



Letter Writing

Grades: 7-9

This lesson is based on the Women of the Oklahoma Legislature Oral History Project. It is provided courtesy of the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program (OOHRP) at the Oklahoma State University Library with generous support from the Women's Archives at OSU and the Oklahoma Commission on the Status of Women.

Formally established in 2007, the OOHRP has collected and preserved firsthand accounts from individuals who have witnessed historic moments. The Program explores the lives and contributions of Oklahomans from all walks of life.

The Women of the Oklahoma Legislature is of one of many projects undertaken by the OOHRP. This oral history project captures and records information about female Oklahoma legislators in their own voices and provides an opportunity to reflect on their individual paths to the Capitol. It also documents more completely the presence of these women in state government.

The OOHRP invites you to explore the website (www.library.okstate.edu/oralhistory/wotol/) and meet the women who have played an important role in Oklahoma politics.



Oklahoma PASS Objectives

- **Language Arts, Listening 1:1** Identify the major ideas and supporting evidence in informative and persuasive messages. (Grade 7)
- **Language Arts, Listening 1:2** Listen in order to identify and discuss topic, purpose, and perspective. (Grade 7)
- **Language Arts, Listening 1:3** Recognize and understand barriers to effective listening (i.e., internal and external distractions, personal biases, and conflicting demands). (Grade 7)
- **Language Arts, Listening 1:4** Evaluate the spoken message in terms of content, credibility, and delivery. (Grade 7)
- **Language Arts, Writing 1:1** Use a writing process to develop composition skills. (Grade 7)
- **Language Arts, Writing 1:2** Use details, examples, reasons, and evidence to develop an idea. (Grade 7)
- **Language Arts, Writing 1:3** Use spatial, chronological, and climactic organizational patterns as appropriate to purpose. (Grade 7)
- **Language Arts, Writing 1:4** Use precise word choices, including figurative language, that convey specific meaning and tone. (Grade 7)
- **Language Arts, Writing 1:5** Use a variety of sentence structures, types, and lengths to contribute to fluency and interest. (Grade 7)
- **Language Arts, Writing 1:6** Edit for errors in Standard English usage, sentence structure, mechanics, and spelling. (Grade 7)
- **Language Arts, Writing 2:1** Write biographical narratives. (Grade 7)
- **Language Arts, Writing 2:3** Write persuasive/argumentative compositions. (Grade 7)
- **Language Arts, Writing 2:9** Write friendly letters and business letters, and continue to produce other writing forms introduced in earlier grades. (Grade 7)
- **Social Studies, Oklahoma History 8:1** Identify significant individuals and their contributions. (Grade 9)
- **Social Studies, U.S. Government 9:1** The student will compare and contrast the roles of the legislative and executive branches of government at the national and state levels. (Grade 9)
- **Social Studies, U.S. Government 16** The students will develop and practice the skills needed for informed participation in public affairs, including analyzing public issues, examining candidates for public office, evaluating the performance of public officials, and communicating with public officials. (Grade 9)
- **Social Studies, U.S. History 2:2** Write on, speak about, and dramatize different historical perspectives of individuals and groups. (Grade 8)

Lesson Objective

The students will be able to identify who their legislators are. They will be able to identify who represents them at the State Capitol and who represents them at the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. They will learn about these people and issues they may have a say in and compose a letter to their legislator about a concern.

Lesson

Everyone in this room is represented at the Oklahoma State Capitol in Oklahoma City by members of the House of Representatives and the Senate, as well as at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., by members of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate. These legislators and members of Congress run for office and are elected by the people of their district. When you turn eighteen years old, you will be eligible to register and vote. However, even though you are not yet eighteen, your voice is still important. We will learn about some things we can do to play a part in our government and be aware of what is happening in our communities and in our world.

Today we are going to learn about a couple of people who serve us. We are going to hear about two women (Vicki Miles-LaGrange and Kathleen Wilcoxson) who as young children wrote to their politicians and who later went on to serve at the Oklahoma State Capitol themselves. These women were interested in what was going on around them.

