

A Letter to “My Dear Nephew”

Note to Teacher

The following activity allows students to practice letter writing in the style of the 19th century. Here, students will study a primary source: a letter from Thomas Jackson to his nephew. Before beginning the letter writing activity, discuss primary sources with the students using the following information.

Discussion Outline

1) *What is a primary source?*

A primary source can be a document, letter, diary, photograph, census record, courthouse record, or memoir. It can be almost any record made at the time of the occurrence and in the original form.

2) *Why is it important or necessary for a historian to study primary sources?*

Anyone studying history should study primary sources because these sources tend to give the most accurate information. Secondary sources (books, articles, research papers) pull together information gained from primary sources, and sometimes the correct information or meaning will be lost in the process. Another reason for studying primary sources is to find out the answers to who, when, and why. Studying primary sources allows us to see how the author feels about the subject and if he/she has any prejudices or biases toward the topic.

Materials Needed

- Copy of original letter for each student
- Copy of typed version of letter for each student
- Writing paper for each student
- Red pen or pencil

Activity Instructions

- 1) Have students pretend that they are Thomas Jackson Arnold (Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson’s nephew).
- 2) Give students copies of the original letter and the typed version, telling them to read the letter their Uncle Thomas Jackson sent to them at home in western Virginia.
- 3) Ask students to do as Uncle Thomas requests in his letter and find the errors he has made (he included the errors intentionally and we’ve added a few). The next step is to circle the errors as they find them, and then make the correction above the circle.
- 4) Lead a discussion about the differences between Jackson’s writing style and modern writing. Does 19th century writing sound wrong and full of errors? Is it really incorrect?
- 5) Finally, have the students write Uncle Thomas and tell him what is going on in their part of Virginia. Suggestions for information to include in the letter are: school, events at home, daily routine, family members. Remind students that Uncle Thomas expects a neatly written letter with proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Lexington, Virginia
Christmas, 1855

My Dear Nephew,

Your letter has given me pleasure in various ways. I am glad to know that you can find time from your play to write me so good a letter, and hope that you will write frequently. I am sorry that your mule should have been so unmannerly as to throw you off and even after doing this should kick you, but now since your Pa has sold him all such accidents I hope will be avoided for the future. I remember having once been served pretty much the same way by one of those kicking creatures. It happened this way I went with Cousin William Brake whom your mother can tell you about to bring some mules home one Sunday morning, and as I was riding down a long hill somehow, or other, I not only got over the neck across his shoulder but he got me over his head and jumped clear over me, and away he went, and from that day to this I have not been very fond of mule riding. You know that they kick out to one side like a cow.

I have corrected your letter and believe that you would understand the corrections better if I would return the letter with the corrections. I have concluded to return it with this. And now I am not going to look over my letter and I expect that there are some mistakes in it and if so I wish when you read it that you would point them out to your Pa or Ma, and tell me of them when you next write, and if there are many you can just correct them, and return the letter thus corrected. I hope that you will get off to a good school this winter. I saw Doctor Bosworth this morning at the Hotel or Tavern in town. He is paying his son John a visit during the Christmas holidays and I wish that you would go and tell Mrs. Bosworth that I saw him and tell her also that John is well.

The doctor told me that he thought that you would have a good teacher in town this winter. I hope that you will get enough money to buy a calve, and that you will grow up to be a good and wise man. Give much love to your Father, Mother, Grace, and Stark.

Your affectionate Uncle
Thomas

Lexington Va.
Christmas 1855

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