

Letters About Literature

Read. Be Inspired. Write Back.

A Library of Congress National Reading-Writing Promotion Program

Letters About Literature

Teaching Activity Guide

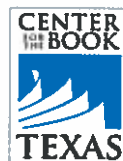
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Adapted from the Library of Congress and Texas Center for the Book's
Letters About Literature Teaching Guide

<https://www.tsl.texas.gov/lettersaboutliterature/resources>



Teacher Overview

Research has shown that children gain greater understanding of what they have read when they are given frequent opportunities to respond to what they've read, especially through writing. The writing response, in turn, helps to develop the students' critical reading and thinking skills. And so the cycle goes—*children who read, write better; children who write, read more*. This reading-writing link is the very heart of the Letters about Literature (LAL) program.

Many students may complain that writing a letter takes too long, that it is an obsolete form of communication. And in fact, a recent Pew Survey noted that among teens texting is now the preferred form of communication—replacing Email and voice mail. (“Teens, Smartphones & Texting,” March 19, 2012) Letter writing does what these other forms of communication cannot—allow the student to develop in detail his or her thoughts, to craft them with language that reflects their voices (rather than texting acronyms and symbols). Letter writing allows students to practice a very important writing skill—targeting a specific audience

Readers enter LAL by writing a letter to an author—living or dead—explaining how that author's work somehow changed the reader's view of the world or self. The program has three competition levels: **Level 1** for grades 4 - 6; **Level 2** for grades 7 - 8; and **Level 3** for grades 9 - 12vaThis teaching booklet has four lessons that take readers from prewriting discussions through writing and assessment. They are:

- **Lesson 1: Focus.** Introduces readers to the concept that books can influence our perception of ourselves and our world.
- **Lesson 2: Inquiry.** Provides activities to help readers explore the unique relationship between themselves, an author, and a book.
- **Lesson 3: Application.** Provides writing tips to help readers shape informative, persuasive letters.
- **Lesson 4: Assessment.** Provides a checklist for editing and rewriting their letters for grammatical correctness and originality.

Taken all together, these lessons and activities plus “writing tips” include:

- What did you learn about yourself either *while reading* or *after reading* this author's work?
- What elements within the book—the author's characters or setting or style of writing, for example—touched you emotionally or influenced your thoughts?
- What insights about the world did this book reveal to you?
- Write honestly and in your own voice, as if you were having a conversation with the author. Those are the best letters to read and the most fun to write! Keep in mind these two tips:
- *Correspond, don't compliment!* Your letter should inform rather than flatter the author. All FAN letters will be eliminated!
- *Do not summarize the book's plot!* Because you are writing to the author, don't tell him or her what they already know—what the book is about! Instead, use clear and relevant details to explain how the author's story affected you, what you learned and felt and understood that you didn't prior to reading the author's work.

NATIONAL AND COMMON CORE STANDARDS

NCTE & IRA Standards

Thousands of teachers have found LAL a valuable classroom project. Each year, the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress receives hundreds of letters from teachers testifying how the program’s theme and guidelines dovetail with state standards for language arts. Listed below are the standards recommended by the National Council of teachers of English and the International Reading Association that apply to the LAL program and recommended teaching activities included in this educational supplement.

OBJECTIVES: *Students will*

- Apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate and appreciate texts.
- Adjust their use of spoken, written and visual language for a variety of audiences and purposes.
- Employ a wide range of writing strategies.
- Apply knowledge of language structure, conventions.
- Participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
- Use spoken, written and visual language to accomplish their purpose.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Grade Level	Text Types & Purposes	Production & Distribution of Writing
4	<p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.1 - Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3 - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique,</p>	<p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.4 - Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.5 With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising and editing.</p>
7	<p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1 - Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.3 - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details and well-structured event sequences.</p>	Same as above

11	<p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3 - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.</p>	Same as above
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What are the judges looking for?

Round 1 (National Level Under Library of Congress)

- **Audience.** Is the essay in letter format and does it address the author of the work? Entries that are not in letter format and are written about the author, rather than to the author, will be eliminated.
- **Purpose.** Does the essay address the contest theme of how an author's work changed the reader's view of self or the world? Is personal reflection evident in the letter? Entries that are book summaries or fan letters will be eliminated.

Letters that meet these criteria advance to Round 2.

