stance on the issue, and what they would like to see done about the issue.

Goal: Students will write a letter to a public official about a national issue and make persuasive recommendations.

Rationale: This activity is designed to help students consider how to persuade a public official about a current policy issue. Students will need to consider the best arguments to support their position and why the issue should matter to the official. Students will do research to determine the best person to contact. This activity will help foster the skills and dispositions needed for active and engaged citizenship.

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Citizenship Skills and Actions: Communicating and promoting interests.

Materials: Attachment 1A: Sample Letter to a National Public Official; Attachment 1B: Sample Letter to a Local Public Official; Attachment 2: Guidelines for a Letter to a Public Official; Attachment 3: Outline for a Letter to a Public Official; Attachment 4: Seven Skills and Practices that Contribute to Democratic Citizenship

Procedures: Before completing this activity, the class should have read at least one *Current Issues* discussion from the *Close Up in Class* library. When doing this activity, you could either have the entire class write about one issue or have students choose the issue they are most interested in.

Introduction (15 minutes)

- Explain to students that they will be using the information they have learned to write a persuasive letter to a public official. Citizens write to public officials to make their voices heard, and letters are often one of the most effective ways to persuade officials.
- Place students in groups, and distribute either Attachment 1A: Sample Letter to a National Public Official or Attachment 1B: Sample Letter to a Local Public Official. In their groups, have students read the sample letter and then answer the following questions:
 - Who is the author writing to?
 - What issue is the author writing about?
 - What is the author's position on the issue?
 - What reasons does the author give for their position?

Main Learning Activity (40 minutes)

- Staying in the same groups, explain to students that they will soon be writing their own letters.
- Ask students to discuss the national issues that the class has learned about. Ask them: About which of these issues would you be most interested in writing a letter? Students do not need to come to a consensus, as they will each be writing their own letter.
- Have students briefly discuss their positions about the issue. Have a few students share out to the whole group.
- Have students return to their original seats and explain that they will now write their own letters to public officials. (This could be done in conjunction with the Researching Policy Issues lesson.)
- Hand out Attachment 2: Guidelines for a Letter to a Public Official. Briefly go over what needs to be included in the letter: a heading, salutation, introduction and statement of purpose, main argument/recommendation, supporting arguments and evidence, closing argument/recommendation, and signature. (Scaffolding option: Either while going over the guidelines or afterward, have students identify each component in the sample letter.)

- Distribute Attachment 3: Outline for a Letter to a Public Official.
- Circulate as students are filling out their template and help students with any missing pieces of information. As students finish the outline, direct them to begin writing their letters.
- If students struggle with who they should address their letter to, you can direct them to the following sites ([House of Representatives](#), [Senate](#)).
- Students should finish their letters for homework and bring in an addressed envelope and stamp when they are due.

Reflection (5 minutes)

- Post Attachment 4: Seven Skills and Practices that Contribute to Democratic Citizenship. What skills did you use while writing your letter?
- Alert students that active and engaged citizens often contact decision-makers to make their voices heard. There are many ways that you can do this, and it is important going forward that you as a citizen continue to make your voice heard.

Optional Extension

- Ask students to bring in any response letters. Have students share the response letters and ask the following questions:
 - How did the official respond to your letter?
 - Did the official agree or disagree with your position? What were their reasons?
 - Did the official indicate whether they would act on your suggestion?
 - Do you believe the official took your ideas and recommendations seriously?



December 15, 2013
The Honorable Patty Murray
154 Russell Senate Office Building
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Murray:

As a scientist and a constituent, I urge you to support an increase in funding for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), bringing funding to at least \$32 billion for FY14. NIH research is the foundation for future medical breakthroughs, which will save lives and money. The federal government's investment in research must be sustained in order to translate today's scientific findings into tomorrow's bedside treatments.

Recent discoveries and achievements, such as those listed below, are a direct result of robust funding for NIH.

- The death rate for heart disease, the leading cause of death in the United States, has dropped 60 percent since 1940.
- Through research to better understand the underlying molecular causes of cancer, NIH research has cut cancer deaths. In 2007, for the first time in history, the number of cancer deaths in the United States decreased.
- In the 1950s, one in five people died within 20 years of diagnosis of type 1 diabetes. Today, those with type 1 diabetes are living longer and healthier lives.
- A type of antibody has been discovered that neutralizes and protects against several subtypes of the flu. This super-antibody may be the key to protecting millions from influenza outbreaks.

