

DEAR MADAM PRESIDENT: LETTERS TO WORLD LEADERS #1

(Time Maximum)

"I plan to visit your country because . . .":
Goodwill Ambassadors Connect Ideas and Evidence

Lesson Sketch

Skills: Students *read* articles about countries around the world; *select* which elements of a country's landscape and/or culture are most appealing to them; *identify* appeals based on similarity to the student's home culture, vs. appeals based on difference or unfamiliarity; *decide* which countries they are interested in visiting; *present* the highlights of their countries of interest to their classmates, and explain their decision-making rationales; and *write* to the leaders of those countries expressing and explaining their interest.

Grades: 7–8

Time: Five 90-minute classes

Featured Resources: AtoZWorldCulture.com or AtoZtheWorld.com articles Maps, Country Snapshot, Cultural Overview, The People, Greetings and Courtesies, Points of Interest, Religion, National Cuisine, Government, Language.

Inspirations

"Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less." ~Marie Curie

"The reality today is that we are all interdependent and have to co-exist on this small planet. Therefore, the only sensible and intelligent way of resolving differences and clashes of interests, whether between individuals or nations, is through dialogue." ~The Dalai Lama

Cultural exchange programs such as the US State Department's International Writing Program and DanceMotion USA

UNICEF's Goodwill Ambassador program

Lesson Overview

Acting as goodwill ambassadors for the United States, students read about countries and cultures of the world, decide where they would most like to travel, and write to the leaders of their chosen countries to explain why. Along the way, students characterize which aspects of their chosen countries are like their own home cultures, vs. different from their home cultures. In a short presentation that is also a prewriting exercise, students walk their classmates through their rationales for deciding where to travel, and showcase the highlights of their chosen destinations. In

letters to world leaders, students connect a proposition ("I would like to visit your country") to evidence ("I would like to visit your country because . . .") within the structure of a formal letter.

Lesson Steps

Students make a list of countries they are curious about. Students briefly skim articles, and choose two countries to focus on. Students complete a prewriting exercise in which they make some guesses and some predictions about the countries they're about to study—in particular, students make predictions about the two countries' similarities to and differences from the US. Students read a series of articles about their countries of interest in order to develop a sense of cultural context, and note how the countries' realities are in line with and/or contradictory to their predictions. Students read articles about the US, and reflect on whether these articles accurately represent their personal perceptions of life in the US. Students present the highlights of their chosen countries to their classmates, explain why they would rather visit one than the other, and explain how their chosen country is similar to and different from the US. Following a series of prewrite exercises, students write a formal letter to their chosen countries' heads of state expressing their desire to visit, and explaining what similarities and differences of place and people make the chosen country so intriguing.

Standards Met

1. **Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: College and Career Readiness Anchors for Reading**
 - a. Key Ideas and Details 1, 2
 - b. Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7
 - c. Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10
2. **Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: College and Career Readiness Anchors for Writing**
 - a. Text Types and Purposes 1, 2
 - b. Production and Distribution of Writing 4, 5, 6
 - c. Research to Build and Present Knowledge 7,8,9
 - d. Range of Writing 10
3. **Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: College and Career Readiness Anchors for Reading**
 - a. Key Ideas and Details 1, 2
 - b. Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7
 - c. Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10
4. **Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: College and Career Readiness Anchors for Writing**
 - a. Text Types and Purposes 1, 2
 - b. Production and Distribution of Writing 4, 5, 6
 - c. Research to Build and Present Knowledge 7,8,9
 - d. Range of Writing 10
5. **Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: College and Career Readiness Anchors for Speaking and Listening**
 - a. Comprehension and Collaboration 1, 2
 - b. Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas 4,6
6. **Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: College and Career Readiness Anchors for Language**

- a. Conventions of Standard English 1, 2
 - b. Knowledge of Language 3
 - c. Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 4, 6
7. **National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards for the English Language Arts**
- a. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
8. **National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies**
- a. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

Supplies

- Computer access for each student
- Access to AtoZWorldCulture.com or AtoZtheWorld.com
- Access to online language references like BBC Languages, Omniglot.com, and Forvo.com
- Dictionaries
- Notebooks, pens, etc.
- Flashcards or other supplies for presentation notes
- Printer access
- Envelopes and stamps

Instructional Plan

Student Objectives

Students will:

