Letters About Literature

Teaching Activities

Part 1: Introduction

You want me to write a *letter?*

Um . . . What's a letter?

> *Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives—he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:*
>
> *Mr. H. Potter*
> *The Cupboard under the Stairs*
> *4 Privet Drive*
> *Little Whinging, Surrey*
>
> — J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

Although he did not know it then, the letter Harry Potter received that morning would change his life forever. What Harry did know is how the letter made him feel—someone had thought about him and cared enough to write to him! Letters have a way of giving special recognition to the person receiving it. And why is that? A letter is private, a great deal more private than posting a tweet or updating a status on social networks. It travels through space and time, becoming a bridge that can span decades, even centuries! A letter is not abstract or virtual. The reader can finger it and perhaps even sense the presence of the writer who penned the lines. When tied in bundles and saved in a drawer, letters can be history.

Writing a letter takes time, not just to put the words into sentences, but to think about what to express and how to express it. Letters have attitude! They can be persuasive, argumentative or deviously clever, even downright funny. But they can also be diplomatic, encouraging, comforting. A letter demands thoughtfulness and patience, for the writer must select just the right words to convey his or her thoughts. Most important, writing a letter requires an understanding of the person to whom you are writing. A letter is a personal, private relationship between the writer and the reader.

Letters About Literature is a reading promotion program challenging students to express themselves through this very personal form of communication. The pages that follow are activities teachers can use to guide their students through the book discussion and letter-writing process.

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

> *It's funny; in this era of e-mail and voice mail and all those things that even I did not grow up with, a plain old paper letter takes on amazing intimacy.*
>
> *— Elizabeth Kostova, The Swan Thieves*

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 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 (CCSS)

A personal narrative describing change or an argument/opinion piece supporting a changed viewpoint of the world or self fits the goals of CCSS. Well-developed letters will have descriptive details and clearly stated links between personal experience and the text. Effective argument/opinion writing will state a point of view and provide reasons and relevant and sufficient evidence to support the writer's stance.

Grade Level	Text Types & Purposes	Production & Distribution of Writing
4	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.1 - Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.3 - Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details and clear event sequences.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.4 - Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose and audience. 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.
7	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.7.1 - Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence. 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.	Same as above
11	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. 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.	Same as above

Note: The lessons and student worksheets begin on page 9 (Part 2). On pages 4 – 8 are the answers for each activity.

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.

MATERIALS

Level I:	**Worksheet A—Books Give Us Wings**
Level II:	**Worksheet B—Books that Make You Think, Books that Make You Feel**
Level III:	**Worksheet C—A Letter from Lois Lowry**

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 I: Books Change Lives

1. Harry's final paragraph sums up what he has learned. Students will express his ideas in their own words, which may include the following: He discovered that living without loved ones would not be living; living in secret would be like dying; and most importantly, at every stage of life there is something wonderful to experience and he wouldn't want to miss those experiences.
2. Focus your discussion on diverse reading experiences and ensure students comprehend the concept of "wings."

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.

LEVEL III: A Letter to Lois Lowry

1. They were mythical creatures, not real people.
2. Answers will vary but should include the main idea that in creating a book, an author lives on after death. Readers can revisit the time and place of a book—and therefore access authors—by rereading. The words remain alive.
3. (a) Lowry's choices begin with children's books and themes of courage and loss. As she ages, the titles become more mature and focus on her identity. (b) The books that matter most to us will change as we ourselves grow and experience many of life's conflicts and rewards.
4. The gifts varied, depending on the author and the book. At times it was a gift of understanding and the realization that she wasn't the only one in the world who felt a certain way. At other times the gift was comfort or the excitement of viewing another character's life that was so different from her own.
5. Because each person is an individual, he or she brings to the reading experience something unique. No two persons enjoy or experience the same book in quite the same way.

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.

MATERIALS

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.

MATERIALS

All Levels: **Worksheet F—The Lead Paragraph;**
Worksheet G—Bookends

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.

