

LESSON PLAN #4: Abigail as Letter Writer

[1] **Curriculum framework(s):** 13.25 Analyze and explain the structure and elements of nonfiction works.

[2] **Goal of the lesson:** To observe the qualities of writing that Abigail and John valued, particularly in the letter, the form they mastered.

[3] **Expected student outcomes:** Students will be able to outline successful strategies for letter writing. They will respond to what they view as significant.

[4] **Assessment of expected student outcomes:** Successful completion of handout and questions.

[5] **Instructional procedures:** 45 minutes

Introduction: Students share their observations from the Epistolary Analysis.

Activities: Students work individually or in pairs on the handout entitled “To My Dearest Friend”

Closure: Students read their letter aloud to a partner or to the class as a whole.

Homework: Read the next letters in the unit and complete an Epistolary Analysis handout for them.

[6] **Material and resources:**

- 1) “To My Dearest Friend” handout
- 2) Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 7 July 1776
- 3) Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 23 September 1776

"To My Dearest Friend"

Letter writing was central to the relationship of John and Abigail Adams as well as to their relationships with other family and friends. They lived in a time when a journey to Europe took months, when Braintree to Boston was a sizable distance, and when photographs and videos were inventions of the future. Therefore, letters were one of the few tangible links to far-off loved ones.

Looking at the letters of 7 July 1776 from John to Abigail, and the 23 September 1776 letter from Abigail to John, answer the following questions on epistles and epistolary form.

- 1) How does John distinguish the difference between the sundry styles of prose? What is particularly significant about letters?

- 2) How does this letter of John contrast to earlier love letters? What does his tone seem to indicate in this letter?

- 3) What classical letters did John consult? Why do you think he encouraged Abigail to read them as well?

- 4) What are several ways John believes writing can be improved?

- 5) According to John, what should a child's literary and written education consist of? What is your reaction to his demands—do you agree or disagree?

- 6) In Abigail's letter, why do you think she finds such solace in writing letters to her husband?

- 7) What does Abigail have to say about writing and receiving letters? Does her attitude about these letters seem balanced?

- 8) Notice that the date of Abigail's letter is during the Revolution. Indicate where in the letter she reveals details about the war. How might the political events of the time period impact her obsession with both writing and receiving letters?

- 9) Why do you think the Adamses saved their letters (and they started saving them before they achieved any sort of fame)?

- 10) Write a paragraph detailing the following scenario...Imagine you are either a mother alone with her children or a husband away from his family while the American Revolution is occurring. Explain how you would feel separated from your partner. How would letters aid you in your separation? What would you do with the letters?

Student Name _____ Date _____

Epistolary Analysis

Date of letter(s)	Location of letter writer
Sender	Recipient

Topic of letter(s)	
Theme(s) of the letter(s)	
Significant quotes	
Historical details in the letter(s)	

Allusions, metaphors, similes and other figures of speech (give examples)	
Tone	
Images	
Diction	
Evidence of sarcasm or satire	
Vocabulary words	

Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 7 July 1776

Philadelphia July 7, 1776

It is worth the while of a Person, obliged to write as much as I do, to consider the Varieties of Style The Epistolary, is essentially different from the oratorical, and the Historical Style Oratory abounds with Figures. History is simple, but grave, majestic and formal. Letters, like Conversation, should be free, easy, and familiar.

Simplicity and Familiarity, are the Characteristicks of this Kind of Writing. Affectation is as disagreeable, in a Letter, as in Conversation, and therefore, studied Language, premeditated Method, and sublime Sentiments are not expected in a Letter. Notwithstanding which, the Sublime, as well as the beautiful, and the Novel, may naturally enough, appear, in familiar Letters among Friends. -- Among the ancients there are two illustrious Examples of the Epistolary Style, Cicero and Pliny, whose Letters present you with Modells of fine Writing, which has borne the Criticism of almost two thousand Years. In these, you see the Sublime, the beautiful, the Novel, and the Pathetick, conveyed in as much Simplicity, Ease, Freedom, and Familiarity, as Language is capable of.

Let me request you, to turn over the Leaves of the Praeceptor, to a Letter of Pliny the Younger, in which he has transmitted, to these days, the History of his Uncles Philosophical Curiosity, his Heroic Courage and his melancholly Catastrophe. Read it, and say, whether it is possible to write a Narrative of Facts, in a better Manner. It is copious and particular, in selecting the Circumstances, most natural, remarkable and affecting. There is not an incident omitted, which ought to have been remembered, nor one inserted that is not worth Remembrance.

