Writing weekly letters back and forth between instructor and students harnesses the energy of a familiar form and friendly voice in the service of classroom community. No other writing assignment the author has ever devised has the motivating power of these letters.

Writing Back and Forth: Class Letters

Toby Fulwiler

When people write about anything, they learn more about it. Often, they learn more than they intend—about what they know, what they don’t, and where they need to go next. Often, the same draft that answers some questions poses others. Serious writing, in other words, is a dynamic, unpredictable thinking process, seldom a straight line, seldom complete in one draft or sitting. School assignments, however, often cut this complicated process short, asking that one draft or sitting to answer old questions, but not raise new ones. Too often in school writing, stakes are high, the pressure on, the deadline close, but opportunities for dialogue and revision few and far away.

Dear Classmates,

Welcome to “Studies in Composition and Rhetoric.” During the semester we’ll explore the historical development and current state of teaching writing within the field of English studies. We’ll look at selected contemporary issues, including cultural literacy, action research, and writing across the curriculum. Finally, all of us will examine process of our own composing—how we learned it, how we do it, how we change it.

Writing letters back and forth with your students increases dialogue, suggests rethinking, and encourages rewriting, yet the stakes remain low. Weekly letters promote the give and take of learning rather than the finality of testing and measuring.

All letters in this chapter, both mine and the students, are authentic and reproduced with permission; some have been edited for clarity, brevity, or anonymity. My thanks to the students in my graduate seminars from 1993 to 1995 for permission to use their letters in this chapter.
Each week I invite you to write a letter to me about ideas related to our readings, writings, and class discussions. Make your letter honest, lively, and personal, while still addressing matters of intellectual and emotional concern about writing and teaching writing. At least once, include your classmates as your audience, making copies for all to read and respond to.

Each term, I write weekly letters with one of my classes, composing my syllabus as a letter, requesting letters back. I would write letters with all my classes if I had time and energy, but I don’t. I ask other classes to keep journals and share selected entries with me to which I informally respond.

I will write a letter back to all of you (the whole class) each week, mailing it on Monday so that you will have read it by Thursday. In this letter I will address some, but not all of the concerns you raise collectively in your letters to me. (In fact, I have written this syllabus as a letter to suggest a possible model for length, style, and form.)

I happen to teach English and so use letters in both my undergraduate and graduate writing courses. But were I a teacher of history, nursing, or natural resources, I would also use letters (as does my chemistry colleague, Michael Strauss, who assigns them in organic chemistry). Letters work in all subjects where instructors and students care about each other’s thoughts, see curriculum as exploration, and are willing, at times, to negotiate who is the learner, who is the teacher.

Thanks for writing back to me in our first class. Ten of you report feeling pretty good—if somewhat confused—four are anxious, one ready to drop. (Hmmm.) Let me share back some of your first impressions of the letter assignment:

Steve—I’m not comfortable with a “letter” being indicative of my writing on a scholastic level.

Mary—I like to write letters, and am a little concerned about turning a private pleasure into a public product.

Sue—I like how the letter format makes your syllabus seem like part of a conversation and our writing back, part of the conversation.

Gustav—I think I’m a little in the dark about your intentions here.

In my letters back, I share fellow students’ concerns by quoting students selectively, not worrying about citing each student in every letter, trusting time to even things out. When reading a set of student letters, I look for themes, highlight common questions, and try to quote people fairly, not out of context. After a few weeks of finding their ideas featured in my letters, nearly all the students enjoy the larger intellectual community that shared ideas create—and they like, especially, the notion that their weekly questions and concerns become part of the course agenda.

Liza—I want to learn more about portfolio assessment and how to incorporate it into a classroom.
Pike—My main interest is seeing how writing can be applied in real world situations.

Larissa—Though I’ve taken several writing courses, I really don’t know how one teaches—let alone learns—to write well.

Everyone knows how to write letters. Graduate students, undergrads, and instructors have written, received, and read letters of one sort or another all their lives. In the public schools, students saturate their classrooms with unassigned letters—called notes—with or without teacher approval. Letter writing is as natural and easy as writing ever gets.

Todd—Previously, writing two pages for a class would have been as bad as pulling teeth, yet here I just rattled it off painlessly.