Bookends

1. The main idea emphasized is decisions.
2. Jonas provides the reader-writer with insight on how to make the right decisions.
3. Unlike Jonas, she doesn't repeat the key word "decisions." Instead, she presents the concept that reading is a puzzle. She mirrors that in the closing paragraph by using the word "muddled." In the opening she wonders why people escape into others' lives through books. In the closing paragraph, she answers her own question—to gain greater understanding of self and situations.
4. Walking through the shoes of a character who experienced cancer. In the body of her letter, which is not here but can be accessed by logging onto the Library of Congress website, Anna explains how her mother died of cancer and she struggled with accepting that. The author helped her to understand what happened not only to her mother but also to herself during this tragic period.
5. She lists things that make her happy.
6. She selects a quote by the main character and uses it to close her letter, explaining that what Matilda believes is also what she believes.

A FINAL NOTE! Discussion will vary but should focus on the main idea that while the writer addresses the author, as in "your book" in the opening and "you wove" and "your characterization" in the closing, the passages are not personal or reflective of the reader. The reader-writer is analyzing the book, not responding to it.

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

MATERIALS

All Levels: **Writing Worksheet H—A Word about Vocabulary**
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.

ANSWER KEY

A Few Words about Vocabulary

1. *Flat face* appears out of order and repetitive. Delete.
2. Showy language that is confusing rather than impressive. Delete and reword in simple language.
3. *Silhouetted* is misused. Meaning is unclear—does the reader-writer mean inspired? elevated?
4. *Extravagant* is misused. The word means excessive or lavish. Replace with more appropriate word, such as "very detailed" or "very imaginative.
5. *Fastidious* is misused. The word means meticulous. Replace with appropriate word, such as "picky" or "choosy."
6. *Ubiquitous* is both misused and also repetitive (all around me). Replace with appropriate word, such as diverse.
7. Language is tangled. State meaning more clearly, such as your book *mirrors* my life.
8. *Decrypted* is misused. Perhaps the reader-writer means depicted or described? *burst open almost like in fright*, while amusing in its literal interpretation, is wordy. Simplify.
9. *Animation* is misused. Does the reader-writer mean imagination?
10. *Popularity* is misused. The reader-writer means prevalence.
11. *Dramatized* is misused. Perhaps the reader-writer meant traumatized?
12. The language is showy and confusing rather than impressive.
13. *Historic knowledge* is misused. The reader-writer means "my knowledge of history." Recast sentence for simplicity and clarity.

LESSON 5: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER! Use this activity to reinforce concepts learned in the previous lessons. Some teachers who incorporate the LAL teaching materials into lessons have told us they use this handout (see materials below) as a quiz!

MATERIALS

Levels I, II: Reading Worksheet K: Part 1, You Be the Judge! Part 2, Beware of Dead Ends and Detours!

PROCEDURE

- List then review key concepts learned throughout the LAL unit: strong lead paragraph; bookends; correspond, don't compliment; synthesize, don't summarize; writer's voice; vocabulary and usage; paragraph structure—a beginning, middle and end.
- Distribute Reading Worksheet K and discuss. Part 2 is a discussion starter but recommended answers for part 1 follow:

ANSWER KEY for Part 1

Answers should touch upon these key points:

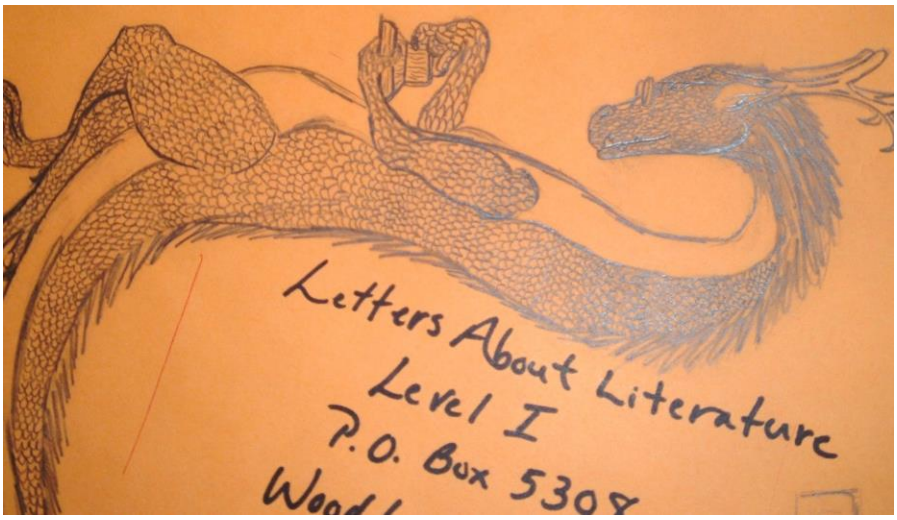
1. Lead paragraph provides interesting details and does catch our interest and has a lively writers' voice, but there is no link between these details and the book or the reader's reaction, either here or in subsequent paragraphs.

