

## Think Like a Historian: Letters as Source Material

**Overview:** Ordinary letters from the past can offer valuable insights into the private lives of a bygone age. In this lesson, students will analyze a handwritten letter addressed to Sarah Elizabeth McMahan Ferguson of Bonnot's Mill, Missouri from her father, Jefferson McMahan, dated Sept. 30, 1883.

**Time Required:** 1 class period

**Recommended Grade Level(s):** 6<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> grades

**Subject Area(s):** English Language Arts, Social Studies

### Materials Needed:

- Copies of handwritten letter (See Appendix 1.1)
- Copies of letter transcript (See Appendix 1.2)
- Paper and pencils

### Preparation Required:

- Make copies of the letter and letter transcript as needed.
- Begin by familiarizing students with reading old handwriting. You can introduce them to some helpful tips using this source: <https://www.legacytrees.com/blog/five-tips-deciphering-old-handwriting>. And/or share some sample pages from a text on handwriting: <https://archive.org/details/cu31924029485467/page/n123/mode/2up?form=MY01SV&OCID=MY01SV>
- It might also be helpful to share with students the history of the standardization of American English: <https://teachinghistory.org/history-content/ask-a-historian/25489>

### Vocabulary:

**Primary Source:** In the study of history, a primary source is an artifact, document, diary, manuscript, recording, or any other source of information that was created at the time under study.

**Secondary Source:** In the study of history, a secondary source is a document or recording that interprets information originally presented in a primary source.

### Objectives:

- Students will engage in analyzing a primary source document, to formulate questions and hold a class discussion about the document.
- Students will be able to explain how historians analyze primary source documents to interpret the past.
- Students will engage in creating a short secondary source based off their interpretations of the letter.

- Students will practice reading and interpreting nineteenth century handwriting.

### Introduction:

- Before handing out copies of the letter, ask students what method they typically use to communicate important news to friends and family (email, text messaging, social media, etc.).
- Poll students on whether they ever handwrite and mail letters.
- Next, ask students how they believe most people communicated before telephones, email, and social media.
- Then explain the following: During the 19th century, letter writing was the primary means of communication. The telegraph existed, yet had limited reach. With relatively slow means of transportation, people were often geographically separated without any means to communicate except by letter. Historians can use these letters from the past as historical evidence to try and rediscover what everyday life was like for our ancestors.
- What are some other examples of primary sources? (Diaries, photographs, etc.) If a letter or diary from the past is considered a primary source, what makes something a secondary source?
- Explain to students they will be reading a handwritten letter addressed to Sarah Elizabeth McMahon Ferguson of Bonnot's Mill, Missouri from her father, Jefferson McMahon, dated Sept. 30, 1883. Once they have finished reading, students will analyze the letter by participating in a classroom discussion based on the question prompts listed below.

### Instructional Steps:

- For the first part of this lesson, students can work either individually or in small groups.
- Hand out copies of the letter to students and have them try to first read it in its original handwriting. Then hand out copies of the letter transcript to read for content and comprehension.
- Working individually, have students write out their responses to the following questions:

Why do you think Jefferson McMahon wrote this letter?
Although written by Mr. McMahon, from reading this letter what information can you gather about his daughter Sarah?
In his letter, McMahon shares with his daughter news of family and friends. What does this tell us about the significance of letters as a means for communication during the 19th century? How might we share personal news like this today?
What does this primary source tell us about daily life during late-19th century Missouri? What are some ways it differs from our lives today? What are some ways it is the same?

- Have students engage in a class discussion of their responses to the questions.
- Take this lesson further: For a more challenging lesson on historical writing, treat this activity as an introduction in analyzing primary sources. Have students research other historic letters or documents online (a good place to have them start is with the National Archives: <https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs>). After they have found a primary source(s) of interest, have students research secondary works related to their topic. The

final project will be for students to construct an essay (or rather their own secondary source) on the chosen topic.

### Missouri Learning Standards Addressed:

#### English Language Arts

##### Writing

*W1A*: Conduct research to answer a question

##### Speaking and Listening

*SL1B*: Delineate a speaker's argument and claims in order to pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.

*SL2A*: Speak clearly, audibly, and to the point, using conventions of language as appropriate to task, purpose, and audience when presenting including appropriate volume.

#### Social Studies

*6-8.AH.1.CC.B*: Explain connections between historical context and peoples' perspectives at the time in American history.

*6-8.AH.1.PC.A*: Using an American history lens, describe how peoples' perspectives shaped the sources/artifacts they created.

### Assessment:

- Students engaged in analyzing a primary source document, formulated questions and held a class discussion about the document.
- Students are able to explain how historians analyze primary source documents to interpret the past.
- Students engaged in creating a short secondary source based off their interpretations of the letter.
- Students practiced reading and interpreting nineteenth century handwriting.

### Resources:

Burke, Kathryn. *Letter Writing in America*. Smithsonian's National Postal Museum, 2005.  
<https://postalmuseum.si.edu/research-articles/letter-writing-in-america>

Garfield, Simon. *To the Letter: A Celebration of the Lost Art of Letter Writing*. Penguin Group, 2013.

### Museum/ Historic Site Information:

The Missouri State Museum is where visitors go to immerse themselves in the history of the Show-Me State. The museum, located in the state Capitol, houses an impressive collection of exhibits portraying the state's natural and cultural history. Museum staff provide guided tours of the Capitol building's history, architecture, and artwork.

Address: 201 W. Capitol Ave, Jefferson City, MO 65101

Phone: (573) 751-2854

Jefferson Landing State Historic Site (JLSHS) located in Jefferson City, Missouri serves as a working 19th century general store. The historic site explores, through hands-on activities and knowledgeable interpretation, what life was like for those living in Missouri's Capitol City during the 19th century. For a knowledgeable and interactive field study of early general store history, come visit us at JLSHS.

Address: 100 Jefferson St, Jefferson City, MO 65101

Phone: (573) 751-2854

**Appendices:**

1.1: Image of handwritten letter addressed to Sarah Elizabeth McMahon Ferguson of Bonnot's Mill, Missouri from her father, Jefferson McMahon, dated Sept. 30, 1883. Image courtesy of the Missouri State Museum.

1.2: Typed letter transcript

FIRST CLASS  
EXTRA SUPER

Sept the 30<sup>th</sup> 1853  
Dear Daughter  
we are all well except my sore  
finger Tea Boyant is very low  
and may be dead by this time  
Nan Langby has a boy  
Arise Bagby is dead  
nothing more of interest  
Tomatoes have all got ripe  
I will meet you at the  
river next Saturday if nothing  
happens bring your saddle  
over with you  
P.S your Uncle George  
has lost his little boy  
be sure to come over  
your affectionate  
Father  
Jefferson  
McDonald

Appendix 1.1: Letter from the collections of the Missouri State Museum

Appendix 1.2

**Letter Transcript:**

Sept the 30<sup>th</sup> 1883

Dear Daughter

We are all well except my soar  
finger Lia Bryant is very low  
and may be dead by this time  
Hon Langley has a boy  
Annie Bagby is dead  
nothing more of interest  
tomatoes have all got ripe  
I will meet you at the  
river nearest Saturday if nothing  
happens bring your saddle  
over with you  
PS your Uncle George  
has lost his little boy  
be shure to come over

your affectionate  
father

Jefferson McMahan