



INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



Teaching Technique 35

Letters

ACTIVITY TYPE

- Writing
- Active/Engaged Learning
- Learning Assessment

TEACHING PROBLEM ADDRESSED

- Surface Learning
- Low Motivation/Engagement

LEARNING TAXONOMIC LEVEL

- Application: Creative Thinking
- Application: Critical Thinking
- Integration & Synthesis

Letters

In *Letters*, students assume the identity of a significant person in your discipline and write a letter explaining their thoughts on an issue, theory, or controversy to another famous person who holds a different perspective.



1

Clarify your teaching purpose and learning goals for *Letters*

2

Identify the issue along with 2 famous people with different perspectives

3

Set assignment parameters (minimum word count, time allowed, etc.)

4

Develop a plan for learning assessment or grading

5

Communicate assignment instructions to students

6

Allow students time to write their letter

7

Reflect upon the *Letters* activity and evaluate its effectiveness

Step-By-Step Instructions

In this section we provide you with guidance on each of the seven steps involved as you consider this technique.

STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS

In this technique, students write a letter from the perspective of a famous person to another important or famous person who holds a different perspective regarding an issue, theory, decision, or set of beliefs that is important in your course. The letter can be to contemporaries or can be an imaginative juxtaposition between people of different eras.

Letters requires students to draw from their knowledge of the ideas and historical/social context of both people and to capture the essence of the personality and opinions of the person whose identity they are assuming. This activity helps teachers assess students' understanding of the fundamental differences between different theories, historical epochs, genres, and so forth.

Letters is a challenging activity that can help develop students' ability to draw inferences from or conclusions about material they are studying and then synthesize and present their insights in an interesting and creative manner. It can be motivating because it gives students the opportunity to be creative. Furthermore, it challenges students to move beyond the surface to a deeper understanding of the material so that they can make the leap required to write a convincing and interesting letter. On the other hand, because it requires such high-order thinking skills, it may be overwhelming and frustrating to students who do not feel creative.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT

In *Letters*, students must understand the ideas and historical/social context regarding an issue, theory, decision, or set of beliefs sufficiently to write a letter from a famous person who holds a specific perspective toward the material.

STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS

To prepare for this technique:

- Identify an issue, theory, decision, or set of beliefs that is important in your course.
- Identify two famous people associated with different perspectives on the topic.
- Jot down the defining characteristics that distinguish each person's views.
- Write sample letters to uncover problems and to serve as assessment model.

Once you have finished preparing for the technique, you will need to determine other parameters such as minimum word count, time allowed for the activity, the deadline, how students should submit their letters, and so forth

Step-By-Step Instructions (CON'T)

STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING

To assess this technique, you may want to consider adapting or using elements of a variety of the VALUE Rubrics, including:

- **The Creative Thinking VALUE Rubric**
<https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/creative-thinking>
- **The Written Communication VALUE Rubric**
<https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/written-communication>
- **The Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric**
<https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/critical-thinking>

STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS

Create a handout that includes directions and clarifies your expectations and assessment criteria.

STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

- Distribute the handout and explain the activity to students, perhaps using your letter as an illustration.
- Have students write and submit their letters.
- Use your rubric to assess the letters.

STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

When reflecting on the activity and how effective it was, consider the following questions:

- Did the technique match the course learning goals and objectives?
- Did it meet my goals for this learning module?
- Was it appropriate for the students?
- Did the technique keep the students engaged?
- Did it promote student learning?
- Did it provide me with information about student understanding?

If you answer yes to all or most of these questions, next consider how you might improve the activity for the next use.

Support Materials

The materials in this section are intended to help you with the process of implementing this technique. For *Letters*, we provide additional guidance on how to vary it.

DYAD ASSIGNMENT

Divide the class in half and form students into pairs. Have one student assume one identity and write the original letter and the second student assume the second identity and write a response.

DIALOGUES

Have students invent a dialogue between two people instead of writing letters. (This technique is described fully in *CAT 17: Invented Dialogues*, pp. 203–207, Angelo and Cross, 1993.) Students create the dialogues by selecting and weaving together actual quotes from primary sources, or by inventing reasonable quotes given the student’s knowledge and understanding of the speakers and context.

Angelo and Cross offer several different examples of dialogues. For example, to illustrate contemporary but opposing perspectives, they suggest a dialogue between an abolitionist and a slaveholder in the United States in 1855. To illustrate a dialogue between people of different eras, they use a conversation between Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon on the leadership skills required to conquer an empire and those needed to maintain one.