Round 2 (National Level Under Library of Congress)

- **Grammatical conventions.** Is the essay written in a clear and organized way with specific details to support the essay's main ideas? Single-paragraph letters and those with significant grammatical errors will be eliminated.
- **Originality.** Does the essay express ideas creatively, communicating a unique or powerful point of view? Letters that are formulaic without evidence of a writer's voice will be eliminated.

Letters that meet these criteria advance to Round 3 (state-level judging.)

Round 3 (State-Level Judging)

- Letters are scored on organization, idea development, conventions and passion/emotional connection.

Final Round

- The top 15, or so letters, in each are sent off to judges via email.
- Those judges are given the same rubric.
- Final decisions are made by averaging the scores from the final judges.

SCORING SUMMARY

Criteria, State Level Scoring	Weak (0)	Average (.5)	Above Average (1)
Organization Value = 1	Writes about rather than to the author, recalling details or reviewing the book.	Acknowledges the author through references to characters and conflicts and/or writing style evident in author's work	Writer uses organizational strategies or literary devices that are particularly well suited to the task. The narrative is well-controlled. Meaningful transitions and strong sentence-to-sentence connections make the letter flow and the letter a joy to read.
Idea Development Value = 1	Uses only simple, obvious statements; generalizes rather than personalizes. No supportive details provided to explain reflection.	Expresses an insightful reflection (observation, interpretation, or anecdote), supported by concrete details	Reveals thoughtful observation, insightful interpretation, or conveys a strong sense of why the book is important to the writer. Concrete, personal details relevant to author's work support statements expressed in the letter.
Language/Conventions Value = 1	Writing is flat, factual without voice; does not attempt to elaborate ideas or elaborates only through repetition of statements	Personality evident through word choice and phrasing; specific, concrete details make the reflection clear to the reader. Errors are persistent and distracting.	Writer's word choice is vivid and expressive. Writer shows age-appropriate control of conventions, such as vocabulary, grammar, etc. Errors do not detract from the overall impact of the letter.
Passion/Emotion Value = 1	Writing feels forced or inauthentic.	Sections of the letter elicit an emotional response	The entire piece creates a strong emotional response in the reader.

Here's an example of a great letter!

Level 1: Grades 4-6

2017 Texas 1st Place Letter – Celina P.

Dear Mr. Mark Haddon,

Your book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* has changed me in a way that is hard to explain in a letter. I am only twelve, so you may be doubtful that I even understood the story. Although something tells me I did understand it because it had such an impact on how I think about the world.

Libraries and bookstores are usually where I find my books, but one night I decided to venture into my mom's room. I cannot tell you how grateful I am that I did because otherwise I wouldn't have picked up the little pale pink book with an upside down dog on the cover and a very long title. The first thing I noticed when I opened the story that would eventually change my perspective on life was the style of your writing. It hit me like a wave crashing onto the shore. When I plucked the novel off the chalky white shelf I was expecting a quick read, but it was truly different from anything I had read thus far. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was powerful enough to keep me turning the pages.

The first night, I was in tears. My parents found me in my room, my hands shaking and my eyes red and puffy, but I was still reading. This is because I realized that this book was more than entertainment; it was a lesson. The message that I grasped was that it is important to be considerate in every situation; and that lesson is still with me today, three months later.

At first, I felt pity for Christopher. He could not understand feelings, and I don't know what I would do if I didn't experience excitement, happiness, fear, love, and hatred every day. But then I looked at it in a different way. His condition was a curse and a gift. Christopher always spoke the truth. He lived life logically, and he didn't let his emotions distract him from his thoughts.

Then the gears of a dusty machine in the back of my head clicked into place, and I tried to imagine a life where everyone was truthful, and no one let their feelings cloud their mind. I love math, so I already thought logically, but I am always sugarcoating what to say to other people. I mean, I wouldn't want to hurt anyone's feelings. But if we were all like Christopher and spoke what was really on our minds, I think we would have a more efficient way of living.

Then there is the downside of that theory. If we had no emotions, we wouldn't have excitement, happiness, fear, love, and hatred. In my opinion, the absence of those emotions would be a large price to pay for any amount of efficiency.

These beliefs are only part of the lesson that your book has taught me. There are two sides to everything, no matter how hard you try to make something good or bad. There will always be the reverse side to an action, and I think that is some extremely valuable advice.

