

## 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.

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 I, grades 4 - 6; Level II, grades 7 - 8; and Level III, grades 9 - 12. This educational supplement

provides classroom activities and black line masters to assist teachers in guiding their students through the book discussion and writing process. The unit has four lessons that take readers from prewriting discussions through writing and finally assessment.

They are:

**Lesson 1: Focus.** Introduces readers to the concept that books can change lives

**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 their letters.

**Lesson 4: Assessment.** Provides a checklist for editing and rewriting their letters.

Each black line master that accompanies the lessons are recommended for one or more of the three competition levels. However, teachers should feel free to adapt the materials to fit the specific needs of their students. Depending on the group and how much work is completed during class time, the lessons—including the writing of the letters—may require five to ten 45-minute sessions.

## NCTE AND IRA STANDARDS

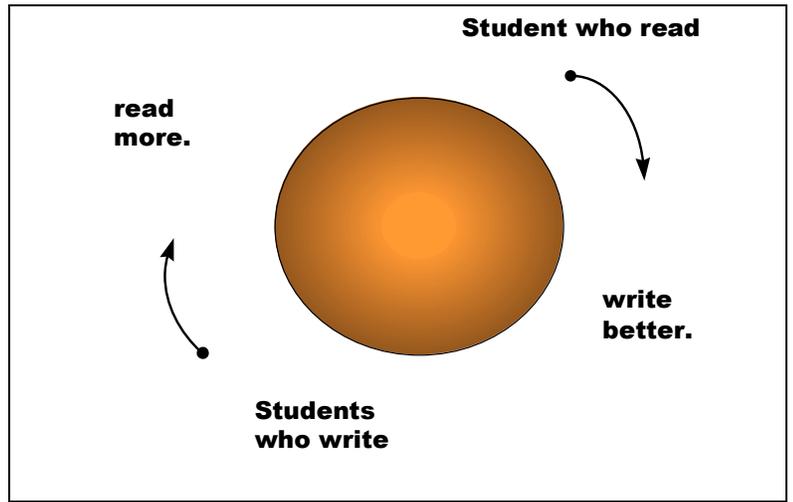
Thousands of teachers have found LAL a valuable classroom project. Each year, the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress receives hundreds of letters from teachers testifying how the program's theme and guidelines dovetail with state standards for language arts.

Listed below are the standards recommended by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association which apply to the LAL program and recommended teaching activities included in this educational supplement:

*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 own purposes.

**NOTE:** Refer to "LAL Reproducibles" file (Part 2) for the blackline masters to accompany these lessons.



## 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 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: Each student 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 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 “release” and forced conformity. In discussing Lindsay’s letter, the students may identify curiosity as an emotion. However, the main focus here is on thoughts, specifically 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 authors continue to exist and 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 authors’ gifts varied, depending on the author and the book. At times it was a gift of understanding herself and realizing she wasn’t the only one in the world who felt a certain way. At other times the gift was comfort or solace, even excitement of viewing another character’s life that was so different from her own.
5. Because each person is an individual, they bring to the reading experience something unique to themselves. No two persons may 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 on the chalkboard or overhead projector this phrase: *reader's response*. Ask students what the phrase might mean in regards 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 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 will 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 special detail of Huck’s adventure.

*Bookends*

1. Decisions is the main idea emphasized.
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 access by logging onto the Library of Congress Website, Anna explains how her mother died of cancer and she struggled with accepting that. The helped her to understand what happened not only to her mother but also to herself during those 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 what she, too, believes.

A FINAL NOTE! Discussion will vary but should focus on the main idea that while the writer addresses the author, i.e. “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. Lesson is written

### 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: You Be the Judge!

## 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.

## ANSWER KEY

Answers will vary but should touch upon the key points below:

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