“Letter from Birmingham Jail” Writing Assignment  
Making *Your* Voice Heard – A Letter to Your Congressman

CONTEXT: As we continue to cover the theme of conformity and rebellion, it is key to note that not all rebellions are violent! Writing, for example, is a peaceful way to protest. One such writer was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote to secure civil rights. This past week we read “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Just as Dr. King wrote to make positive social change, so too will you have the opportunity to write a real letter to a local representative to help make change in your community! ☺

PRIMARY WRITING TASK: Students will write a **letter** in which you try to **persuade** your local **representative(s)** to support your stance on a particular **issue** that is of importance to *you*. Have a conversation with your family about key local issues or laws in your community today, and consider how these issues—and the representatives who support/oppose them—affect your school, peers, and lives. Use the elements of good persuasive writing to support your beliefs.

First go to [*www.congress.org*](http://www.congress.org)to find your local representative(s), then visit your town’s homepage (ex: Village of Orland Park) to research current topics to assert in your one-page letter. Again, try to focus on issues that affect you, and explain why you feel the way you do to the representative.

**ORLAND PARK EXAMPLE ISSUES**:  
  
-- Should the Sportsplex have open admission on Fridays but charge a more expensive weekly fee?  
-- Should school buses at local schools run two hours later but offer free daycare until 5 p.m.?   
-- Should curfew be extended to 1:00 a.m. instead of 12 a.m., but with more police security at night?

Remember, your letters will be sent to real political officials! To back up your claims, be certain you include both **personal experiences** as well as **research-based elements.** You will want to follow the correct format for writing a letter, check for proper mechanics, and make sure you write in a formal way that demonstrates your **authentic voice.** You *can* make change through your writing!

SECONDARY WRITING TASK: As always with our formal writing assignments, you will be asked to write a brief (3-5 sentences) **paragraph reflection** along with your letter. This does not need to be typed. Consider answering such questions as:

--Approach/process to writing -- Why you chose topic/issue -- Strengths/challenges in piece

REQUIREMENTS/GUIDELINES FOR WRITING:

-- Letters are to be in typed in size 12, single-spaced, Times New Roman font, proper letter format  
-- Remember from our class discussion: (1) effective persuasion first states who you are and the issue/topic at hand, (2) offers supporting points with experience and research, and (3) provides possible solutions to help improve your issue

EVALUATION CRITERIA: The best letters/projects will:

\_\_\_\_\_Offer an engaging, creative introduction paragraph  
\_\_\_\_\_State and define the issue/topic at hand  
\_\_\_\_\_Present a convincing, persuasive argument on issue  
\_\_\_\_\_Include both research (logos) and experience (pathos/ethos) support  
\_\_\_\_\_Include proper format/appropriate language in letter

DUE DATES:  
Proposal due:  
Rough draft/Peer review due:  
Final letter due (for submission/publication):

Please bring in **two copies** of your letter and one properly stamped, addressed envelope. We will post and send letters via mail. If any of you receive a response back from your local representative(s), we will share your written reply with the rest of the class! ☺

## Sample Letter Writing Handout

7 Fairlane Road  
Orland Park, Illinois (Insert your address)                      
  
March 5, 2010    <Insert Date Here>    
  
The Honorable <Insert Senator’s or Rep’s Name Here and address>  
17 Peabody Square        (Insert office address)      
Springfield, Illinois 01970  
  
Dear (Senator or Representative) (Insert Congressman's Last Name Here) :  
  
 (Paragraph One)  
    •Introduce yourself, your age and your school. You may want to   
        explain briefly our theme of conformity/rebellion and class details.  
(Paragraph Two )  
    Use this paragraph to explain your concern/opinion on issue.    
        •Explain what the problems is and (use facts from your research) and  
        •Explain what you think should be done to solve it. Ask for help.  
(Paragraph Three)  
    •Sum up your concerns in solving the issue.  
    \*Add your feelings about the important job that people in Congress have in making   
        important decisions that will affect young Americans.  
    •Thank him or her for time/attention.   
  
Sincerely, Truly Yours, Your constituent, (Use one closing that you like)  
          Your signature

\*\* DON’T KNOW YOUR LOCAL REPRESENTATIVE?  
*To find who your local congressman or woman is, simply go online to* [*www.congress.org*](http://www.congress.org)*. Write your zip code in the search bar on the page, and your local representatives will be listed (along with contact information).*“Letter from Birmingham Jail” Writing Assignment  
Evaluation Rubric and Peer Review/Checklist

**IDEAS** (15 pts): Main message, overall theme, offers supporting details  
\_\_\_\_ Does the letter focus on one clear topic that introduces the writer?  
\_\_\_\_ Is there personal influence/experience support included in the letter?  
\_\_\_\_ Is fact-based research evident in the letter to support/challenge the issue?  
\_\_\_\_ Is any mention of possible solutions to the topic mentioned throughout?  
\_\_\_\_Is a strong concluding paragraph, including a thank you, present?  
**1 2 3 4 5 x 3 =**