Michelle—if I were to teach a high school literature or writing class, I would have the students . . . write a brief letter explaining their lives, interests, dislikes, lifestyles, language styles, course expectations.

Early on, I ask the students for blanket permission to quote from their letters by name, suggesting they mark overly private passages “don’t publish,” but trust that otherwise I will cite them fairly. Their trust is usually warranted, though occasionally I have made mistakes:

My apologies to the several of you I quoted out of context last class; I meant to survey the wide range of class reactions to Britton and Berthoff; I did not intend for this sampling to substitute for a full scale debate of the readings.

Letters imply equality, more or less. Writer and reader make a tacit pact to converse and explore in conversation, each with a turn to say, a turn to respond: the response is part of the assignment, the assignment part of the response. Being equal increases the chance of being honest.

I’m sorry we ran out of time at the end of last class—I didn’t allow enough time for reading to each other or for articulating your revision plans. I really want you to tell me (by writing a note on the back of your draft) where you plan to go next on your paper—I always read this before formulating my own comments, trusting you know better than I what to do next. We’ll do better next time.

Letters are invitations to share, explore, query, and continue talking. Letters are good places to try out ideas, see how they are received, listen to reactions. If an idea is questioned, reformulate it, expand it, or bag it. (Hey, it was just an idea.)

Sue—Am I a writer? Perhaps this class will answer that question.

Stephanie—I’m hoping this course will unlock some kind of secret door and I will begin to write for myself and then enjoy showing my writing to others—which so far in my graduate career has not been the case.
Kathy—I’ve never felt like a “writer,” would never call myself a writer, and am sometimes shocked to see my own words in print.

Letters don’t have thesis statements. Or if they do, it may be an accident. Nor do they need to assert claims or arguments or hypotheses or propositions that then need to be supported, proven, or documented in MLA, APA, or CBE style. In fact, a letter that is all thesis and support puts a damper on exploration and dialogue. Of course, a letter will sometimes lead to a thesis, and that’s okay, too.

Todd asks, “Do you always teach writing the same way?” Well, I’m really not sure. My only honest answer is yes and no. In all writing classes I aim at the same things—to improve writers’ knowledge, strategies, and confidence levels. The difference between first-year and advanced students is where to start, what to expect, how far to go. So, essentially, my objectives with your class remain the same—to help you write better and feel better about yourselves as writers.

In exams, term papers, and lab reports, when you admit you are confused or don’t know something, you leave yourself vulnerable to criticism, ridicule, and low grades. In letters, you admit, share, explore, and debate your uncertainty.

Jaime—If teachers teach the same course the same way won’t it get awfully boring?
Joanne—I think teachers always teach the same course, but same, by the way, doesn’t necessarily mean boring.
Trish—Yes, I think we all do teach the same way . . . the same pulls, the same urges, the same drives . . . your quest is always the same: to get the student to a place they were not before.
Gustav—I can’t really shed any light on this subject.

Letters let you have it both ways. (What do I mean by that?) Letters encourage doubt and uncertainty as well as candor (of course, other forms allow for these things, too—personal essays, for instance—but letters actually promote them). You can assert in one voice then question your assertion in another and not be penalized for your confusion. Too often in thesis-driven writing, you are expected to have it only one way (or to pretend to have it only one way), to have one thesis to prove or support—especially if you are a student writing a paper. But letters invite the back and forthness of the doubtful mind, accepting the paradoxical and contradictory way the world seems to work.

(Well, Todd, my answer to you makes me wonder if my objectives are always the same in teaching literature courses—to improve readers’ knowledge, strategies, confidence levels. But I do have different agendas in introductory survey courses than in narrowly focused classes for majors, don’t I?)
Most people write letters in their natural writing voices: first-person pronouns, contradictions, personal asides, digressions, humor, slang, expletives. . . . I prefer dashes to semicolons, ellipses to transitions, sometimes sentence fragments, other times endless sentences.

Kathy—I’ve finally realized that my letter to you is teaching me something—the letter is really more for me than you, isn’t it—or am I wrong? (How could I be wrong!)

Toby—Ask yourself if you learn best from listening to yourself or listening to others? Reading other’s writing or writing yourself? If you’re anything like me, you’ll answer, “Well, it sorta depends.”