Online Adaptation

This section is intended to help you with the process of implementing and assessing *Letters* in your online class.

HOW TO GET STARTED

- Prepare by selecting: an issue, theory, decision, or set of beliefs important to your course and two famous people associated with different perspectives on that idea.
- List characteristics that define each person's view, and create an assignment with instructions and grading criteria in your Learning Management System.
- Have one half of the class write a letter from one person's perspective and the other half from the other.
- The letters can be written to contemporaries or an imaginative juxtaposition between people of different eras.
- After evaluating the letters, consider sharing some of the best submissions with the whole class.

VARIATIONS

There are several ways to vary this technique. For example:

- Assign students into pairs to write letters to each other from opposite perspectives, or have student pairs write a dialogue rather than letters.
- Have the pairs briefly rehearse their dialogues in breakout rooms before performing for the whole class in a videoconference.

Technique Template

Following are two templates to assist you as you think through how you might implement this technique in your own class. The first is a completed template, providing an example of how a Professor adapted *Letters* in his course, *History of Constitutional Law*. The second is a blank template for you to fill out to tailor this technique for your course.

Technique Template

Sample Completed Letters Technique Template: Content from *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*

History of Constitutional Law

Course Name

COURSE CHARACTERISTICS

What are the situational factors that impact this course? For example, is it on campus or online? How many students? Is it lower division or graduate? Are there student attributes such as attitudes, prior knowledge, reasons for enrolling, and so forth that should be taken into account as you consider this technique?

This course examines the structures of government that emerge from the United States Constitution. Major themes include federalism, separation of powers, the role of the courts, and Reconstruction. It is an important, introductory part of a larger project of exploring and understanding the United States Constitution.

STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS

Why are you choosing this technique? What do you hope to accomplish?

The professor was looking for an assignment to help students internalize and personalize the controversies underlying the development of constitutional law.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT

What is the question you want learners to address, or problem you want them to solve?

The professor formed students into pairs and asked them to research and choose a famous or historically significant constitutional court decision that had not already been covered in class. Student "A" was told to write a letter to the editor of a national news magazine that represented the plaintiff's perspective and Student "B" was assigned to write a letter representing the defendant's perspective.

STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS

What are the assignment logistics? For example, will this be assigned individually or is it group work? How long will the assignment take? Will students be submitting a product? What materials, resources, or additional information do you anticipate needing?

The professor implemented this as an individual writing assignment, but introduced elements of collaborative learning as described in Steps 2 and 6.

STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING

If you decide to assess learning, how will you determine that learning has occurred? For example, will you use a simple +/check/- grading system? If you use a rubric, will you use an existing one or create one? What will be your criteria and standards?

The professor created a rubric to assess and grade the letters.

STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS

How will you communicate assignment parameters to students? For example, through a handout? A prompt on a presentation slide? Assignment instructions in your online course?

The professor created a handout to communicate instructions to students.

STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

How will you adapt steps/procedures for your students? Are there any additional logistical aspects to consider?

When both letters were written, the professor formed groups of 8-10 students and had pairs take turns reading their letters to the group, followed by a brief Q & A period in which group members were encouraged to make comments or ask questions. Each group was asked to vote on the set of letters they found most interesting and persuasive, and then the authoring dyads were asked to read these to the whole class.

STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Note: This step will be completed after you have implemented the technique.

Did this technique help you accomplish your goals? What worked well? What could have been improved? What might you change if you decide to implement the activity again?

The professor found that the activity challenged students to investigate and think about the historical cases in an engaging, novel way and that reading the letters in groups and to the whole class exposed students to the ideas underlying important constitutional law cases in a memorable manner.

Technique Template

This template is intended for use when planning to implement **Letters** in your class. Fill in the blanks below, and use the information provided elsewhere in the Instructor's Guide to assist you in your thinking.

Course Name

COURSE CHARACTERISTICS

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Did this technique help you accomplish your goals? What worked well? What could have been improved? What might you change if you decide to implement the activity again?

References and Resources

PRIMARY SOURCE

Content for this download was drawn primarily from “Student Engagement Technique 18: Letters” in *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (Barkley, 2010), pp. 229–231. It includes material that was adapted or reproduced with permission. For further information about this technique, including examples in both on campus and online courses, see the primary source:

Barkley, E. F. (2010). *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

CITATIONS AND ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Angelo, T. A. & K. P. Cross (1993). “CAT 17: Invented Dialogues.” *Classroom assessment techniques: a handbook for college teachers*, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp. 203–207.

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