

## **“I hope you will excuse my bad writing”: Cornelia Jefferson Randolph’s 1<sup>st</sup> Letter**

### **Overview**

Students will investigate a correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and his granddaughter Cornelia Randolph. The students will make predictions about what Thomas Jefferson and Cornelia would write about, and compare the style of writing of the past to our style of writing letters today. Students will also analyze the letter-writing conventions used in their correspondence.

### **Prior Knowledge**

Students should have some background of Thomas Jefferson such as:

1. Lived from 1743-1826
2. 3<sup>rd</sup> president of the United States
3. Author of the Declaration of Independence
4. Additional background information can be found on:  
<http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/brief-biography-thomas-jefferson>

Letter Writing Knowledge:

1. Before this lesson students should know the general five parts of a letter: heading, greeting, body, closing, and signature.

### **State Standards**

#### **Virginia Standards of Learning: Reading**

2.12 The student will write stories, letters, and simple explanations.

3.6 The student will continue to read and demonstrate comprehension of nonfiction texts.

- b) Use prior and background knowledge as context for new learning.
- c) Preview and use text features.
- d) Ask and answer questions about what is read.
- e) Draw conclusions based on text.
- j) Use reading strategies to monitor comprehension throughout the reading process.
- k) Identify new information gained from reading.

4.12 The student will write cohesively for a variety of purposes.

e) Recognize different modes of writing have different patterns of organization.

### **Common Core Standards**

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.1](#) Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

### **Objectives**

1. Students will be able to label and identify the five parts of a letter.
2. Students will be able to comprehend the content of Thomas Jefferson's letter to his granddaughter.
3. Students will be able to compare and contrast letter conventions of the past and present.
4. Students will be able to write their own letter to a family member.

## **Procedures**

### **Step 1**

*Duration:* 10-15 minutes

#### **Introduction**

1. Project the image of Cornelia's letter to Thomas Jefferson on your whiteboard. Do not give your students any information about the letter. Ask your students to look at the letter silently for a minute. Then ask the students to find a partner and discuss their observations of the letter. If students are having difficulty reading the letter, feel free to read it aloud.

2. If students need some direction during their discussions with their partners, ask them the following:

- Who do you think is writing this letter?
- What time period do you think this letter was written? Why?
- What is the author's purpose in writing this letter?

3. After recording the students' observations of the letter, inform them this was a letter from Cornelia Randolph to her grandfather Thomas Jefferson.

4. Review the observations the students had made originally, and discuss if knowing the author or the recipient of the letter changes any of their original assumptions.

### **Step 2**

*Duration:* 20-25 minutes

1. Following the discussion of Cornelia's letter, project onto a whiteboard the letter Thomas Jefferson wrote to Cornelia at a later date (this is not a direct response to her letter)\*. Show the students the writing of the original letter. The students will probably not be able to read the letter due to the small cursive handwriting, but ask them to identify the parts of the letter they find present in Jefferson's writing.

2. After looking at the parts of his letter, show the transcribed version of the letter to the students and read it aloud.

<http://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/letter-granddaughters-silkworms>

3. After reading the letter aloud, hand out a copy of the transcribed letter to the students.

4. Ask the students to work with a partner to understand the content of Thomas Jefferson's letter.

5. Key strategies to emphasize for determining understanding:

- Highlight unfamiliar words. Try to determine their meaning from the context of the sentence and use of a dictionary.
- Determine the general points that Jefferson is making to his granddaughter by reading ahead if some parts do not make sense
- There are approximately three main topics that Jefferson is writing about to Cornelia. Try to find where he switches topics so you can organize the information.

6. Come together as a whole group and share out students' understandings of Thomas Jefferson's letter.

Ask students what strategies worked best for them, and assist students as necessary in determining the meaning of the letter.

\*Thomas Jefferson did write a response to Cornelia's letter, but the contents of the letter are very difficult for younger learners to understand. If you are using this lesson with older or advanced learners you can find the original response to this letter on the Library of Congress website: [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mtj:3:./temp/~ammem\\_MJSK:.](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?mtj:3:./temp/~ammem_MJSK:)

### **Step 3**

*Duration:* 20-30 minutes

1. Have students discuss why Thomas Jefferson wrote letters in his time. Also, ask students, “Why did Thomas Jefferson keep copies of letters that he wrote? How did he make copies of each letter?” Show students the image of Jefferson's polygraph.
2. Part of this lesson was to observe the letter writing conventions that Jefferson practiced. Ask the student, “Why do you think some of these conventions were necessary when writing a letter?” Key points: The date was important because letters could take a long time to travel to their destination. The reader would want to know when the letter was sent. The signature is important so the person knows who the letter is from, etc.
3. As a final activity, have the students complete a Venn diagram on the topics Thomas Jefferson discussed in a letter to his granddaughter with what a modern day grandfather might write to his granddaughter.

### **Step 4**

*Duration:* 20 minutes

*Assessment Options:*

1. Students compose a letter to a family member or close friend. The letter should include detailed information about his/her life and use all of the letter-writing conventions.
2. Students could pretend to write back to Thomas Jefferson as Cornelia. “What would Cornelia say in response to Thomas Jefferson?”
3. Students could create a modern day conversation between Thomas Jefferson and Cornelia through text messages or status updates. “How would Thomas Jefferson and Cornelia communicate now? What would they discuss with one another?”
4. Students could write a response to the following question: How has our style of communicating changed today? What are some advantages and disadvantages to these changes?

### **Accommodations:**

If working with younger grades, teachers could use the first part of the lesson with Cornelia's letter to address the conventions of letter writing and the importance of communication. Students could have Cornelia's letter read aloud to them and discuss a person they would also like to write too. Using her letter as a model, they could write to a family member or friend.

To view the original letter and transcription visit:

<http://classroom.monticello.org/kids/gallery/imagepdf/315/Letter-from-Cornelia-Randolph-to-Thomas-Jefferson/>

Transcription of Cornelia's Letter:

Dear Grandpapa,

I hope you will excuse my bad writing, for it is the first letter I ever wrote, there are a number of faults, in it I know, but those you will excuse. I am reading a very pretty little book called dramatic dialogues, that mrs smith gave sister Elen when she was a little girl. I am very much pleased with it. all the children send their love to you. we all want to see you very much

adieu my dear Grandpapa,  
believe me to be your most  
affectionate Granddaughter.  
C.R.

Image of Jefferson's original letter to Cornelia:

<http://www.monticello.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/T55912.pdf>

Transcription:

Monticello June 3. 11.

My Dear Cornelia,

I have lately recieved a copy of mrs Edgeworth's Moral tales, which seeming better suited to your years than to mine, I inclose you the first volume. the other two shall follow as soon as your Mama has read them. they are to make a part of your library. I have not looked into them, preferring to recieve their character from you after you shall have read them. your family of silk worms is reduced to a single individual. that is now spinning his broach. to encourage Virginia and Mary to take care of it, I tell them that as soon as they can get a wedding gown from this spinner they shall be married. I propose the same to you that, in order to hasten it's work, you may hasten home; for we all wish much to see you, and to express in person, rather than by letter, the assurance of our affectionate love.

Th Jefferson

P.S. the girls desire me to add a postscript, to inform you that mrs Higginbotham has just given them new Dolls.

Jefferson's Polygraph:

image courtesy of: <http://classroom.monticello.org/kids/gallery/image/237/Polygraph-on-Jeffersons-desk/>



**Topics in Thomas Jefferson's letter**

**Topics in a modern-day letter**