2. Closing paragraph mirrors the opening in that the writer refers to rock climbing. But again, she offers no statement linking the book to her reaction.

3. The author is not writing a fan letter or summarizing (good), but neither is she writing a reader response letter. The letter comes close, though, when the writer says the book brought back a sad memory but then she abruptly stops. What is the memory? How does it relate to the book series? She does not develop her ideas. Even saying that the book is inspiring is good but again, it is dead-ended. She never explains what she means by "inspiring" or provides an example.

4. Organization is choppy. Although the letter has three paragraphs (beginning, middle, end), the context and meaning are hard to follow. There is no link between paragraphs one and two. "Mysterious" is not explained. The final paragraph runs ideas together so that the meaning is unclear.

5. Among the grammatical errors are misspellings (it's, grown-ups, every one, except, etc.); words used incorrectly (nationally ranked, interested) and run-on sentences.



Ready to inspire your students to read, write and submit their entries?

PART 2 BEGINS ON PAGE 9.

Books Give Us Wings

Books have wings. You can't see them, but they are there just the same. Books may give you wings to understand the world around you. A book's characters can help you rise above bullying and peer pressure to discover pride and happiness in just being yourself. Or a book's wings can help you cope with difficult situations—an illness, the disappointment of not making the team, or even the death of a loved one.

Below are the first two paragraphs from a letter written by a Hollywood, Florida, fifth grader. What kind of wings did Gut Opdyke's book give her?

Dear Mrs. Gut Opdyke,

Your book is titled *In My Hands*, but I know that you found your courage "in your heart." Like the twelve people you saved, my grandmother was also 'hidden' as a child during the war. If her Polish heroes had done nothing, I would not be here today. Your book has inspired me, because it has shown me how to become a more sensitive and compassionate person. It has also shown me how to take the first step to stand up for what I know is right.

Recently I thought of you when I saw my friends taunting another girl. My friends asked me to join them. I refused. I befriended her and told my friends they were being cruel. They turned against me instead. I felt alone but doing the right thing meant more to me. After reading your book, I understand that it is "in my hands" to make a difference in this world. . . .

ACTIVITY

Read the Level I national wining letter from LAL 2003 below. Then answer the questions that follow.

Dear Natalie Babbitt,

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.

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 on would discover my secret. That would be pretty much like dying. I wouldn't want to leave but I would have to leave.

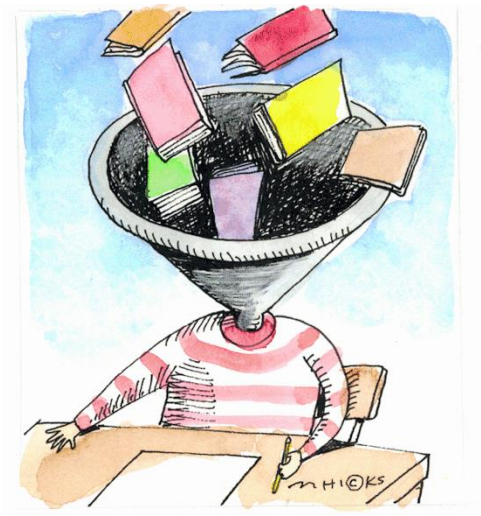
I'm thinking that maybe living forever wouldn't be such a good idea after all. God's plan includes a time for everything and an end to life at the right time. I guess I'll rethink the last of my three wishes.

Harry Maddox, Grade 5

1. Harry's letter explains how *Tuck Everlasting* gave him wings of understanding something important about life and death. What new understanding did Harry get from reading the book?

2. What book did you read recently that gave you "wings"—of courage, of understanding or hope?

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. Sleator,

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 wining 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. One 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?

A Personal Letter from Lois Lowry

Directions: Read the letter below and then discuss the key points that follow.