- Improve reading comprehension skills, note taking skills, abstract reasoning skills, speaking skills, and writing skills.
- Increase geographic knowledge and geopolitical awareness.
- Begin to develop a sense of which languages are spoken in what regions, and have a brief encounter with a language other than English.
- Increase cultural awareness and self-awareness by encountering their own cultural tendencies, and considering how these tendencies condition responses to unfamiliar cultures.
- Present evidence for a proposition in both a spoken presentation form and a written letter.
- Distinguish informal language from formal language; have the opportunity to present the same ideas in informal peer-to-peer speech, and in a formal letter to a head of state.
- Practice the complete writing process: taking notes, prewriting, drafting, seeking peer feedback, and then incorporating these incremental steps into a fully realized formal letter.
- Practice connecting ideas and evidence in writing.
- Become more sophisticated global citizens able to engage in dialogue with those different from themselves.

Teacher introduction

- Introduce the concept of the goodwill ambassador, and the goal of students as goodwill ambassadors. Establish that all readings, prewritings, discussions, and short presentations are notetaking/prewriting exercises toward a final writing exercise—if students complete all steps along the way, the final writing assignment will be a snap.

Student Directions

Which country would you like to visit? Select a country

- Go to AtoZWorldCulture.com or AtoZtheWorld.com.
- Peruse list of countries.
- Identify four countries you are curious about. Skim materials for these countries: get a quick sense of where the country is, who lives there, and whether you are curious about the place.
- Choose two countries to mentally visit for this exercise.

Teacher introduction

- Set the stage for the series of prewriting exercises by establishing expectations. In terms appropriate to existing classroom activities and curricula, explain that these prewriting activities are to be taken seriously as generative writing practices that result in an easier time completing a formal writing assignment, but they are not formal writing assignments themselves. The idea is to get ideas flowing on the page, and for students to leave themselves notes to come back to later when they get stuck, but prewriting is not the time to worry about writing beautiful sentences or spelling everything perfectly.

Student Directions

Learn about your chosen country: Comparing expectations to reality

- Go to Maps—understand where countries are. Complete the following readings and prewriting exercises for both countries.
- Place your bets: Prewriting #1
 - Based on this country's location, what are your expectations regarding the culture? In what language/s do you guess that people greet each other? Are any of these languages spoken in the US? Do you guess that most residents have their roots in this country, or do you expect a large recent immigrant population? Do you expect that most residents are of the same ethnic background and religion, or do you expect a high degree of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity in this place? How does the degree of diversity compare to diversity in the US? What do you suppose is important to residents of this country? What would you say is important to residents of the US? Do you imagine an intricate ritual of greeting in this country, or a loose, laid-back greeting style? What role do hierarchy and social status play in the culture? Do you expect that people's experiences of living in this country vary depending upon social status, gender, ethnicity, and/or age? If so, how? How do these different experiences compare to your sense of the experiences of different kinds of people living in the US? Overall, how do you suppose this country's culture/s is/are different from the mainstream culture and other cultures found in the US.

- Read the articles Country Snapshot, Cultural Overview, The People, and Greetings and Courtesies
- Place your bets: Prewriting #1A
 - So far, how do your guesses before reading compare to the lives of this country's citizens? What is as you expected, and what surprises you?
- Read Points of Interest, National Cuisine, Religion, and Language
- Place your bets: Prewriting #1B
 - Which Points of Interest would you most like to visit? Why? Which would you least like to visit? Why?
 - Which foods would you most like to try? Why? Which would you least like to try? Why?
 - Which language/dialect would you most like to learn? Why? Which language/dialect would you least like to learn? Why? If people in a chosen country speak a language or language/s you already speak, does that make visiting the country more or less appealing to you?
 - Which religion, if any, is practiced in this country that you also practice? Are any religions practiced in the country familiar to you, though you do not practice them yourself? Do you see religions practiced in this country that you know are practiced in the US? Overall, after learning a bit about the religious landscape of the country, do you feel more or less inclined to visit?
- Look at the top sections of the Government article to ascertain government type. If you are not familiar with this type of government, visit the CIA World Factbook listing of government types, the CBBC types of government page, or these government descriptions from teacher Dave Stutz.
- Place your bets: Prewriting #1C
 - Is this the same government type as in the US, or a different one?
 - Are you familiar with the idea of this type of government, or is it brand new to you?
 - Does living in a country with this government type appeal to you?
 - What about just visiting a country with this government type?

S e s s i o n T w o

Teacher introduction

- Invite students to share some highlights of their notes so far. Ask students to remain alert to any shifts in perspective they experience while listening to their classmates' responses to the readings—students should be making notes on their prewrite pages or scratch paper regarding any new ideas that occur to them during this discussion.