It gives you, an Idea of the Scaene, as distinct and perfect, as if a Painter had drawn it to the Life, before your Eyes. It interests your Passions, as much as if you had been an Eye Witness of the whole Transaction. Yet there are no Figures, or Art used. All is as simple, natural, easy, and familiar, as if the Story had been told in Conversation, without a Moments Premeditation.

Pope and Swift have given the World a Collection of their Letters; but I think in general, they fall short, in the Epistolary Way, of their own Emminence in Poetry and other Branches of Literature. Very few of their Letters, have ever engaged much of my Attention. Gays Letter, concerning the Pair of Lovers kill'd by Lightning, is worth more than the whole Collection, in Point of Simplicity, and Elegance of Composition, and as a genuine Model of the epistolary Style. There is a Book, which I wish you owned, I mean Rollins Belles Letters, in which the Variations of Style are explained.

Early Youth is the Time, to learn the Arts and Sciences, and especially to correct the Ear, and the Imagination, by forming a Style. I wish you would think of forming the Taste, and judgment of your Children, now, before any unchaste Sounds have fastened on their Ears, and before any Affectation, or Vanity, is settled on their Minds, upon the pure Principles of Nature . . . Musick is a great Advantage, for Style depends in Part upon a delicate Ear.

The Faculty of Writing is attainable, by Art, Practice, and Habit only. The sooner, therefore the Practice begins, the more likely it will be to succeed. Have no Mercy upon an affected Phrase, any more than an affected Air, Gate, Dress, or Manners.

Your Children have Capacities equal to any Thing. There is a Vigour in the Understanding, and a Spirit and Fire in the Temper of every one of them, which is capable of ascending the Heights of Art, Science, Trade, War, or Politicks.

They should be set to compose Descriptions of Scaenes and Objects, and Narrations of Facts and Events, Declamations upon Topicks, and other Exercises of various sorts, should be prescribed to them.

Set a Child to form a Description of a Battle, a Storm, a seige, a Cloud, a Mountain, a Lake, a City, an Harbour, a Country seat, a Meadow, a Forrest, or almost any Thing, that may occur to your Thoughts.

Set him to compose a Narration of all the little Incidents and Events of a Day, a Journey, a Ride, or a Walk. In this Way, a Taste will be formed, and a Facility of Writing acquired.

For myself, as I never had a regular Tutor, I never studied any Thing methodically, and consequently never was compleatly accomplished in any Thing. But as I am conscious of my own Deficiency, in these Respects, I should be the less pardonable, if I neglected the Education of my Children.

In Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, my Education was imperfect, because unmethodical. Yet I have perhaps read more upon these Arts, and considered them in a more extensive View than some others.

A scanned image of the original letter is available at the following site:

<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/aea/cfm/doc.cfm?id=L17760707jasecond>

Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 7 July 1776 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society.

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 23 September 1776

Sepbr. 23 1776

There are perticular times when I feel such an uneasiness, such a restlessness, as neither company, Books, family Cares or any other thing will remove, my Pen is my only pleasure, and writing to you the composure of my mind.

I feel that agitation this Evening, a degree of Melancholy has seazd my mind, ~~whether~~ owing to the anxiety I feel for the fate of our Arms at New York, and the apprehensions I have for your Health and Safety.

We Have so many rumours and reports that tis imposible to know what to Credit. We are this Evening assur'd that there has been a field Battle between a detachment of our Army commanded by General Miflin and a Detachment of British Troops in which the Latter were defeated. An other report says that we have been obliged to Evacuate the city and leave our cannon, Baggage &c. &c. This we cannot credit, we will not Believe it.

Tis a most critical day with us. Heaven Crown our arms with Success.

Did you ever expect that we should hold Long Island? And if that could not be held, the city of New York must lie at their mercy. If they command New York can they cut of the communication between the Colonies?

Tho I sufferd much last winter yet I had rather be in a situation where I can collect the Truth, than at a distance where I am distressd by a thousand vague reports --

*War is our Buisness, but to whom is Give'n
To die, or triumph, that determine Heav'n!*

I write you an abundance, do you read it all? Your last Letters have been very short. Have you buried, stifled or exhausted all the -- I wont ask the question you must find out my meaning if you can.

I cannot help smileing at your caution in never subscribeing a Letter, yet frank it upon the outside where you are obliged to write your name.

I hope I have a Letter by Saturdays Post. You say you are sometimes dissapointed, you can tell then How I feel. I endeavour to write once a week.

Poor Barrel I see by the paper is dead. So is our Neighbour Feild.

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