The letters let me restate class objectives in a way that often needs doing some weeks into the term. In fact, letters allow me to refocus and redirect the course of the class throughout the course of the class.

Whether you plan to teach or not, in this class, your writing is part of course content—an object of study: how I assign it; how you approach it; how I respond to it; how, where, when you compose it; how we negotiate it; how we share, assess, and learn from it.

Peter Elbow (1981) talks about “good-enough writing”—writing that conveys information in a sufficiently clear, but not elegant manner, that accomplishes approximately what both writer and reader need for the moment. Letters can be like that, too—one-draft good-enough writing that makes a good enough case and doesn’t need to be revised, edited, and worried to death—but here, too, there are exceptions.

Mary—Is it necessary or advisable to revise these letters to you?

Toby—No, not unless you care to. However, I’ll admit that I revise my weekly letters to you because addressing fifteen specific people at once gets pretty complicated. . . . So I revise to be clearer, more clever, more honest, more comfortable—I care very much about how my writing represents me and my ideas (& I’m also aware of how closely you examine my words for clues to my values, beliefs, biases—hey, I’m the guy who grades you—I don’t blame you).

When people write letters to people they trust, they worry less about conventional correctness and more about the matters on their minds. Letter writers don’t try to make mistakes (at least I don’t), but when they do it’s no big deal. But letter writers do try to avoid misunderstandings (at least I do).

So, Mary, my institutional authority (!) makes me as careful in my way as you are cautious in yours. But ultimately, I revise more to be honest and clear than safe: I love language, form, genre, style, image, rhythm, wordplay, voices, and so I end up revising and editing every expression intended for public consumption, even memos, e-mails, and class letters such as this.
Peter Elbow (1981) also talks about “no-big-deal writing”—writing that’s accepted as exploratory and tentative and doesn’t commit the writer to a whole lot, that’s not contractual nor set in cement or stone. No-big-deal writing: try it out, try again, again. Letters can be that part of a conversation where you say, “Maybe,” or, “No, that’s not what I meant at all,” or, “Hmmm.” What Peter now calls “low stakes writing.”

Laurie—I write, I am. Yet, writing is pain . . . an ordeal.

Trish—I am beginning to realize my writing might be better if I began creating a paper trail.

Sam—I am confused. And you know what? I am finally realizing that confusion and learning are integral to each other.

Edis—It is impossible to remove ourselves from our writing. But it is possible to hide our thoughts, to hide ourselves behind a rhetorical screen.

Letters are short on organization and development. Not necessarily, of course, but because they are often one-draft productions, their organizational patterns are most often associational rather than logical or chronological. And they are long on readability and candor. Not necessarily, of course, but because they are often written to a real person rather than for a grade, there’s little point in pretension, deception, or bluff. They are informal papers with a real audience.

Carol—At the end of class you said that we should not be “critics” of reading that we have not fully read or understood. I disagree. I think we should be critics of everything we read, or do, or say to a certain degree.

Gustav—I am still roaming in darkness—is there any source of light?

Letters substitute well for quizzes because they include reactions to and explorations of weekly reading assignments—but without a sense of judgment. (You can’t write much about what you haven’t read—after a while it begins to show.) Letters have the advantage in allowing writers to respond to readings on their own terms and in causing less anxiety. In classes where I use letters, well-prepared students become the rule rather than the exception (there are always exceptions). In addition to asking for general responses, I sometimes ask for letters that address particular issues.

As you finish Jim Berlin’s chapter on the current status of composition studies, examine our seminar syllabus, readings, classroom practices, and writing assignments; explain why Berlin would classify our class as expressive, cognitive, or social epistemic.

Letters expand the possibilities of journals. They are journals with an audience—informal, searching, tentative, honest, sometimes emotional. Authentic journals are for the writer’s self, not the teacher reading over her shoulder, so honest journal writers are always in a bind when instructors collect their jour-
nals. Note that letter writers try harder than journal writers to make thought communicable: writing “Dear Toby” makes all the difference, because they know I don’t know what they know. And it makes a difference for the letter writer, too, as such forced shaped thought often leads to interesting places.