Dear Reader—

When I was young, I thought that all writers were creatures with mythical status: unavailable, inaccessible, perhaps dead. It never occurred to me to conceive of them as real human beings, in a house somewhere, drinking coffee, using a dictionary, making typing errors, chewing on a pencil eraser, twisting a strand of hair (or stroking a beard) as they thought of the next sentence.

Imaginative though I was as a kid, I never pictured a mailman knocking at the door of a writer and saying something mundane like, "Lots of mail from your fans today." Nor could I envision the writer opening a letter, reading a letter, or chuckling or weeping at a letter from a person like me.

Yet here I sit today, chewing on a strand of hair while I ponder a sentence, and on my desk is a stack of mail from readers who realize that I am no farther away from them than a first-class stamp.

I wish I were young again, with a favorite book by my side and a pen and paper in my hand.

Dear Lois Lenski, I just read a book that you wrote. It is called Indian Captive. *The girl in it, Mary, had hair the same light color as mine, and so the Indians called her "Corn-Tassel." Now I sometimes think of myself as "Corn-Tassel and I try to be as brave as she was. I don't tell anybody about that because they would laugh. But I think you would understand.*

That's a letter I would have written when I was nine.

At ten, I would have written to a woman named Betty Smith, to thank her for creating a little girl named Francie Nolan in a book called *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.* She was my best friend when we were both in sixth grade, though her life in the boisterous immigrant neighborhoods of Brooklyn seemed infinitely more exciting and dangerous than mine in a Pennsylvania college town. I envied Francie her raucous surroundings, shared her most private fears and worries, and have remembered her with love for almost fifty years.

When I was eleven, I met a boy named Jody Baxter and learned all there was to know about grief.

Dear Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, I have never lived in the South. I have never been poor. I have never been a boy. But when I read The Yearling, *I understood Jody, and I understood how he felt when his pet fawn had to be killed because it ate the crops. I had to give my dog Punky away because he bit my little brother. I know Punky didn't mean to. Now my heart is broken. You and Jody know how that feels.*

Dear Gustave Flaubert, I would have written, when I was fifteen and felt that my life was as dull and unrewarding as Emma Bovary's. At sixteen, making the acquaintance of Holden Caulfield, it would have been an ongoing, slightly sardonic thank-you to Salinger—at least until I turned seventeen and began to compose, in my mind, a more impassioned and convoluted correspondence with Thomas Hardy.

Somehow the communications I actually *did* put on paper—usually in garish turquoise ink (which seemed terribly soigne)—never amounted to more than perfunctory thank-you notes to great-aunts and grandparents after Christmas. *The sweater fits perfectly and will look nice with my new gray skirt.* There had never been the underlying level of communication that would have enabled me to speak the truth, even if one could write truths in such appalling ink:

The sweater fits just fine but, oh, Aunt Grace, I wish I had a more grown-up body to put inside it, and I wonder whether I will ever be pretty, and whether boys will ever like me, and I know you will understand . . . .

No. One can't write such things to a person who will be sitting across the dinner table from you on Sunday, suggesting another helping of peas. Privacy is required. Distance. And a different kind of gift for which to say thank you.

Of course, many authors are, in fact, dead. They are not drinking coffee, chewing a pencil stub, or stroking their beards—not in this world, at least. Yet how alive they are—Anne Frank, Malcolm X, John Steinbeck, and others—how accessible, how available, to each young reader.

What a gift they bring, author and reader, to each other.

Here's another unwritten letter from me to someone who changed my life:

Dear Harper Lee. Thank you for writing To Kill a Mockingbird. *I became Scout when I read the book and I have been Scout ever since. She (and you) taught me about innocence and honor. Thank you for never writing another book about her and her brother.*

I have grandchildren now. I can watch with delight as they turn pages that invite them into the lives of Scout, Jody, Francie, Corn-Tassel, Holden, and others I have never met. But I can't participate in their friendships between writer and reader. Those are private.

The phrase *Dear Author* is not just a simple formal salutation. It's a wish that touches on a love affair. Listen to it with envy and with awe.

Lois Lowry

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. As a child, what was Lowry's concept of a "writer"? How has her understanding of authors changed over time?

2. What does Lowry mean when she says even dead authors are "alive" and "accessible" to young readers?

3. Lowry shares snippets of letters she *might have written* to authors. The letters are from different stages of her life. (a) How do the authors and the stories they tell change as Lowry ages? (b) What does this tell you about literature and a person's response to it?

