

# ***Dear America: Letters of Hope, Habitat, Defiance, and Democracy***

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## **In-Class Exercises for the Composition Teacher**

### **1. Analyzing audience**

We know that these letters were originally printed in the online journal [Terrain.org](http://Terrain.org). Put students into pairs to take a look at the journal. What observations can you make about the journal? What can we learn about the readers, the intended audience for these letters? (I would do this the very first day of class before using the book.)

### **2. Using writing to brainstorm and learn**

If they haven't already, have students read [Peter Elbow's piece](#) on freewriting. Then, once they've read at least part of the book, tell students they are going to "freewrite" with a prompt. This will help them learn how to use writing as a way of brainstorming. The prompt is, "What would you say in a letter to America?" Ask them to write for ten minutes without stopping. Their pen has to keep moving. If they can't think of anything to say, they have to write "Dear America" over and over again. After the ten minutes is over, invite students to share if they wish. Some will have a germ of an idea that could be turned into a Letter to America. It's a good way for them to see how they can use freewriting as a way of brainstorming ideas that can be later developed and revised.

### **3. Imitation**

One time-honored way to become a better writer is to take a piece written by an established writer and imitate that piece as a writing exercise. Erin Coughlin Hollowell's piece *From the End of the Road* (page 13) is a good letter for students to imitate and then share as a classroom exercise. Or Robert Wrigley's *Somewhere I've Never Travelled* (page 185).

### **4. Evaluating sources when we do research on the internet**

Have students read the Gregory McNamee piece "Of Truth, Post-Truth, Alternative Facts, and Lies" on page 19.

Discuss: What do people mean when they say we're in a post-truth era? What does he mean by calling out time the Age of Lies? What advice does he give to help us negotiate in this time of lies? What does he mean when he says that passive voice should be a red flag? What is symmetrical skepticism? He says that old journalists always said, "If your mother says she loves you, get it from two independent sources." What point is he making? He says that some opinions are more valuable than others: what does he mean by that? Has further reading and research ever changed your opinion on something? How can facts be deceiving? What's the difference between fact-checking and checking for bias?

Then choose a topic currently in the news (climate change, the water crisis in Flint, Standing Rock, and Greta Thunberg are ones I've used successfully in the past). For the next class, each student has to do some research on the topic. Then they have to come to class with what facts and information they've found, but more importantly, a short paper analyzing their sources of information. In class, we compare all the information and the sources, check facts and allow for bias, and see if we can figure out what is actually going on.

We then collaborate on a list of what things we look for in a source. Examples:

- 1) we want to know the author's name
- 2) we want to know the date this was written

- 3) does this source hire journalists who were trained as journalists?
- 4) does this source hire fact-checkers?
- 5) does this source print corrections if it gets something wrong?
- 6) what kind of reputation does this source have?
- 7) how long has this source been in business?
- 8) is there bias we need to account for?
- 9) how is this source funded?

## 5. Passive vs Active voice

In Gregory McNamee's letter, he tells us to look for the passive voice. (page 20)

*When someone says "mistakes were made," set your antennae on the most sensitive tuning.*

This is a good time to teach active voice vs passive voice.

After many examples, most students will see that active voice is in most cases a stronger way to write. But then you can talk about times when a writer might *choose* to use passive voice.

Lab reports will come up as one example. In that case, what you're doing is considered more important than what you're doing.

Who else uses passive voice often? People trying to shift blame. "The dog was kicked." "The lamp was broken." "Mistakes were made."

Political speeches are filled with passive voice. That takes the discussion back to the point that Gregory McNamee is making. Being a critical thinker means paying attention to language.

## 6. How to write an introduction

Put students in pairs.

First, ask them what makes them stop reading, what makes a bad introduction. Come up with a list. (It's boring, it's confusing, it doesn't make a point, it doesn't catch my interest, it uses cliches or tired sayings, it quotes the dictionary, it doesn't really say anything, it doesn't include any interesting details, etc.) Then have each pair write a deliberately terrible introduction. (You can pick the topic. I've used "violence in video games" successfully in the past.) Read them aloud, and vote on which is the worst introduction. (They are often hilariously funny.)

Tell them that most people write terrible introductions on their first draft, but now that they know what they look like, they need to edit that stuff out for the second draft.

Next: Ask them to go through the book reading just the beginnings of each Letter to America. Each student needs to choose a letter that has a beginning that caught their attention and made them want to read the whole letter. Then they have to answer the harder question: Why did it work? Then everyone needs to share.

## 7. Establishing credibility

*Read:* Ask students to read Diana Liverman's *Our Climate Future* (page 116).