The money invested in NIH is redistributed to communities across the nation, including our district and state, to create jobs and stimulate the local economy. In my lab, we have technicians and students who are learning the technical and intellectual skills required for the high-paying jobs of the future. A federal investment in basic research is an investment in the health and economic future of our nation. Please make medical and health research a higher priority for our nation by continuing the investment in NIH.

Thank you for your consideration and please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss this issue further.

Sincerely,

Emma Jones
Seattle Middle School
123 Main Street
Seattle, WA 98101

ATTACHMENT 1B: SAMPLE LETTER TO A LOCAL PUBLIC OFFICIAL



456 Mayor Drive
Wichita, KS 67134

Honorable Mayor Madio Smolanka:

As the coordinator of the Pleasant Rock Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program, I am writing to express my strongest concern over the proposed city funding cuts for the Teen Activities Center (TAC). Closing the TAC would have several negative consequences for the youth of the city and for the city itself. It would give our youth one less place to relax and have a good time in a safe, healthy environment.

The closure of the TAC would have other, more direct consequences as well. Currently, our Teen Mothers' Support Group meets at the TAC on a weekly basis to discuss the challenges of motherhood, finishing school, and finding jobs. More than two-thirds of the 25 participants do not have their own means of transportation; it is therefore imperative that meetings be held in the neighborhood of the participants (the Potwin area, where the TAC is located) or on a major bus route. No public building is nearly as well suited to meet both of these requirements.

In addition, the TAC hosts a variety of activities that are athletic, artistic, or just plain fun for young people. Their ability to participate in these activities is vital to helping them acquire the self-esteem needed to say "no" to potentially unsafe behaviors, such as engaging in sex prematurely or experimenting with drugs. TAC activities also help students gain the skills and attitudes needed to stay in school and prepare for meaningful work.

I urge you to vote against this new proposal to cut the funding for the TAC. Cuts can surely be made elsewhere that will be less harmful to the well-being of our children. If I can help in any way to defeat this proposal, let me know. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mary K. Steinert
East Middle School
123 Main Street
Wichita, KS 67211

ATTACHMENT 2: GUIDELINES FOR A LETTER TO A PUBLIC OFFICIAL



- Obtain the name, title, and address of the official who will make the decision about your issue. Make sure that all names are spelled correctly and that you have the proper address.
- Begin your letter in an official manner. If the person has a title, you should include it in the opening; if not, you can begin with “Dear ...”
- Explain the purpose of the letter. The reader should immediately know what your letter is about and why this issue is important to you.
- Make a recommendation. What do you think this person should do to address the issue?
- Explain your recommendation on the issue. Why should this person take that particular action?
 - What facts, stories, or reasons do you have to support your position?
 - What impact will this action have on the issue or the people affected by the issue?
- Include a final call to action. Remind the official of the recommendation you are making and summarize your position.
- Close and sign your letter.

ATTACHMENT 3: OUTLINE FOR A LETTER TO A PUBLIC OFFICIAL



Issue: _____

Why is this issue important to you?

What is your recommendation about the issue?

What is the first reason to support your recommendation?

What is the second reason to support your recommendation?

What is the third reason to support your recommendation?

What public official will you address your letter to? Why?

What is the address of the public official to whom you are sending your letter?

ATTACHMENT 4: SEVEN SKILLS AND PRACTICES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP



Acquiring, interpreting, and using information about government, politics, and public policy.

Communicating your views and interests with fellow citizens, community leaders, and public officials regarding public issues.

Making informed judgments by applying standards such as justice, ethics, morality, effectiveness, efficiency, and practicality to evaluate public policy proposals, public institutions, and the actions of public officials.

Making decisions regarding governance or policy issues by developing and choosing between two or more courses of action.

Cooperating with others to achieve mutual goals regarding political situations and policy issues.

Assessing your involvement and the involvement of other stakeholders in political issues and public policy choices; evaluating the implications and consequences of personal and public decisions.

Promoting your interests to decision-makers by doing such things as organizing supporters and working with existing organizations and community leaders.