4. Lowry says she wrote thank you notes to relatives who gave her Christmas gifts but that the gifts authors gave her were "different." What does she mean?

5. What does Lowry mean when she says the relationship between an author and a reader is private?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Use Lowry's letter as a brainstorming model. List three books you read at three different periods of your childhood. Consider, for example, a book you read or a parent read to you when you were seven years or younger. Then move forward in time to a book you read when you were nine or ten, and then move forward once again to a book you read when you 12 or 13.

Next, answer these questions:

- How do the books' characters and conflicts differ?
- What did you find appealing in each instance?
- Most important, how did he the books you liked change as you changed and grew older?

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 book 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)*

Bookends (. . . or how to close your letter)

All good writing whether it is a story, a research report or even a letter, has three key parts:

- a beginning, or introduction;
- a middle, or body of supporting details; and
- an ending, or conclusion.

All three parts are important. The body is the largest part of the written message, but it is often the opening and closing paragraphs that help to organize the message and emphasize key points. Think of the opening and closing paragraphs of your letter to an author as *bookends.* A bookend provides support. It holds the many volumes in place, one next to the other. Remove one of the bookends and what happens? The books begin to tip and slide.

Directions: *The bookends below are from national winning letters from each of the three competition levels in previous LAL contests. Read the each opening and closing paragraph, discuss how the bookends mirror one another and emphasize key points.*

LEVEL I

from a letter by Gideon Bender (Washington, D.C.) to Lois Lowry:

Opening

There are many times that I never even think about all the decisions I make during a single day—what will I wear to school, what will I eat for lunch, how will I spend my free time, what book will I read, and on and on. Some of these decisions are more important and more difficult to make than others, but all of them are mine and all of them impact how I live my life.

Closing

As I continue down the roads of my life, I know I will not always remember the importance of having opportunities and challenges. However, I do know that when I face especially difficult or wonderful choices, I will remember that the decisions Jonas made empowered him to determine his own future. And I will do the same. Thank you for the gift of yours words. Peace.

1. What word or main idea from the opening does Gideon repeat in the closing?
2. Gideon is writing about the book *The Giver.* What link does he make with Jonas?

LEVEL II

from a letter by Anna Byers (Louisville, Kentucky) to Davida Hurwin:

Opening

Reading is a strange thing if you think about it, and I suppose you have. I mean, why would anyone want to escape and live the life of another when they could be out there living their own life? Taking this into consideration, perhaps it is the books we relate to, the ones that involve our lives, the books and characters with which we have things in common that are the best. They change us and make us who we are. Your book, *A Time for Dancing*, was one of those books for me.

Closing

It is difficult to walk through life muddled by a puzzle you can't seem to solve. This was my life before I read your book. Afterwards, I was enlightened. I had unlocked both my own feelings and those of my mother. *A Time for Dancing* allowed me to walk in the shoes of a person struck down by cancer. It was a walk I needed to take to understand my mother's death and to be at peace with it. Thank you for the gift of a lifetime, the gift of understanding and remembering and the gift of tears. I hope your beautiful book reaches many more and enlightens them, too. Thank you.

3. What main idea does Anna introduce in her opening paragraph that she then returns to in her closing paragraph?
4. What link to the book does Anna make—with a character, a conflict, or both a character and conflict?

LEVEL III

from a letter by Jazlyn Langford (Molt, Montana) to Roald Dahl:

Opening

There are some things in life that make you happy just because: a hot bubble bath after a week of camping; a baby's toothless grin; watching giant snowflakes float down from the heavens and land like butterfly kisses in a children's tousled hair; finding a crumpled $20 bill in your coat pocket from last spring; gazing into a star-filled sky. Sometimes things don't need explanations—they are simply endearing and wonderful. *Matilda* is one of these things.

Closing

Something in *Matilda* makes me inexplicably happy anytime I read it, like the pheromone in babies that makes you want to kiss them. You don't know why, but that's not really the issue. All you know is that you're happy and that's enough. Matilda accurately describes this wonderful sensation as " . . . flying past the stars on silver wings." So I would simply like to say thank you, Roald Dahl, for everything. You gave me my silver wings and now I can fly.