The other message your book has taught me is how important it is to be empathetic. Before I read this book, I was nice, but I never thought about what it would be like to live in a situation where no one listened to what I was saying. Throughout the book people were ignorant to Christopher's ideas, even though he was a bright person who was trapped in a dark situation. Today, instead of wondering why someone is acting different, I wonder what is going on, and if they need help. I am eager to assist anyone, even strangers, now that I know how hard it is to be special.

I have a cousin named James who has a condition similar to Christopher's. I have never really understood what made him operate differently. Reading this book has helped me better understand him, and that is very important to me. I want to let you know how grateful I am that I can now make this connection with James and try to make him feel more comfortable around me.

These are only a few lessons that I took away from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. I know there are more, so many that I couldn't even identify them all. The best I can do is tell you that I felt enlightened after reading your book. And now I have a better understanding of life. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Celina P.

LESSON 1: FOCUS. Use this activity to introduce students to the Letters about Literature theme that books are more than entertainment; they are windows to understanding our society, other cultures and ourselves.

Level II: Worksheet B—Books that Make You Think, Books that Make You Feel

PROCEDURE

- Warm up by asking students to list a book or books they remember reading as a very younger child, or a book they remember an adult reading to them. List these on the chalkboard or overhead projector. Ask students to comment on the books. Which were funny? Which were scary? What feelings do they associate with the reading experience—pride in being able to read the book? Affection from a parent or guardian who took time to read to them?
- Next, explore how their reading experiences have changed over time. For example, do they now read to a younger child? Do they prefer a different type of book than when they were younger? No doubt some children and young adults will complain that reading, while once fun, is no longer so. Explore why this may be the case.
- Distribute the reading worksheet identified for each level. Read, then discuss the questions. Answers will vary, but recommended answers are provided below.
- Conclude the activity by explaining the LAL assignment: Students will write a personal letter to an author—living or dead—explaining how that author’s work somehow changed their view of the world or self.

ANSWER KEY

LEVEL II: Books that Make You Think, Books that Make You Feel

In discussing Pynn’s letter, students should identify these emotions: confusion, fear. Thoughts triggered by the book was a realization that the story itself was a warning of what the future might be if society had such things as “release” and forced conformity. In discussing Lindsay’s letter, the students may identify curiosity as an emotion. However, the main focus here is on the idea that life exists on other planets.

LESSON 2: INQUIRY. Use this activity to teach the concept of reader’s response to literature and to begin encouraging students to explore their own reader’s response to a book that has had special meaning to them.

**All Levels: Worksheet D—Correspond, Don’t Compliment!
Worksheet E—Synthesize, Don’t Summarize!**

PROCEDURE

Warm up by writing “Reader’s Response” on the chalkboard or overhead projector. Ask students what the phrase might mean in regard to reading books. Next, write this sentence on the chalkboard or overhead projector: *Not all books are right for all readers.* Ask students to explain what they think this statement means and whether or not they agree with the statement.

- Ask students to select two or three books that have had special meaning for them. They need not share these titles with anyone else in the class. They should write the book titles on a sheet of paper, drawing three columns, one for each title.
- Next, conduct a scaffolding activity by sharing with students the titles of three books that were especially meaningful to you. Draw your columns on a chalkboard or overhead projector. Under each column indicate what your reader's response was then. You might even compare your reader's response then with your response now. By listening to you discuss how you reacted to the books, you provide a model for the students to begin verbalizing their own reader's response.
- Distribute the reading-writing worksheets D and E. Read the excerpts and discuss. Answers will vary but recommended answers are below.

TEACHERS, please note: For younger readers, often the first step toward a reader's response is finding a common denominator between the reader and a character. For example, a child may write: the character has a dog and I have a dog, or perhaps write something along these lines: the character has red hair and I have red hair; the character has a baby brother who annoys me and I have a baby brother who annoys me! **While this is an important recognition, explain that details like these are not really examples of reader's response.** Instead, these details are like a door that invites the reader into the novel to get to know the character better. Younger readers may need help in opening that door and stepping inside to explore what they may have in common with the character beyond these initial details.

☑ Conclude the activity by asking students to select just one book from their list of three to be the subject of their personal letters.

ANSWER KEY

Correspond, Don't Compliment!