Vicki Miles-LaGrange was born in Oklahoma City. In 1986 she became the first African American elected to the Oklahoma Senate. She also held a law degree. After serving in the Senate for seven years, she became a federal judge appointed by President Bill Clinton. In an interview conducted in 2007 through Oklahoma State University Library's Women of the Oklahoma Legislature Oral History Project, she tells about how she wrote a letter to President John F. Kennedy after he was elected and how excited she was to get a letter in response from the White House! She also looked through magazines and made a scrapbook of the president, which was actually given to him when he came to town. Listen to what she has to say. (Read Miles-LaGrange excerpt found in resource addendum.)

Kathleen Wilcoxson was an elementary-school teacher before being elected to the Oklahoma State Senate, where she served from 1996 to 2008, the maximum amount of time allowed by term limits. She has now gone back to teaching elementary school. When she, herself, was in eighth grade she wrote a letter to Oklahoma's Governor Bellmon. In an interview conducted in 2007 through Oklahoma State University Library's Women of the Oklahoma Legislature Oral History Project, Ms. Wilcoxson shares how very disappointed she was not to hear back from him or receive a thank you for the scrapbook she gave to him. Because of that experience, she understands the importance of thanking someone for something they have done or contributed. (Read Wilcoxson excerpt.)

In the political system, there is state government and national government, or federal government. They work similarly but handle different issues. The federal government is headed by the President of the United States. Under the president is the vice president. At the state level, the governor is the head, but instead of there being a vice governor there is a lieutenant governor. Both federal and state governments have a Senate and a House of Representatives. At the federal level, every state has two senators and several representatives. The number of representatives depends on the population of the state. At the state level in Oklahoma, every district within the state has two senators and one or several representatives, depending on the population of that district.

Teacher: Draw this out on the chalkboard so the students can see the comparison:

Federal Government

President (Barack Obama)

Vice President (Joe Biden)

Senate (list your two senators)

House of Representatives (list)

State Government

Governor (Brad Henry)

Lieutenant Governor (Jari Askins)

Senate (list your two senators)

House of Representatives (list)

As a class, with the teacher's help, look up who your state and U.S. senators and representatives are. (This information can be found at <http://www.capitolconnect.com/oklahoma/> by typing in your town and zip code.) Find out what is going on in the legislature currently. Go online and read some news articles at either the state or national level. There are always so many issues being decided upon by our legislators. What jumps out at you as something particularly important? Decide which issue you would like to address and who you would like to write a letter to. It could be your state or U.S. representative, state or U.S. senator, lieutenant governor or vice president, Governor of Oklahoma or President of the United States. Address a concern, ask a question, tell them you appreciate their service to the people of Oklahoma, or even invite them to come speak to your class. (The class can discuss ideas together about what they could include in their letters.) The teacher will have a proper letter format prepared for the class to reference (including date, salutation, closing) as well as the addresses for the recipients. Perhaps students could briefly share what they chose as the subject of their letters.

Teacher: Have names and Capitol addresses ready. Perhaps you could send a manila envelope with several letters if several students write to the same person. Also have suggestions of Web sites or newspapers the students can look through. Some suggestions:

Tulsa World <http://www.tulsaworld.com/>

The Daily Oklahoman <http://newsok.com/>

The New York Times <http://nytimes.com/>

The Chicago Tribune <http://www.chicagotribune.com/>

Evaluation

Students can be graded on following instructions and composing their letter in the proper format. Points can be assigned for substance of their letter and presentation to the class.