Edis [a teaching assistant]—Most of my English 1 students don’t like journals: Some will [ask] for more in-class directed journal writes (just tell me what you want), while others will tell me they cannot write under the pressures of time and class environment (it’s not natural).

Letters promote classroom community. Not necessarily but usually, as everyone enjoys the freedom to explore anything about the course he or she wants to. When students and instructors write to each other, they hear each other better.

Jennifer—Upon reading the other students’ comments I felt myself a part of a “community of thinkers.” . . . I was actually surprised that so many of us do not view ourselves as writers.

Letters encourage playing with conventions, with language, with my reader (who I’m trusting will accept my play and, in turn, play back with me). I write in various forms and voices to suggest that in letter writing there really ain’t no rules.

Gustav—In Switzerland our undergraduate classes were more formal—not at all like this. It has been hard getting used to. Writing was expected to be formal too, and to be finished and carefully documented when you handed it in. There was no changing it or revising—and no playing with your voice. I’m starting to like the play.

Letters are alternate modes of assessing learning. More to the point, they allow you to witness (and assess if you wish) the process of learning, as do journals and classroom conversations.

Meanwhile, some are worried about what counts in here: The letters count—I expect fifteen by week fifteen; but it’s the doing of them that counts, not their conventions, content, form, or style. In the same way, your journal doesn’t count—at least not for me—as I don’t intend to read or measure it. But keeping one will provide material from which to write letters, find ideas for papers and research projects, and help your mental health to boot. (No promises, but that’s what mine does for me.)

Letters invite letters back. When you write letters, you expect a reply—not a grade, but an honest-to-goodness reply. You start a dialogue with no necessary right answer, conclusion, or end in sight. Your letter invites mutual exploring, questioning and answering, possibly a meeting of two minds—collaborative learning.
Look, you either write the letters or you don’t. If you miss one or two, no big deal. If you miss more, what’s the problem? Exactly what and how you write are your business, that you write is mine. But, believe me, your reactions to the readings, class discussion, research projects, as well as anything else related to the course helps me teach better.

Letters lower your expectations. (It’s just a letter.) A letter is a sample of what’s on a writer’s mind at the moment of writing, not of his or her comprehension or literacy or worth. There can always be another letter—better, more thoughtful, more complete, literate, clever, or profound. Letters leave doors open. The only fair assessment of this particular assignment is quantitative.

Laurie—I was relieved to read in your letter that it was the doing of the letter that counted, not the content, style, etc., though admittedly, I have a very hard time believing that.

Each week, it takes me about two hours to read student letters and write mine back—longer for the set of thirty-two, the largest class in which I have assigned letters. They work especially well with once-a-week graduate seminars, where they seem to add an extra class meeting by promoting out-of-class dialogue. (And they work especially well to relax graduate students who become especially anxious about their developing professional voices and selves.)

This time I had the urge to respond to nearly every one of you individually—but, as usual, I just didn’t have the time. I can tell that, now, in your fifth letter to me, most of you are accepting—even liking—the letters back and forth as another way to advance our seminar (frankly, I’d have been surprised if this hadn’t happened, human beings talking to each other in writing).

E-mail letters, in which I don’t capitalize, are something else again—very useful and a little different from these weekly paper letters. E-mail letters seem to evolve naturally, now, in all courses where I share my e-mail address. I encourage students to open e-mail accounts in order to correspond privately with me as well as more easily with each other. In addition, if students want more responses from everybody, I invite them to subscribe to the class listserv, which allows them write to me and their classmates simultaneously. When students send me an e-mail letter, I do write back individually—briefly but personally.

From: toby fulwiler <tfulwile@moose.uvm.edu>
To: kristina m. <kristina@moose.uvm.edu>
Subject: new paper
On Mon, 6 Nov, kristina wrote:

Hi! E-mail is fun and saves me printing ribbon! I can’t wait to get my paper back from you tomorrow. I really enjoyed writing the one on my language autobiography.
It's rough because I have a lot more to include, but this is the first time I've worked with prose snapshots. It's amazing how they speed up the writing process, since there's no need for lengthy transitions. It almost feels as if I'm cheating or taking the easy way out, but it isn't as easy as it looks.

yes, i know, and i love the cheating, cutting to the chase that the snapshots allow. but as you probably already know, they only work when you craft them as you do conventional paragraph writing. right now, i'm writing a chapter on “letters” all in snapshots for a book about writing assignments. wish me luck, too.