5. What main idea does Jazlyn introduce in her opening that she then returns to in her closing?
6. "Sometimes things don't need explanations" Jazlyn writes in her opening. How does she emphasize this key point in the closing?

A FINAL NOTE!

SOME LETTERS HAVE BOOKENDS BUT THEY AREN'T READER RESPONSE BOOKENDS.

Read this opening and closing and discuss why it may be better suited for a "lit-crit" (or literature analysis) exam (perhaps) and not for this particular writing assignment called Letters About Literature.

Opening

Your book *To Kill a Mockingbird* subtly shows how people judge and are judged by others. The book's characterizations and theme of racial intolerance and intolerance for anyone who is different are still relevant in today's society. In this letter, I will explain what I mean by this and how your use of characterization and symbolism makes this work of literature a classic.

Closing

I believe that the appeal of *To Kill a Mockingbird* has continued for decades since its publication is a direct result of the symbolism you wove throughout the narrative. In addition, your characterization of Scout and exploration of her relationship with both Jem, the other women in the novel and most importantly with her father ensures that this book will remain a classic for decades still to come.

A Few Words about Vocabulary

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

Ever been tongue-tied? You know what you want to say but your words get tangled? Sometimes you mix up the order of the words, like saying *Ever get tied-tongue?* Sometimes you insert a familiar-sounding word but one that doesn't mean the same thing, like saying *Ever get tong-tied?*

Writers often get "tongue-tied" too. They know what they want to write but they might mix up the order of the words or misuse a word. Being tongue-tied is usually the result of writing too quickly and not proofreading your work. Here are other common vocabulary mistakes writers make: replacing a perfectly fine but common word—tongue—with a more flowery synonym, like "organ of speech." *Ever have your organ of speech tied?* Sounds silly, doesn't it? Still, beginning writers often make this mistake of using recently learned vocabulary words from English class incorrectly. Others thumb through the *Thesaurus* for words that sound intelligent. They think that by using big words they'll impress the judges. Good writing doesn't work that way.

The audience who reads your work should be able to hear your *voice*, not your just-learned vocabulary. When you write, be natural. Use the kinds of words you would in everyday conversation. That's not to say that vocabulary isn't important. It is. But if the words you use are confusing or sound too stuffy, then you need to revise your language. Here is a surefire tip to help you untangle your vocabulary: **Read your letter aloud**. Listen to your voice. Listen to how the words and phrases sound. If the language is twisted or unclear, then revise.

ACTIVITY

The lines below come from submissions to past LAL contests. Read the sentence aloud and listen. What sounds awkward or out of place or too showy and unnatural? Suggest ways to improve each sentence.

1. I saw Allie lying as stiff as board flat face.
2. I do not imply that *The Grapes of Wrath* was the means of my abandonment of any hope of satisfaction in life; I only mean to say that life was not as I had thought.
3. I feel silhouetted by how you were always willing to sacrifice something for the good of somebody else.
4. Your plot was extravagant.
5. As a reader I am very fastidious and don't usually like many books I read.
6. *Crosses* made me more aware of the ubiquitous actions that surround me.
7. *Matilda*, one of the many books you have written, is a book I mirror my life by.
8. The best thing about the book was that it was so well decrypted you felt as if you were standing in the same room as her.
9. I'd march to my room right after dinner and my tired eyes would burst open almost like in fright at the sight of my book.
10. My animation used to be dull but ever since I read your book I have a better way of thinking.
11. Before I read your book, I was unaware of the popularity of child abuse.
12. I was recently dramatized by your series of three books based on your life.
13. Your book inculcated in me the idea that life should not be lived oblivious to the evils which life does most assuredly possess.
14. *Corelli's Mandolin* opened my eyes to the missing links in my historic knowledge.

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

- ❿ *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?

- ❿ *Audience*. Does the reader demonstrate knowledge of his or her audience? In other words, is the writer addressing the author and not the teacher?

- ❿ *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

- ❿ Does the reader talk to the author rather than summarizing the book's plot or analyzing literary elements within the book?

- ❿ Does the reader relate the book to himself or herself rather than asking the author questions about why he or she wrote the book?

- ❿ Does the reader correspond with the author rather than compliment?

- ❿ Is vocabulary smooth and natural rather than tongue-tied or showy?