**ORGANIZATION (**10 pts): Internal structure, thread of focus, logical flow  
\_\_\_ Does the writer begin with a creative, engaging introduction?  
\_\_\_ Does the writer include transitions between paragraphs to connect ideas?  
\_\_\_Are ideas presented in a logical way that maintains the same focus throughout?  
\_\_\_ Is the conclusion of the letter formal, summarizing, and professional?  
**1 2 3 4 5 x 2 =**

**VOICE (**10 pts): Unique perspective of writer, engaging language, good details  
\_\_\_ Does the writer employ a convincing tone? Is it honest and credible?  
\_\_\_ Is the language authentic (natural)? Does the writer sound professional and engaging?  
\_\_\_ Is the voice persuasive? Does the writer express why this stance on a topic is important?  
**1 2 3 4 5 x 2 =**

**WORD CHOICE/SENTENCE FLUENCY** (5 pts): Use of precise words, rich and appropriate meaning  
\_\_\_ Does the writer use formal, clear, and strong sentences/language that convey the message?  
**1 2 3 4 5 x 1 =**

**PROCESS WORK/SUPPORTING MATERIALS** (5 pts): Prewriting, Drafts, Peer Review, Reflection  
\_\_\_ Is the writer including pre-work and supporting materials, including reflection, with final copy?   
**1 2 3 4 5 x 1 =**

**CONVENTIONS** (5 pts): Proper format, mechanics, appropriate grammar/spelling  
\_\_\_Is the letter written in proper letter format, according to the handout and class discussion?  
\_\_\_ Is the writer’s work free of grammar and spelling errors/mechanics issues?  
**1 2 3 4 5 x 1 =**

**TOTAL: /50 POINTS**

**GRADE: 45-50 pts (A) 40-44 pts (B) 35-39 pts (C) 30-34 pts (D)**

“Everyday Use” Writing Assignment  
*You* are the Character – A Classroom Writing Quilt

CONTEXT: When it comes to conformity and rebellion, there are few characters that illustrate this theme more than Maggie and Dee “Wangero” from “Everyday Use” by Alice Walker. As seen in this short story, Maggie conforms to traditions, while Dee fiercely rebels against them—even in their desire for the family’s precious quilt. Each character’s beliefs depend upon the perspective they choose to look from. As such, you will have the opportunity to write through either sister’s eyes to get a fresh view of what it is like to truly “see” another character in a literary text.

PRIMARY WRITING TASK: Students will write a **journal entry** in which you **narrate** to your **classmates** from either Maggie’s or Dee’s point of view about their **beliefs** and right to the family’s old quilt. Put yourself in one of the sisters’ shoes! Writing from a first person perspective, you will select from one of following choices for your assignment:

a. **Write as if you were Maggie**  
b. **Write as if you were Dee “Wangero”**

While writing this journal entry, you may consider it as a private diary post. Keep in mind Maggie’s or Dee’s values, their experiences and beliefs, and their “right” to the prized quilts. Describe how you feel about yourself and your sister. What would you say? In an **authentic voice**, explain what the quilt means to *you*. Why do you want/deserve it? And what, then, does your character hold most important: conformity or rebellion? Be creative! ☺

SECONDARY WRITING TASK: As always with our formal writing assignments, you will be asked to write a brief (3-5 sentences) **paragraph reflection** along with your character analysis. This does not need to be typed. Consider answering such questions as:

--Approach/process to writing -- Why you chose topic/issue -- Strengths/challenges in piece

REQUIREMENTS/GUIDELINES FOR WRITING:

-- Journal entries are to be 1 full page, typed and double-spaced, in size 12 Times New Roman font  
-- While informal writing is allowed as a journal entry, be sure to write in complete sentences and use correct spelling/grammar. Remember to use paragraphs and good transitions, as covered in class. Creativity and connections to the text are also encouraged.  
  
-- **Artistic Opportunity:** Calling not just readers and writers, but artists, too! As the family’s quilt is such an important part to the story, so too will we make your journal entries an important part of our class “quilt.” Please bring your colored pencils/markers to class on the due date listed below. Drawing from the artwork of actual African-American quilts, you will be able to sketch a border around your written assignment in the spirit of the quilts’ different designs. We will then safety pin our papers together and hang them on the wall as our own authentic quilt as a class! ☺

EVALUATION CRITERIA: The best journal entries/projects will:

\_\_\_\_\_Introduce “yourself” as Maggie or Dee in a creative, personal, and engaging way   
\_\_\_\_\_Look and “feel” like a real journal entry  
\_\_\_\_\_Describe your character’s point of view, values, and opinions of both sisters   
\_\_\_\_\_Explain why your character desires/deserves the family quilt  
\_\_\_\_\_Answer the question: Do I conform or rebel? Why?   
\_\_\_\_\_Include appropriate language that follows proper mechanics

DUE DATES:  
Rough draft/Peer review due:  
Final journal entry due (for submission/posting):

## Sample Quilt Designs for Border Artwork





“Everyday Use” Writing Assignment  
Evaluation Rubric and Peer Review/Checklist

**IDEAS** (9 pts): Main message, overall theme, offers supporting details  
\_\_\_\_Does the writer craft the journal entry from first person perspective?  
\_\_\_\_Does the writer’s work focus on one character’s (Maggie or Dee’s) POV?  
\_\_\_\_Are a variety of ideas—values, beliefs, opinion on self/sister/quilt—present?  
\_\_\_\_Are there any connections made to characters/events in the original text?  
\_\_\_\_Is there at least one sentence about conformity or rebellion in the journal?  
**1 2 3 x 3 =**

**ORGANIZATION (**3 pts): Internal structure, thread of focus, logical flow  
\_\_\_ Does the writer begin with an engaging introduction/end with a creative conclusion?  
\_\_\_ Does the writer include transitions between paragraphs to connect ideas?  
\_\_\_Are ideas presented in a logical way that maintain the same focus throughout?  
**1 2 3 x 1 =**

**VOICE (**9 pts): Unique perspective of writer, engaging language, good details  
\_\_\_ Does the writer speak like he/she were Maggie/Dee? Are supporting details provided?  
\_\_\_ Is the language authentic (natural)? Does the writer sound personal and engaging?  
\_\_\_ Is the voice expressive? Does the writer narrate ideas and messages from the character?  
**1 2 3 x 3 =**

**WORD CHOICE/SENTENCE FLUENCY** (5 pts): Use of precise words, rich and appropriate meaning  
\_\_\_ Does the writer use formal, clear, and strong sentences/language that convey the message?  
**1 2 3 x 1 =**

**PROCESS WORK/SUPPORTING MATERIALS** (5 pts): Prewriting, Drafts, Peer Review, Reflection  
\_\_\_ Is the writer including pre-work and supporting materials, including reflection, with final copy?   
**1 2 3 x 1 =**

**CONVENTIONS** (3 pts): Proper format, mechanics, appropriate grammar/spelling  
\_\_\_Is the journal entry written like a diary with paragraphs that follows correct format?  
\_\_\_ Is the writer’s work free of grammar and spelling errors/mechanics issues?  
**1 2 3 x 1 =**

**TOTAL: /30 POINTS**

**GRADE: 27-30 pts (A) 24-26 pts (B) 23-25 pts (C) 20-22 pts (D)**

“We Real Cool” and “We Wear the Mask” Writing Task  
Informing *Others* of Poetry – A Contextual Look at Legacy

CONTEXT: In keeping with our unit on the theme of conformity and rebellion, we now arrive at poetry. Two writers who used poetry to express their support of civil rights and social change were Gwendolyn Brooks (“We Real Cool”) and Paul Lawrence Dunbar (“We Wear the Mask”). While many times we may perform a close reading of a poem, we do not always consider its author and historical context, which is also very important. After reading these works in class, you will now have a chance to write about both the contributions of a poet *and* the lasting legacy of their poetry.

PRIMARY WRITING TASK: Students will write a **eulogy** in which you **inform** your **peers and school community** about a poet’s **life** and a particular **poem** he or she is remembered by. You will become an expert on your poet and poem, then share your findings with the class. You will select from one of the following choices for your assignment:

1. **Write a piece on Gwendolyn Brooks and “We Real Cool”**
2. **Write a piece on Paul Lawrence Dunbar and “We Wear the Mask”**
3. **Write a piece on another multicultural poet/poem of your choice** (see me for approval)

This project will be split into two parts: the poet’s biography and the poem analysis. You will first conduct online research for your poet/poem. Then, you will highlight important life facts on your poet of choice as well as key themes from your poem of choice. How might you speak at their funeral? What final words would you say? How/why should they be remembered? Finally, in your *authentic voice*, you will weave your work together to craft a eulogy that honors their memory! ☺  
  
SECONDARY WRITING TASK: As always with our formal writing assignments, you will be asked to write a brief (3-5 sentences) **paragraph reflection** along with your letter. This does not need to be typed. Consider answering such questions as:

--Approach/process to writing -- Why you chose topic/issue -- Strengths/challenges in piece

REQUIREMENTS/GUIDELINES FOR WRITING:

-- Eulogies are to be 1-2 pages, typed and double-spaced in size 12, Times New Roman font  
--Please list any sources used for poet/poem research via a Works Cited page in MLA format