From the first letter on, my students and I add P.S.’s to our letters. We do this in order to share information that has absolutely nothing to do with the class itself—though it has a great deal to do with getting to know each other as real people who have lives beyond the classroom. In a seminar in which people must trust each other enough to read and respond helpfully to each other’s writing, I want us to know each other.

P.S. The hardest thing about February, for me, is the distance remaining until motorcycle season—at least another month, more likely two. It’s not the cold that stops me (my motorcycle has a windshield, heated handgrips, electric vest—this is, after all, Vermont); what stops me is the ice—ice gotta be gone from the roads for two wheels to stay up—just in case you wondered.

At term’s end, I move the letters from an informal to a formal assignment—or, as Peter Elbow would say, from low to high stakes—and expect now to see more focused, deliberate, and crafted writing examining themes, patterns, and concerns of a term’s worth of correspondence. I request “an Edited Edition of your collected letters with an introduction to provide context and excerpts to explain their meaning or value.”

Stephanie—What emerges from these letters, as I re-read them, is a sense of my world as one big hologram. Everything is connected in some way. If you break a hologram into pieces, any one piece will reflect the same pattern as the whole together: this is how I compose my life on these pages. What I always thought was a hindrance to my learning—my personal and emotional sensitivity—is really the core of my learning.

The edited edition of the letters is a real term paper of sorts, providing an evolutionary overview of each writer’s semester journey—the results of which often amuse, enlighten, and surprise writers who by term’s end have forgotten what they wrote two months ago (so, there really is a pattern to my thinking after all!).

Stephanie [a teacher intern]—A good example of [my emotional sensitivity] is found in the letter of February 18:
This week I am starting to decompose, to fall apart again, to dissect myself. Are my expectations too high, or am I really just a poor student and a poor teacher? Sometimes I feel things more strongly than I think them.

Yet, ironically, in writing about these emotions, I not only share and validate them, but actually start to recompose myself. This same letter ends:

Being a teacher doesn’t mean you feel secure all the time. . . . You shouldn’t feel as if you’ve failed just because you haven’t performed well on a particular day—besides, those are the days I usually learn the most.

In a course with regular informal writing and with multiple drafts of formal writing, a writing portfolio is the most reasonable mode of assessment. Each portfolio contains all the accumulated work of the semester, including responses from me and classmates, to which is attached a self-assessment letter. To communicate this term’s end assignment briefly and clearly, I move to a memo.

To: Classmates
From: Toby
Re: Portfolio assessment

Your final portfolio should include the following assignments:
—drafts 1 & 2 of the collaborative research reports
—drafts 1 (objective), 2 (subjective), & 3 (mixed) of your classmate profile
—drafts 1 & 2 of your collected letters
—selected journal entries (optional)
—a cover letter explaining how you would like me to read your portfolio & what it reveals about your writing and learning.

Of all my writing assignments, weekly letters receive the highest marks from students for their combination of personal, social, and academic worth. After the first few weeks, in which students test the form to see how I respond, what I expect, how they work, their acceptance of the letters as a meaningful assignment is near unanimous (nothing about teaching is really unanimous).

Stephanie—These letters are a great way to organize our reactions to the readings & class, a good way to pose questions, express anxieties, inform each other about our individual struggles, and reflect as a community on common problems and ideas.

Sue—After reading all 14 of my letters, I can see how much I learned about myself, my writing, our class.

Mary—Overall, these letters served as a journal for me. They allowed me to open up and reflect on my academic experience as well as my personal life. I’ll miss not doing them.

Dan—To write the letters, I had no choice but to think about my own writing—I had never actually sat down and thought of myself as a writer before. I can identify points in those “forced” letters where I see myself maturing as a writer.
Gustav—This class—these letters—helped me find pleasure in expressing myself in wild ways, playing with my voice, laughing with it, crying with it!

The disadvantages of letter writing? Each week, your students need to write, and some won’t like that. Each week, you need to read what they write. Each week, you need to write back. Each week, you will hear student concerns that make you uncomfortable or may cause your course to change. And if you are anything like me, you will miss not assigning letters in your other classes.

Reference