*Discuss:* How does she establish her credibility as someone who is going to talk about climate change? (If you need an additional example, you can use Anita Desikan's *Science Under Fire* (page 120))

*Writing task:* Ask students to think of something that they have experience or expertise in. None of them have PhDs but they probably can come up with something. Perhaps it's years of playing Ultimate Frisbee or playing piano or training dogs or eating pizza. Tell them they can exaggerate a bit

to make up for their young age. Ask them to write a paragraph in which they explain their credentials to a reader who knows nothing about their topic. Their goal should also be to keep the details interesting enough to get the reader interested in the topic. Then share these paragraphs in class.

## 8. Development: choosing facts and details

Often beginning writers don't include any facts or details to support what they are saying. Or they do some research and include every single fact and detail they find, whether or not they are relevant to the point they are making. A more sophisticated writer does their research and then chooses the facts or details that are relevant to the point they are making.

In this essay, underline the facts or details. Then be prepared to explain WHY this writer choose those particular facts or details.

*Each One a Bright Light* by Lee Herrick (page 161)

*Hasten to Understand* by Kathryn Miles (page 241)

## 9. Analyzing prose and use of social media

The Richard Kenney poem (page 299) draws attention to Donald Trump's use of twitter. Find his twitter account and choose several tweets to analyze. For each tweet

- Fact check. Are the facts accurate?
- Does he use hyperbole?
- What is the bias?
- What's the tone? What does that tone achieve?
- What is the metamessage? What is he trying to say?
- What does this tweet achieve?

## 10. Endings

Have students look through the letters they've already read, and look especially at the endings. What makes a good ending? What do you think each writer's goal was for a particular ending? Make a list.

Some in particular to look at:

*What Will Keep Us*. Derek Sheffield. (page 60)

*The River Between Us*. Kurt Caswell (page 109)

*Somewhere I've Never Travelled* Robert Wrigley (page 185)

*Sentinel*. Ted Marshall. (page 208)

## 11. Organization: the Big Picture

In pairs, read this letter and then draw a picture that shows how the author organized their ideas. (It might look like a flowchart or an infographic or a diagram or something else. I give my students complete freedom on this one.) Then each pair has to go to the board, draw their picture, and explain why they think the organization was effective. This exercise leads to good discussions about how to organize a piece of writing.

Some letters that might work particularly well:

Fenton Johnson's *My Mother's Vote* (page 31)

Taylor Broby's *Notes to America* (page 43)

Kurt Caswell's *The River Between Us* (page 109)

Anita Desikan *Science Under Fire* (page 120)

Lee Ann Roripaugh *Dear America/Dear Motherland: An Essay in Fractures* (page 148)

## 12. Organization: the Shuffle

Take a letter that the students haven't read yet. Copy it, and then cut it up paragraph by paragraph. Shuffle the pieces of the essay. Paperclip together and give one of these packets to each pair of students. Tell them they have to decide what order to put the paragraphs in, and they will have to justify the order they choose. This will lead to good discussions about how to organize an essay. The essays in this book are especially suited to this exercise because they're short.

## 13. Learning to Discuss Difficult Topics

Have students read "In Case of Active Shooter" by Heather Ryan (page 210) Have them do some research on school shootings (and guns) ahead of time. Set aside a class for a discussion on the topic.

This is a collaborative exercise. We are working together. Here are the rules.

- Everyone has to be polite and respectful (if not, we all lose)
- We can use laptops and phones to fact check things people say
- We need to come to a consensus (that's the ideal) or if we can't, a 2/3 vote (any less than that, and we've failed the exercise.)
- Every person in the room has to speak at least once
- Teacher has to stay neutral although they can ask for fact checking

The topic is: **What can we do to prevent school shootings?**

- Teacher writes the topic on the board. Students come up with a list of ideas, which the teacher writes on the board. Other students can ask questions and can ask for facts and evidence, but all ideas are respected and are put on the board.
- Once we have a list of ideas on the board, we go through one at a time, discuss them, ask for more information if we need it, and then vote. Anything that doesn't get consensus (or a 2/3 vote, depending on the particular class) gets erased.
- At the end we look at what's left

The exercise is a success:

- If everyone has spoken at least once
- Everyone has been respectful and polite
- We've done a good job factchecking
- We've come up with a list of solutions

## 14. The Writer's Voice

Does it matter who wrote each letter? Often the writers introduce themselves with just a phrase or two. Many are writers well-known to their audience (the readers of Terrain.org). In class, each student can choose one writer and do some research to find out who that writer is. Write a short paper in which you include relevant information about the writer and a paragraph describing that writer's voice. For class discussion: Does what we found out about each writer change how we read the letter or how effective it is?

## 15. Ethos, Pathos, Logos: categories of persuasion.

Working as a class, define ethos, pathos, and logos.

Then put the students in pairs and ask each to come up with a letter for each category. (Most essays use all three -- but often there's one dominant appeal.)

Ask each pair to explain and defend their choice to the class.

Some examples:

Logos: Anita Desikan, page 120  
Pathos: Pam Houston, page 359  
Ehtos: Pete Souza, page 289