1. Compliment. No personal details.
2. Compliment. Emphasize that while the reader-writer is commenting on the book, he or she must include something personal.
3. Compliment.
4. Correspondence. The reader-writer is sharing something personal about himself/herself that relates to the subject matter of the book. The information provided here is something the author would not otherwise know.

Synthesize, Don't Summarize!

1. Synthesizing. The reader-writer weaves a detail from the book into her own life, stating how something Scout valued is something the reader also valued.
2. Summarizing. Emphasize, too, that the reader-writer is not keeping the audience of the letter (the author) in mind. Note how the reader-writer talks *about* the author rather than *to* the author.
3. Synthesizing. The reader-writer eloquently reveals information about self by citing events from the book.
4. Summarizing.

LESSON 3: APPLICATION. Use this lesson and its handouts to guide students through the writing process, specifically in crafting the opening and closing paragraphs of their letter.

All Levels: Worksheet F—The Lead Paragraph

PROCEDURE

- Warm up by reading the opening lines and/or paragraphs of three different books—either fiction or nonfiction. You can also read the opening paragraph from a feature news story, perhaps something from *National Geographic* or a news magazine. Ask students to identify how the writer grabs the reader’s attention. What detail or use of language makes the reader want to know more and therefore read the rest of the chapter or article?
- Explain that narrative hooks are important in both fiction and nonfiction books and articles. Authors often spend a great deal of time working and reworking their opening paragraphs because they know if the readers isn’t hooked early on, the reader may not stick around to read the rest of the story. Relate this information about narrative hooks to their own writing, including their LAL letters.
- Distribute reading-writing worksheet F. Read and discuss the strategies identified for writing narrative hooks.
- Distribute reading-writing worksheet G. Emphasize the importance of both an introduction and a conclusion in writing. The opening may hook the reader, but the conclusion makes some significant point about what has been learned.
- Conclude the activity by reading some closing lines from books or news magazines in order to identify different strategies authors use to bookend their stories.

ANSWER KEY

How to Hook the Reader in 25 Words or Less

1. The reader-writer wanders all over the place. The opening paragraph isn’t focused. To improve, focus on one of the details presented here, perhaps a catchy line from the reader-writer’s own sci-fi story and then attribute its inspiration to the author.
2. The reader-writer provides information available elsewhere—salutation, etc. but also summarizes the theme of the contest. To improve, the reader-writer should either link some interesting detail about his or her school to the book or simply cut this unnecessary information and follow one of the strategies listed above.
3. The opening line is cute but not as powerful or grabby as it could be. To improve, the reader-writer might compare/contrast his or her real-life adventures to Huck’s or focus on some special detail of Huck’s adventure.

LESSON 4: Assessment. Use this activity to introduce students to the Letters about Literature theme.

Level I: Letter Writing Rubric

Levels II, III: Assessment Checklist

PROCEDURE

Warm up by asking students to imagine how judges will assess the letters submitted. Ask:

Do you think the judges read every letter?

What do judges look for in a winning letter?

Why might a judge eliminate a letter?

- Ask students to work in pairs or groups of three or four. Distribute writing worksheet H. Read the opening passages and ensure students understand the reasons why writers’ words become

tied or tangled or simply unclear or unnatural. Then ask students to complete the activity as a group. Recommended answers are below.

- Distribute either the rubric (Levels I, II) or the Assessment Checklist (Levels II, III).
- Give students the opportunity to work individually if they prefer to keep their letter private or in pairs if they are comfortable sharing their letters with another student. Students will read their letters, checking for specific points listed on the worksheet.
- Conclude the activity by asking students to revise their letters for final submission.

LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE SEASONAL GUIDE

Letters About Literature Seasonal Guide

Fall	Spring
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teach simple curriculum by Halloween*	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• State Winners are chosen (by TLA)• Texas First Place Winners receive \$100 and are invited to attend the Texas Library Association Annual Conference for awards ceremony (In Dallas, April 3-6)• Awards Ceremony held during Texas Association of School Librarians Meeting at TLA
Winter	Summer
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Deadlines for entries (2017/18 letters due by Jan. 12)• Judging takes place at the National Levels (January)• Judging at Texas State Library (during February)• State finalists are submitted for final round (Mid-late February)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• National Winners Announced. National Winners received \$1,000 and travel assistance to the National Book Festival in Washington D.C.