III. Organization and Grammatical Correctness

- ❿ Does the reader present ideas in a logical, organized manner without unnecessary repetition?

- ❿ 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: _____

- ❿ 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?

- ❿ Has the reader proofread the letter for errors of spelling and punctuation?

Part 1: You Be the Judge!

Directions: Read the letter below. It was an entry for LAL Level I. If you were a judge for LAL, would you advance this letter to round 2? Why or why not? Circle whatever errors you find. Some errors are grammatical but the letter itself has other weaknesses. If necessary, review the previous worksheets you completed during your LAL lessons and then apply them to assessing this letter.

Dear Rachel Roberts,

I am a nationally ranked rock climber. I am considered as a sponsored athlete at the age of eleven! I even taught two actors how to rock climb for a movie! I am on a team called (its a little weird) "The Ape Factory" (I told you it was weird) in my hometown. One day, I made a 5.12—which is the hardest climb in the gym and no grown-up's could do it accept me. Enough about me, let's talk about magic and wonder in the fabulous world of Avalon!

You know when you get really interest in a book and you don't want to put it down? Avalon is that way with me! I've read all of them about five times for each and everyone! Your book is so mysterious. These books inspired me so much, it even brought back a sad and depressing time three years ago. It had to do with my granpa. I miss him so much!

Inspired by the series, they taught me more about friendship, you can never have too many friends, courage and bravery, stay strong where ever it might take you and believing is always seeing. I hope you make more of your series all the way to book 10. Please, if you ever get a chance, can you write back to me? If you do, I'll tell you more about my rock climbing!

From your friend and best reader,

Faye

Part 2: Beware of Dead Ends and Detours!

You're driving down a road and suddenly the pavement ends. You can go no farther. You have no choice but to turn around and find another route. Guess what? The same thing happens when you are writing. You start an idea (start down a road) but you never fully explain what you mean by that idea or you don't provide an example of what you mean. Look closer:

Dear Judy Blume, After reading your novel, I felt different about myself. That really surprised me. I didn't know that simple words on paper or characters who exist only in your imagination and now mine could have that effect on me. KATIE

Why is this a dead end? Sure, it's great use of language (*characters who exist only in your imagination and now mine),* but the writer never explains what he or she means by "different" or "effect." How is the author—the reader of this letter—to know what happened to Katie?

Here's another scenario. You are cruising down a highway, radio blasting and singing along. At this rate, you're going to reach your destination an hour ahead of time! All at once, you veer off the road into a field. You keep driving but the going is rough—your car is bouncing and the tires are kicking up dust clouds. Unless you somehow get back on smooth pavement, you'll blow a tire or run out of gas before you reach your destination.

This, too, happens when you are writing. You state an idea or opinion. You explain what you mean by that idea or opinion by providing details or even examples. So far, you're cruising! But then you get off the track. Some of your details or examples you add are irrelevant. They don't have anything to do with your main idea. It leaves the reader wandering about in a field, lost. Here's an example:

Dear Tom Brokaw, I now know why you called your book The Greatest Generation. *My grandfather, too, is a veteran of the Second World War. He was bombardier pilot shot down over Germany in 1945. His courage in surviving behind enemy lines was a story he had never told to us grandkids, until I read your book that is. As I was talking about the real soldiers in your book, he suddenly began to talk about* his *experiences during the war—his fear of dying, the hunger pangs that knifed through him as sharp as the winter wind while hiding from German Nazis behind enemy lines. Like the men in your book, he believed that risking his life was a small price to pay for the freedom of Europe. Years later, he climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa. One of the climbers in the tour group was a German pilot during the war. They embraced and someone took a photograph of them, high on that mountain, side by side.* TONY

Two former enemies who meet on Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa is an interesting story. But it is a detour from the main idea the writer was developing, specifically the courage and commitment of his grandfather during the war. That doesn't mean the writer can't include the detail about Mt. Kilimanjaro, but Tony has got to somehow find his way back to the main road. He has got to link the Mt. Kilimanjaro "detour" to the main highway of ideas in his essay or drop it altogether.

Avoiding roadblocks and detours is easier once you are aware that they exist. A good driver pays attention to the road signs along the highway. A writer has to keep an eye out too for the bumps in the road.