Student Directions

- Read the Cultural Overview and Country Snapshot articles for the United States. Skim over some of the other materials for the US.
- Prewrite #2: Reflecting on your own country
 - What surprises you about these articles? What did you learn about the US that you didn't know before? What do you agree with in these articles? What, if anything, do you disagree with?
 - What about your chosen countries strikes you as most similar to the US? What seems most different from the US?

Teacher introduction

- Ask students to share their thoughts regarding the US readings. With what in the US articles do they agree and/or disagree? Do these articles reflect their personal experiences of living in the US? What do they notice that is similar and different in the countries they're reading about, relative to the US? As discussion winds down, remind students of expectations for prewriting.

Student Directions

- Prewrite #3: Where are you going?
- Think fast: If you could only visit one of the countries you've read about so far, which one would it be?
 - How do the countries' locations affect your decision?
 - How do the countries' landscapes affect your decision?
 - How do the countries' religions affect your decision?
 - How do the countries' cuisines affect your decision?
 - How do the countries' languages affect your decision?
 - How do the countries' points of interest affect your decision?
 - How do the countries' government types affect your decision?
 - How does your overall sense of the countries' cultures affect your decision?
 - Overall, what are the strongest factors influencing your choice?

Session Three

Teacher introduction

- Remind students that these presentations are the last stop on the way to a writing assignment. This presentation to peers is like a dry run of the contents of the letter, but shared in informal language. Remind students that as they listen to their peers' presentations, this is an opportunity to listen for ideas that they could apply to their own letters. Since students are writing to leaders of different countries, they won't be borrowing any ideas directly—but this is a good time to listen for inspiring tidbits that they could adapt for their own purposes. Students should have notebooks out, and should be taking notes throughout their peers' presentations.

Student Directions

Prepare to present: On an index card or some other piece of paper suitable for presentation notes, jot down:

- Where you are going
- The top three reasons you are going there.
 - For example: 1) some particular point of interest that you wish to see, 2) an interest in learning the country's language, and 3) a desire to try the cuisine.
- Why you find those top three reasons appealing.
 - For example: 1) you've always wanted to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa, 2) you like the sound of Italian, and 3) pesto and gelato—what's not to like?
- Which of your appeals are based on similarity to things you already know?

- For example, you used to hear your grandparents speak Italian.
- Which appeals are based on things that are different from anything you've experienced before?
 - For example, in the US, we have no buildings as old as the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and perhaps the history of older buildings appeals to you.

Presentation #1

- Share your plans in a brief (3 minutes or less) presentation to your classmates. Don't stress over creating a fancy presentation—simply speak peer to peer in informal language, and share what you've figured out so far.

Teacher introduction

- Remind students that while listening to other students' presentations, they are not merely resting—they are listening for more ideas for the writing assignment that comes next.

Session Four

Teacher introduction

- Remind students of the role of goodwill ambassador. Prepare students to transition from presenting their travel decisions and rationales to their peers in speech via informal language, to addressing heads of state in writing via formal language. Students will begin with researching their letter recipients.

Student Directions

Letters to Leaders: Goodwill Ambassadors in Action

- Go to the Government section for your chosen country
- Look for the name and title of the head of government and/or head of state (the head of state might also be called the chief of state).
 - The head of government is a top official responsible for government administration and management—this person is in charge of the daily business of governance in the country.
 - The head of state is a country's chief public representative, and this person may or may not have actual governing powers. Heads of state serve a symbolic role in representing their nation. Heads of state often serve as goodwill ambassadors who improve their country's relationships with other nations around the world.
 - In some countries, such as the US, the roles of head of government and head of state are combined in one office: the president. In other countries, such as England, the roles of head of government and head of state are performed by the holders of two different offices: the prime minister is England's head of government, and the queen is England's head of state.
- Choose your letter recipient: Depending upon the nature of the country's government and the nature of your letter, you might want to write to the head of state, the head of government, or to the single person who is both the head of state and the head of government.
 - In a country with a separate head of government and head of state, if one of the reasons you wish to travel to the country is the nature of the government and its laws, the head of state might be the appropriate recipient for your letter. If your interest in travel is primarily cultural, such as in the country's religion or cuisine, you might write to the head of state.
 - Either way, carefully write down your recipient's official title and correct full name spelling.