Materials

Teacher Resources

- Information about the local legislators in your area. This information can be found at <http://www.capitolconnect.com/oklahoma/>.
- The full transcripts for the two women included in this lesson can be found at <http://www.library.okstate.edu/oralhistory/wotol/> (Excerpts are in the resource addendum.)
- Envelopes and postage

Student Resources

- Paper and pens OR a computer for composing the letter
- Newspapers or online news sources
- Addresses of legislators

Enrichment

- Learn more about one of your legislators. Write a biographical report on this person. Use sources such as their Web site, newspaper articles, interviews, and campaign Web sites. Present this to the class.
- Many representatives and senators are willing to visit your classroom if invited. Consider inviting one of your legislators to come address the class. Help the students come up with questions to ask, and have the legislator tell about what they do, how they campaigned and won election, and what inspired them. And remember to write them thank you notes if they come!

Resource Addendum

Transcript Excerpt:

VICKI MILES-LAGRANGE

<http://www.library.okstate.edu/oralhistory/wotol/lagrange/index.htm>

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I can remember being at Garden Oaks Elementary School, and this would have had to have been 1961. I was in second grade. John Kennedy was elected president. I have such a recollection of that. And for us in our family, because our parents were teachers back then, if they were home by five o'clock and we were all home, we ate dinner together. The TV was always on. We ate dinner and watched the news together. The news was always on the television as we ate.

I wrote a letter to President Kennedy, and I was telling him how—he won in 1960, and I wrote him. Do you remember the paper we used to have in elementary school, where the lines are at the bottom and you draw a picture at the top? And I drew a picture of him at the top. (Laughs) I thought it was a picture of him, that's what he looked like to me. And I wrote him this letter, and I was telling him how very happy I was that he was elected president.

Well I got a letter back. Now of course—and I have got that letter on my wall at the courthouse, or it may be at home. It was 1961, so it must have been in 1961 that I wrote the letter, because the election would have been in November of '60. It says, "The White House," and the postage stamp on it is four cents. And of course it's not signed by President Kennedy, it's signed by some guy named John Duggan, Special Assistant to the President, and it's like about all of one sentence, "The President received your letter, he appreciates your ideas, and thank you very much for writing," so I took the letter to school, and we had an assembly about my letter! (Laughs) I was so excited to hear from the President of the United States.

And I can remember when Robert Kennedy came to Oklahoma City. There used to be a John F. Kennedy Junior High School over here on Martin Luther King. When Robert Kennedy came to dedicate that school, there was a man from one of the large paving companies. I used to read the newspaper as a kid. I'm telling you, I liked the news, I liked the newspaper, I liked current events. And I remember saying to my mom that Robert Kennedy was going to be here and did she think I could meet him? I had four scrapbooks of the Kennedys that I had made. A lot of LIFE magazines, you know LIFE magazine was physically a big large magazine—I had all these cutouts. My mom said, "Well, we'll see." It was one of the paving companies here at the time. But anyway my mother contacted them, because there was a little article in the paper, and he said, "Well, if you all get the scrapbook here to my office, I'm going to go and be meeting him in the limousine." Of course, he didn't offer to take me along, darn! (Laughs) So Mama and I went traipsing up there to take the scrapbook, and sure enough, he wrote me a nice little message, and I've got that scrapbook today. So that was kind of my first. I was about seven then."

Transcript Excerpt:

KATHLEEN WILCOXSON

<http://www.library.okstate.edu/oralhistory/wotol/wilcoxson/index.htm>

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Tanya Finchum: When did you get interested in the political arena?

Kathleen Wilcoxson: Well my first experience was in the eighth grade when Henry Bellmon was running for governor and he won, as our first Republican Governor of Oklahoma. I think that was about 1962. My mother suggested that I read the newspaper, which I think today now how fascinating that was, but she encouraged me to read the Tulsa World and cut out all of the articles on Henry Bellmon, so I did. I put them in a scrapbook, and when he won, I wrote him a letter. I was in the eighth grade. I wrote him a letter and gave him this scrapbook. The interesting part of that is, and something I've learned since then, was that he never wrote me a thank you note. And my mother never forgave him, so when he ran for governor and United States Senate and then governor again, it was very difficult for her to vote for him because he ignored her daughter. (Laughs)

So with that you probably send a lot of thank you notes yourself.

I try. I try to at least call and tell people thank you.