Books that Make You Think, Books that Make You Feel



Some books challenge your brain. Others touch your heart. Some books do both!

What book have you read lately that got you thinking about things you never thought about before? What book's character made you shiver in fear or shake with laughter, clench your fists or want to hug your kid brother? What one, special book was so powerful it became a part of YOU?

Thinking and feeling are two sides of the same "brain" coin. Exploring how and why you respond to a book—either through thoughts or emotions—is a key to understanding yourself.

Below are excerpts from two winning letters from past LAL contests. After reading each excerpt, discuss what thoughts or emotions they trigger in the readers.

Dear Mrs. Lowry,

... with each passing paragraph, each turned page, each new chapter, I realized *The Giver* was different. I couldn't understand why your characters had no recollection of animals. I didn't understand the Ceremonies of Age. I didn't understand what was meant by Release. Release. When I got to that part of your book, I became frightened . . . I have a younger sister. I reread the passage, hoping I had interpreted it wrongly. But your chilling words were still on the page. . . .

It wasn't until the end that I realized this book was a warning to this generation and to the next, to ten generations from now and 100 generations from then. It is up to us to make sure that our children's children will always be able to ride a sled down a snowy hill. . . .

R. Pynn, Brooklyn, NY

Dear Mr. Steator,

I believe there must be 'creatures' living on other planets, and frequently argue this point with friends. Your book *Interstellar Pig* made me think so hard it was difficult to concentrate on anything else. I'm not going to tell you how well written or how much fun your book is. I really want to tell you what went on in my mind as I read it and how I reacted.

Even though I am a 12-year-old girl, I felt like the main character, a teenage boy. When Barney played the interstellar game, I whispered where he should move next. When he was fighting off the extraterrestrials, I was helping him. My mind was in the book, even though my body was not. . . .

Lindsay, Wauwatosa, WI

Directions: Read the Level II national winning letter from LAL 2003 below. What new thoughts or emotions did the books trigger within the reader? After discussing, complete the activity that follows.

Dear Norton Juster,

I noticed one day that I always seemed to be waiting for something; 3:00, the weekend, the summer holidays. I willed the days to go by faster, worked as quickly through my schoolwork as I could to get it over with. I took as many shortcuts as I could get my hands on. School was an enormous bore, and many a time I wondered the point of it all—what use will it ever be to me to learn how many protons there are in an atom of carbon? Is it really so important to understand the difference between a direct object and an indirect object? I began to wonder why I went to school at all.

Then I read *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

In the beginning, Jilo's attitude toward life aggravated me like an itch you can't reach; but as I read on, I began to realize that my own attitude was not all that different. This new spark of thought inspired me to read on. I couldn't help but laugh out loud upon reading Milo's aberrant conversation with the Whether Man, and I so loved the part when the Lethargians described their daily schedule that I had to share it with other people. I tried reading some of the funniest passages aloud to my parents, but they simply nodded and smiled politely before moving on to the next discussion topic. No matter. It certainly didn't discourage me from continuing the book.

Every page was more cleverly written than the last, and I started to carry the novel with me everywhere I went: to the bathroom, to church, to meals. I even stayed up at night, secretly reading under the covers, not to find out the outcome of the plot but to entertain myself with the whimsical ideas, places, and people that Milo met. *The Phantom Tollbooth* is one of the few books I have ever read where I didn't skip over paragraphs, eager to find out how the story would resolve itself; the journey itself was much more important than the end. I got to thinking that perhaps the book itself was symbolic of life.

I found myself in a position where I was dreading reaching the back cover. The end would mean no more adventures, no more fascinating people to meet, no more clever plays on words. However, all good things come to an end, and *The Phantom Tollbooth* was no exception. When I had read the very last word of the very last page, I sat still for a moment to bask in the brilliance of it all, and then opened the book again to the beginning to see if perhaps it had magically been transformed into a sequel. When I found that this was not true, I flipped through the book reading my favorite parts again and searching for any paragraphs I had by chance missed.

Overall, your book taught me a lesson, and a valuable one at that. I learned that every moment of the day is precious, and that once time passes, it won't come back. Life is short. We might as well enjoy it while we can. I've been walking with a new bounce in my step, and when outside, lifting my face to the sunlight and breathing in the great scent of life. With the help of *The Phantom Tollbooth*, I've realized that every second of the day holds so much opportunity, and great things are just waiting to happen. Thank you.