- See if your recipient has a personal bio online. Using Google and a little luck, you may find that the leader you'll be writing to has a personal biography on his/her government's web pages.
 - Do you have anything in common with your letter recipient? If so, jot it down on your prewriting pages or a new piece of scratch paper. This could come in handy in your letter.
- Find your recipient's mailing address: Visit the US State Department's list of Foreign Consular Offices in the United States. For countries that have an embassy office in the US, you can address your letter to:

[Recipient's title and full name]

c/o* [Embassy name and address]

(*c/o means "care of," and is used to indicate that you are sending a letter to one person via placing it into the care of another person, who will deliver it. For example, you are sending your letter to a head of state or head of government by sending your letter to the country's embassy, and trusting that embassy staff will forward your mail to their official.)

- For countries that do not have an embassy office in the US, you'll have to do a little internet digging to find the address. Try Googling in search of your country's government Web pages, and follow your nose from there. If you need help, ask your teacher.
- Find your recipient's proper title. Try The Protocol School of Washington's guide to forms of address.

Teacher introduction

Ask students to read the following model letter once for information, just to get a sense of it—and a second time to think ahead about how their ideas that they have written about and presented so far might fit into this format.

May 10, 2012

Eleanor Offred
2468 Tale Street
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2
Canada

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500
USA

Dear Mr. President,

I am writing to you from Vancouver, British Columbia. As your Canadian neighbor, I wish to express my interest in learning more about the United States. I am a student at Margaret Atwood Middle School, and I believe that young people like me must see the world, must understand other nations better. This will help us achieve peace as a planet. Since I will have a limited travel budget when I graduate from high school, I have researched extensively where I would like to travel most. I have decided to visit the United States first. The United States feels like the right blend of the familiar and the unfamiliar for my first international trip. The United States has a diverse population like Canada's, but has very different landscapes. Specifically, I have always wanted to see the alligators of Everglades National Park. Also, I have a weakness for biscuits, so I would like to try some of your country's southern cooking.

In Canada, English and French are the official languages, but many other languages from around the world are spoken in Canada, as well. In the United States, since English is the dominant language, and I am an English speaker, I feel confident that I can travel successfully and safely. Since there are many Spanish speakers in your country, as well, I hope to learn a little Spanish while I am there. I know the United States includes speakers of Korean, Russian, Arabic, and many other languages, too. I hope to have the interesting experiences in your cities that I have in Vancouver: hearing languages I don't speak, and trying to guess where the people are originally from.

What you have in the United States that we don't have in Canada is lots of heat. You have so many landscapes in the southern United States that I can't even imagine—the deserts of your Southwest, and the beaches of southern California. But I have always been especially curious about south Florida—to me, the landscape of Everglades National Park seems so foreign that it might as well be on the moon. Specifically, I am can't wait to see the alligators—they scare me, but I have always wanted to see them, because they give me goose bumps.

Incidentally, I am hoping that they serve biscuits and red velvet cake in Florida. I know they'll have seafood, but I would like to try some other traditional southern foods, like sweet potatoes and okra.

I'm not sure about shrimp and grits, but I know cheese grits are for me—I plan to learn to make them right, so that I can eat them at home.

I hope that you encourage the young people of the United States to travel abroad in order to understand the cultures of the world. I want to go to law school, like you did, and use my legal knowledge to improve the world—but first, I want to see the world. If American students are like me, and want to start by visiting their neighbors, I invite them to come to Canada. If kids from Florida want to see some snowy mountains, they can visit Banff National Park in the Canadian Rockies.

Most Respectfully,

Eleanor Offred

Teacher introduction

- Ask students to find the five basic parts of a formal letter in the model letter. Ask students to discuss the letter a bit, and to consider how the letter's presentation is different from the presentations they have already given to their classmates.

Student Directions

Use the following definitions of the parts of a formal letter to identify the parts of the model letter. Use the five parts to outline and draft your letter to the leader of your chosen country.

- Five basic parts of a letter
 - Heading: At the top of the page, place the date, your address, and the address of the person you're writing to. To see how these elements are arranged, visit the Formal Letter Writing page on Using English, and see the "Layout of a Formal Letter" segment near the top. See also the model letter from hypothetical Canadian student Eleanor Offred to American President Barack Obama.
 - Salutation: Address your recipient as suggested by The Protocol School of Washington's guide to forms of address. If the leader you are writing to is not covered by this reference, then respectfully address your intended recipient with his or her full formal title and full name. For example, "Dear Captain Elizabeth Cady Stanton, . . ."
 - Body: The body of the letter is the letter's introductory and main paragraphs—all but the short closing paragraph at the end.
 - Closing: In the last paragraph, writers often complete the three Rs: 1) wrap it up, 2) Remind the reader of a key point or request, and 3) give Regards to the recipient.
 - Signature: Choose a formal sign off like "Most Respectfully" or "Sincerely." If a specific sign off when addressing your recipient is suggested by suggested by The Protocol School of Washington's guide to forms of address, use it.

