

# Exploring Literature through Letter Writing Groups

## Letter Exchange Example

Since I want to use letter writing groups over the course of the year, I have decided that the extra time needed to set up and teach my students how to use online discussion forums is worthwhile. With their letters always online and their specific exchanges grouped together, I will be able to skim their exchanges as they develop, I and the students will be able to refer to various letters in class, and the letters will be available for students to refer to and even quote from when it comes time to write their papers.

The year will begin with a unit on heroism in which we will explore the idea that heroism is, to some extent, culturally determined. Over the course of this unit, we will read *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf*, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *The Warrior Woman* by Maxine Hong Kingston, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, and *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White, in that order. The first letter series will begin while we are reading *Beowulf* so that I can keep tabs on their reactions to that difficult poem. I want the letter exchange to consist of four letters to be exchanged over a period of two weeks. This process will culminate in a paper that explores whether Beowulf can be both a good hero and a good king.

As part of our wrap up of *The Hobbit*, I will preview the letter writing assignment by explaining what it is, that we will use it throughout the year, and how I want the letter exchanges to be used. I will ask them to think about and discuss the differences between using evidence to engage in an exploration of an idea and using evidence to win an argument. We will then use specific examples from *The Hobbit* to think about how we might explore issues of heroism in a way that opens a space for dialogue. Outside of class, I will form the letter groups and the online discussion forums so that everything will be ready to go when we spend a day learning how to use the forums.

We will begin *Beowulf* by spending a class or two prefacing the poem and Anglo-Saxon culture. In a class session between this introduction and our first discussion of *Beowulf*, I will assign the groups and we spend a class period learning how to use the online forums. During that session, I will pass out a quick reference sheet on how to use our forum, and I will show the class how to post and respond to posts and how to access the software's help system. We will then spend some time making practice posts and practice responses in their designated group forums so that they are more likely to remember how to perform this task. As they practice posting and responding, I will provide help as needed and keep an eye out for students who seem to understand the software in order to ask them to provide help as well. Once everyone seems comfortable with the software, which may be the same day as the forums are introduced or the following class, I will give each student a filled out Letter Exchange Chart. I will also pass out the first letter assignment and the Letter Exchange Guidelines. For this first letter exchange series, as I want to be very hands on with *Beowulf*, I will provide a prompt not just for the first letter each exchange in the series. In future letter exchange series, I will only provide a specific prompt for the initial letter, and from time to time I will leave even the approach of the first letter up to each student.

In a class shortly before they will make their first post, I will give them a brief writing prompt about that day's reading and ask them to post it in their group forum. This will help to ensure that each student remembers how to post to the forum. As they go through this series of exchanges, I will make sure that everyone is posting and responding, and I will spot check the content of letters, making sure that I have looked over one or two posts from each student by the time the first series is over. As they engage in this first series of letter exchanges, we will spend some time discussing both the process of posting and responding to letters and the content of those letters. I will also refer to specific letters during class discussion and I may even organize a day's discussion around issues raised by the students in their letters. As they write each letter, I will ask them to use the Letter Exchange Rubric to do a self-evaluation of their letters.

After we have finished discussing *Beowulf*, both in class and through our letters, I will assign students their first paper. I will encourage them to use their letters as a resource. Not only will they be able to revise and use passages from the letters they wrote, I will encourage them to use the letters of their classmates as sources to quote or paraphrase, by exploring further a line of inquiry started by a classmate, or by arguing with the content of a letter. I will also ask them to look over their letters and their self-evaluations and use them to write me a brief letter that evaluates their group discussion. They will need to support their evaluation with examples from their discussion and the self-evaluations they wrote during the series of exchanges.

Over the course of the year, we will engage in a number of letter exchange series. The number of letters per series, the purpose of each exchange series, the use of prompts in each series, and even the members of each groups will vary over the course of the year. As for the groups, I tend to change them once or twice during the year. While I find that the conversations generally get stronger as groups get more comfortable with each other, I also find that my first attempt at grouping usually results in one or two strong groups, one or two weak groups, and some okay groups. By making new groups which combine students from strong groups, fair groups, and weak groups, the overall quality of discussion tends to improve, thereby making the exchanges more valuable for everyone.