Yours truly,

Frances Choi

ACTIVITY

Step One. Select a book you read that had special meaning for you.

Step Two. On a sheet of paper, draw two columns. Label one THOUGHTS and the other EMOTIONS. In the first column, list specific details from the book that triggered a new realization or way of thinking about someone or someplace or something. In the second column, list specific details from the book that triggered your emotions.

Step Three. Draw conclusions about the information you listed in both columns. What link did you discover between your thoughts and your emotions and the characters or events in the books? What did you learn about yourself after reading the book?

Correspond, Don't Compliment!

Directions: Read the passage below and then complete the activity that follows.

Sure you liked the book. You might even have loved, adored, or been excited by the author's words. But if your letter is nothing more than a list of compliments then you are missing the purpose of this assignment—to share with the author how his or her work changed your view of the world or yourself. The excerpt below from the opening paragraphs of a letter to Phyllis Whitney is really a fan letter. The student-writer is guilty of complimenting instead of corresponding!

*I am writing this letter to you as a pleased reader. As I dove into your book, *Sea Jade*, I felt both humbled and inspired. Sometimes I feel confused at how an author can pack so much emotion into one small book. It's like a new world is opened at just the flipping of a page. Speaking from a future author's point of view, I can tell you your book was a great creation. Yours was truly a wonderful tale of adventure, excitement, and wonder*

that I found incredible. Good job! Keep writing!

How do you correspond instead of compliment? The key is reader's response. A response can be many things: a feeling not felt before, a memory, or an action taken as a result of reading. It can also be a sudden understanding or insight. The author's words pull the chain on the light bulb inside your head and you go, Aha!

Identifying your reader's response is the first step. The next step is to share it by explaining it, describing it, putting it into your own words.

The writer of the letter above knows *Sea Jade* had a powerful effect on her but she fails to express what that effect is. For example, she could have told Phyllis Whitney why she felt humbled or what action she was inspired to take. In short, the writer didn't develop her ideas.

ACTIVITY

Determine if the passages below are fan letters or thoughtful correspondence. For each passage that compliments instead of corresponds, suggest ways to weave reader-response details into the paragraph.

1. I have always read your books and love them dearly. It's unbelievable to me that in your lifetime you wrote so many books that are so good. They recently came out with the movie, "The Grinch," after one of your books. Your books are so funny! I love how you make up words instead of using plain words. *(to Dr. Seuss)*
2. Your diary has become a world classic. It has enriched us with human spirit. It reminds the people of the terrifying horrors that the Jews faced in 1942 and how bleak their future was. *(to Anne Frank)*
3. Your book *the Last Shot* was the most intriguing book on the inner city that I have ever read in my life. The plot was spectacular and I could see the scene in my head. You described the characters with absolute perfection. I never thought that someone could make a book about recruiting high school players in an inner city of New York so fascinating. *(to Darcy Frey)*
4. My cousin died at the age of 11 from cancer six years ago. He was my best friend, hero, and companion. We were close cousins, and I always thought that we would be together. This left me devastated for months. I kept all of my feelings concealed as if I caught a firefly, put it in a jar, and never let it fly. Six years later, my feelings were still as raw and painful as the night I got the call. When our teacher explained what the book *Bridge to Terabithia* was about, I knew it would bring back many sad, depressing, and awful memories, but I had to be strong. We started reading your book that day. *(to Katherine Paterson)*

Synthesize, Don't Summarize!

Directions: Read the passage below and then complete the activity that follows.

Writing a letter to an author may seem awkward. After all, the author knows nothing about you. You may at first be tempted to prove to the author that you read his or her book by summarizing what happened. But think about it. The author wrote the book. He or she already knows what the book is about. What the author doesn't know is how the book affected you.

The two passages below are from letters written to Daniel Keyes, author of *Flowers for Algernon*. The first passage tells the author what happens in the book. The second passage tells the author how the reader responded to what happened. Which passage do you think the author would find more interesting to read?

Passage A

Two scientists discovered Charlie in a high school reading class. They decided he was an ideal candidate for a new operation they had been trying on a lab mouse they called Algernon. The operation had greatly improved the intelligence of the mouse and the scientists believed there was a good chance

the operation would raise Charlie's intelligence, too.