Teacher introduction

- Direct students to outline their letters. Suggest to students that they start with their presentation notes, and expand/adapt/rearrange these materials into the form of the formal letter. Remind students that they've already prepared most of the content of their letters via their presentations. Now it's time to expand on what they shared in their presentations, and to present their travel decisions in writing, vs. in speech, and in more formal language.

Student Directions

- Outline the body of your letter: For a formal letter, vs. a personal letter, you need to think through ahead of time what you will say and how you will say it. Luckily, you've already prepared your thoughts a little bit through preparing your presentation for your classmates. Your aim in your letter is to courteously express what has attracted you to this leader's country, and to do so using formal and appropriate language—you are acting as a goodwill ambassador representing your country's friendly curiosity about another country.
 - Introduction: Let your recipient know right away who you are and why you are writing. This will let a busy recipient know that you appreciate his or her time. Once you've established your identity (American student) and reason for writing (to express interest in visiting country), let the leader know what it is about his/her country you find appealing, and whether

these appealing things appeal to you because they are already familiar, or because they are unfamiliar.

- Evidence Paragraph 1: Explain in detail the first thing you find appealing, and how that thing is familiar or unfamiliar, based on what you know in the US.
- Evidence Paragraph 2: Explain in detail the second thing you find appealing, and how that thing is familiar or unfamiliar, based on what you know in the US.
- Evidence Paragraph 3: Explain in detail the third thing you find appealing, and how that thing is familiar or unfamiliar, based on what you know in the US.
- Conclusion: Summarize your interest in visiting, and express your goodwill toward the recipient and his/her nation. The closing is a good place to include something you have in common with the person you're writing to, if you haven't done so already. Remember the conclusion's three Rs: 1) wRap it up, 2) Remind the reader of a key point or request, and 3) give Regards to the recipient.

Session Five

Teacher introduction

- Ask students to draft their letters using the model letter above, outline suggestions above, and their own notes from prewriting exercises, discussions with their classmates, and their presentations. To set the tone, in a class discussion, ask students to identify some examples of formal and informal language. You might begin by having students identify some formal components of the model letter, vs. some informal components from their presentations. You might ask one student to share a sentence that s/he would include in a note to a friend, then ask another student how this sentence could be retooled to be suitable for addressing a head of state.

Student Directions

- Draft your letter to your chosen recipient, using the model letter, your outline, and your own notes from prewriting exercises, discussions, and presentations. If you get stuck, you can move past a tricky passage and come back to it later. Do the best you can, but don't agonize over making everything perfect yet—you'll have a chance to revise.

Teacher introduction

- Ask students to gather in groups of four. Students will read each other's letters and discuss the following questions, with the writer of each letter taking notes toward revising.

Student Directions

Peer Review

- As you read each person's letter in your group, make notes on the following questions, and share your responses with the writer in writing and in conversation.
- When it's your piece that's being discussed, take notes so that you can remember later what people's suggestions were—sometimes a suggestion that doesn't seem like a good idea at first becomes more appealing over time.
 - Is it clear right away who the writer is and what is the purpose in writing?
 - Is it clear what appeals to the writer about traveling to this country?

- Is it clear what is alike and what is different from the speaker's existing experience?
- Where is the language sufficiently formal? Where does it sound too informal, and what would you suggest to the writer for elevating the tone?
- What's your favorite part of the letter?
- Any other suggestions for improving the letter?

Teacher introduction

- Instruct students to revise letters based on peer feedback. Discuss the challenges of making writing choices in the face of conflicting reader feedback: if one reader praises a paragraph that another reader finds problematic, how should the writer respond? Suggest that a writer doesn't have to accept a particular reader's solution to believe that there's a problem in the passage—maybe the writer just prefers another solution. And flat-out disagreeing with a particular reader's feedback is OK, too. But if multiple readers have identified a place in a draft as problematic, suggest to students that those are the places to give priority attention to during the revision process.

Student Directions

- Revise your letter based on peer feedback, your teacher's directions, and your own writerly instincts.

Teacher and Student Directions

- Send! And congratulate each other on your success as goodwill ambassadors.