-- **Media Element/Publication:**   
 -- Eulogies are not meant to only be written, but spoken and shared with others. As such, after composing our eulogies, we will first use **sound recorders** from the school library and make taped audio copies of our speeches into MP3 format.  
 -- Next, we will upload our recordings to our classroom blog via Blackboard to listen, comment, and learn from our fellow peers’ creative work. These will also be heard in class.  
 -- Lastly, as a class we will submit our work to the other high school English teachers (without names) to decide on which two eulogies were the strongest based on the below criteria. The two that are chosen will then be submitted to the online school newspaper/ radio show as an audio podcast to be shared with the entire school community in honor of Black History Month! ☺

EVALUATION CRITERIA: The best eulogies/projects will:

\_\_\_\_\_Introduce the eulogy creatively and expressively  
\_\_\_\_\_Offer detailed, factual information on poet’s biography  
\_\_\_\_\_Provide a clear, meaningful analysis of poem’s meaning  
\_\_\_\_\_Conclude the eulogy with a lasting remark or unique close  
\_\_\_\_\_Demonstrate originality, emotional language, proper format

DUE DATES:  
Rough draft/Peer review due:  
Class/library work and transcription:  
Final eulogy due (for submission/posting):

## Sample Eulogy Writing Handout

**Introduction  
-- Begin your eulogy creatively. Ask a question, offer a quote, tell a story, give an interesting remark.**

**Part 1 (The Poet)  
-- Describe the biography, or life, of the poet.**

* **Name, birth and death dates**
* **Famous quotes, interesting facts**
* **Contribution to literature**

**Part 2 (The Poem)**   
-- Describe the poet’s poem and influence.

* State the title of the poem.
* Explain its key lines
* Offer possible interpretations, meaning/themes
* Provide a connection to today

**Conclusion  
--** End your eulogy memorably. Give a key quote, a hope for the future, a sign of their lasting legacy.

\*\* USEFUL RESOURCES:  
 -- Works Cited (MLA Format) for online sources: Owl.english.purdue.edu/owl  
 -- Poet Biographies: Biography.com  
 -- Tips on how to analyze a poem: [Enotes.com/topics/how-analyze-poem](http://www.enotes.com/topics/how-analyze-poem)  
 -- Guide on how to write a eulogy: Elegantmemorials.com

“We Real Cool” and “We Wear the Mask” Writing Assignment  
Evaluation Rubric and Peer Review/Checklist

**IDEAS** (30 pts): Main message, overall theme, offers supporting details  
\_\_\_\_Does the eulogy include both a poet and a poem within?  
\_\_\_\_Is a creative and engaging introduction included to hook audience attention?  
\_\_\_\_Did the writer provide detailed research and insight into the poet’s biography?  
\_\_\_\_Did the writer provide detailed research and insight into the poem’s analysis?  
\_\_\_\_Is a clear and memorable conclusion present at the eulogy’s close?  
**1 2 3 4 5 x 6 =**

**ORGANIZATION (**20 pts): Internal structure, thread of focus, logical flow  
\_\_\_Does the eulogy have a clear and logical beginning, middle, and end?  
\_\_\_Does the writer integrate the poet biography in a way that maintains focus?  
\_\_\_Does the writer integrate the poem analysis in a way that maintains focus?  
\_\_\_Are solid transitions placed throughout eulogy to help create structural flow?  
**1 2 3 4 5 x 4 =**

**VOICE (**20 pts): Unique perspective of writer, engaging language, good details  
\_\_\_ Does the writer present the audience with the professional, reflective tone of a eulogy?  
\_\_\_ Is the language authentic (natural)? Does the writer sound both credible and engaging?  
\_\_\_ Is the voice informative? Does the writer display their knowledge in the eulogy?  
**1 2 3 4 5 x 4 =**

**WORD CHOICE/SENTENCE FLUENCY** (5 pts): Use of precise words, rich and appropriate meaning  
\_\_\_ Does the writer use formal, clear, and strong sentences/language that convey the message?  
**1 2 3 4 5 x 2 =**

**PROCESS WORK/SUPPORTING MATERIALS** (5 pts): Prewriting, Drafts, Peer Review, Reflection  
\_\_\_ Is the writer including pre-work and supporting materials, including reflection, with final copy?   
**1 2 3 4 5 x 2 =**

**CONVENTIONS** (10 pts): Proper format, mechanics, appropriate grammar/spelling  
\_\_\_Is the eulogy written in proper format, with a Works Cited page, according to the handout?  
\_\_\_ Is the writer’s work free of grammar and spelling errors/mechanics issues?  
**1 2 3 4 5 x 2 =**

**TOTAL: /100 POINTS**

**GRADE: 90-100 pts (A) 80-89 pts (B) 70-79 pts (C) 60-69 pts (D)**