Passage B

In your book, Charlie works in a bakery with uneducated workers who show no sympathy for his condition. They laugh and snicker at Charlie. At times, I've been made fun of and it hurts to the point where I want to strike out. Charlie laughed with those who mocked him. He thought they were his friends. Unlike Charlie, however, I have the ability to realize the difference between good-natured teasing and mocking.

To summarize means to recall details. To synthesize, however, means to combine one or more ideas into one written presentation. In Passage B, the reader combines a detail about Charlie's life with a detail about his own life. The result is a more interesting piece of writing, one the audience (in this case, the author) would find interesting but also informative. **This is one key to good writing: Always keep the audience in mind!**

ACTIVITY

Read each passage and determine if the writer is summarizing or synthesizing. For each passage that summarizes, suggest ways the author can weave reader-response details into the paragraph.

1. I was enraged when Scout's teacher told her that she wasn't allowed to read anymore. I felt this way because reading is so valuable to me, and it's a way of escaping from my troubles. Reading is so important, and this part of your story showed me that. *(to Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird)*
2. *Night* is a true story. Elie Wiesel and his family were split up and transported from the Jewish ghetto which had been their town to Auschwitz. He and his father fought for freedom and survival. *(to Elie Wiesel, Night)*
3. I have never been to California, never seen the great golden valleys nor the verdant peach orchards or fields of burgeoning grapes. I have never moved from my small community, certainly never ridden across half the nation through cold rain and sweltering heat in an overloaded jalopy. I have never questioned the fact that there would be food, and plenty of it upon our table, and a house, all our own, above our heads. *(to John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath)*
4. Harry has strong ties to his family. He feels love and affection for them and always thinks about them. Harry is a boy with strength. He conquers all that comes his way. When the evil sorcerer Voldemort is mentioned, Harry shudders at his name. *(to J.K. Rowling)*

The Lead Paragraph—How to Hook the Reader in 25 Words or Less!

Directions: Read the passage below and then complete the activity that follows.

In a news story, it's called a lead. In a novel, it's the prologue; in a TV screenplay, the teaser. No matter what you call it, the introduction is one of the most important parts in a piece of writing. If the opening is boring or unfocused, too long or too short, the reader won't bother to read any further. An effective opening, on the other hand, delivers a one-two punch: It grabs the reader's attention and it suggests the main idea or theme of the story to follow.

Dear Bette Green,

*Some people stay the same after reading a book. But your hook tossed my brain all around. The risk you took in writing *The Drowning of Stephen Jones* makes me want to take a risk . . . change the way I think. That's why I'm in this facility. I've had trouble changing. Because of books like yours, I now want to speak out against racism and people who hate people without even knowing them.*

David

David's letter surprised the judges twice. First, his use of language caught our attention. It was both interesting and conversational. David's phrase *Your book tossed my brain all around* reflects his voice, the

way he might talk to the author if he met her in person.

Second, David revealed something private about himself in writing *That's why I'm in this facility*. We could not resist. We had to read on to learn more. And in fact, David's letter did answer why he had been incarcerated in a juvenile detention center. Sharing something personal about yourself in a letter can be difficult. But that's not the only way to deliver the one-two punch. Three other ways to hook the reader's attention include beginning with:

- an anecdote that relates to a character or event in the book
- a before-and-after comparison
- an interest or quality you share with the author or one of the characters in the book

Example:

It is mere ink on paper. That's all. Just a "by-the-way-I-have-to-remind-Herbert-to-buy-milk-at-the-supermarket" scribble. But it lifts you up and throws you crashing to the ground. By jotting down ideas of life and love into a forty-six line poem you, Andrew, stormed into my safe bedroom chamber and aroused me from my deep sleep. You taught me there is a difference between being alive and living.

—Jane

ACTIVITY—TALK, THEN WRITE

Discuss why the passages below aren't quite as interesting or as focused in theme as those above. Second, rewrite each passage to make it more interesting and more focused. Use one of the suggested "hooks" identified above.

1. My name is Ben and I am a young writer. I write sci-fi and fantasy. I have started to write many stories but have been sidetracked by new ideas. I have to say your book *Wolf in the Shadow* greatly changed the way I write. I like your juicy details. I once started to write a story about a guy who died in Greek times and came back to life in modern times. (to David Gemmel)
2. Hi, I am in ninth grade in Lawrence Middle School. I love to read and to ice skate. In school, we are getting the opportunity to write to an author that wrote a book that inspired us, or changed the way we thought about certain things. I decided to write to you about *Child of the Owl*. (to L. Yep)
3. I know you are busy writing books and everything so this letter won't be very long. I loved your book. I love how Huck went down the Mississippi. Overall, it was really quite an amazing adventure and a good book. (to Mark Twain)

Letter Writing Format & Rubric

RETURN ADDRESS
Harry Maddox
111 Hometown Lane
Searcy, AR 72143

SALUTATION OR GREETING → Dear Natalie Babbitt,

OPENING OR LEAD PARAGRAPH → If given three wishes, I always thought that my last one would be to live forever. That way I would have enough time to do everything I wanted to do and see everything I wanted to see. Living forever seemed like such a good idea, especially when death seems so scary. Reading your book Tuck Everlasting changed the way I think about living forever versus death.

BODY OF SUPPORTING →
While reading the book, I started wondering. At what point in my life would I want to drink from the spring—when would I want to freeze myself? If I drank the water now, at ten years old, I would never get to drive, never vote, and never become a father. All my friends and family would grow old and die and leave me here all alone. If I waited to drink from the spring at twenty-five years old, I would never have wrinkles or bad hips, but I would also never get to go fishing with my grandchildren.

→ No matter at what age I drank from the spring, eventually I would have to move away or hide so that no one would discover my secret. That would be pretty much like dying. I wouldn't want to leave but I would have to leave.

CLOSING OR CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH → I'm thinking that maybe living forever wouldn't be such a good idea after all. God's plan includes a time for everything and an end to life at the right time. I guess I'll rethink the last of my three wishes.

COMPLIMENTARY CLOSE (GOOD-BYE) AND SIGNATURE

Sincerely,
Harry Maddox, Grade 5

Check Point	Wow, You did a great job!	Hey, pretty good. You should be proud.	Oops! You need to do some more work!
Letter format	Your letter has all key parts.	Your letter has most of the key parts.	Your letter is missing some important parts.
Letter content: theme & expression	Your letter explains how a book changed your view of the world or yourself. You use interesting language to make your point.	Your letter tells the author how you reacted when reading the book. Your language is good but could be stronger or more clearly stated.	Your letter is more like a fan letter or a summary of the book's action. Your language is sometimes confusing.
Organization & Grammar	Your letter has a beginning, middle and end. You have no errors!	Your letter is missing one of the key parts: beginning, middle or end. You have some spelling and sentence mistakes.	Your letter is missing two of the three key parts: beginning, middle or end. You have many spelling and sentence mistakes.

Assessment Checklist

Directions: Once you have written your letter, review each point below.

I. Content

- Ⓐ *Purpose.* Does the letter address the essay's theme—describing how a work of literature somehow changed the reader's view of the world or self?
- Ⓑ *Audience.* Does the reader demonstrate knowledge of his or her audience? In other words, is the writer addressing the author and not the teacher?
- Ⓒ *Supporting Details.* Does the letter provide explanations or examples, anecdotes or other specific details to support the reader's point of view?

II. Reader Response/Originality and Expression

- Ⓐ Does the reader talk to the author rather than summarizing the book's plot or analyzing literary elements within the book?
- Ⓑ Does the reader relate the book to himself or herself rather than asking the author questions about why he or she wrote the book?
- Ⓒ Does the reader correspond with the author rather than compliment?
- Ⓓ Is vocabulary smooth and natural rather than tongue-tied or showy?

III. Organization and Grammatical Correctness

- Ⓐ Does the reader present ideas in a logical, organized manner without unnecessary repetition?
- Ⓑ What organizational strategy does the writer use?
 - a. chronological order if relating a story
 - b. cause-and-effect
 - c. compare/contrast
 - d. steps in a process
 - e. other: _____
- Ⓒ Does the essay have bookends: an introduction or lead paragraph that hooks the reader plus a concluding paragraph that may or may not mirror the opening paragraph?
- Ⓓ Has the reader proofread the letter for errors of spelling and punctuation?