

ACTION RESEARCH ON THE LETTER AS GENRE

AN EXAMINATION OF BOTH EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL GOALS FOR THEIR COURSE AND ITS STUDENTS

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The Undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

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And hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Course Description and Formation.....	3
Guest speakers.....	5
Course Designations, Assignments, and Readings.....	6
The Research Question of <i>The Letter as Genre</i>	9
Literature Review and Methodology.....	10
Research Question #1.....	22
Critical Thinking.....	25
Summation of <i>The Letter as Genre</i> 's Stakeholder's Goals.....	28
Research Question # 2.....	28
A Brief History of Writing to Learn in WAC and Composition Studies.....	29
Applying Writing to Learn in The Letter as Genre.....	32
Research Question #3.....	35
Conclusion.....	43
Appendix.....	49
Works Cited.....	62

Introduction

The interest, formation, and execution of this project traces to a wide variety of factors, from the support of my co-instructor of *The Letter as Genre* and advisor Dr. Martha Townsend to the love of facilitating learning and growth in my students that I discovered while in graduate school. However, one of the most important factors that drove this project continued to be the knowledge that I would *not* be continuing my graduate education in a PH.D program in English (or more specifically, in my emphasis area of Rhetoric and Composition). This knowledge of the terminal nature of my academic life led me in search of a Master's project which would showcase the teaching experience that I was most proud of in my brief academic career in *The Letter as Genre*, but also allow me the platform to analyze and ask questions about that experience as well; or, as I tell my Freshman Composition students, answering the "so what?" questions of that experience. After the end of my second year in graduate school, I had decided that what I loved most about my time in my graduate program was my experience as co-instructor in *The Letter as Genre*; however, I was finding it difficult to find a reliable method for evaluating my performance. What did my students learn? What did I learn? Did I perform the job expected of me? This desire for intense examination, or "reflection" of the course *The Letter as Genre* and my role in it led me almost naturally to the qualitative research paradigm of "Action Research" or "Teacher Research" as it is sometimes known as.

As Meghan Manfra in "Action Research: Exploring the Theoretical Divide between Practical and Critical Approaches" states: "Action research formalizes teacher inquiry and empowers teachers to leverage their 'insider' knowledge to change classroom

practice. Teacher researchers study their classrooms in a systematic and intentional manner and share their knowledge with the educational community”(32). This “systematic” and “intentional” nature of investigating classrooms and classroom practices Manfra highlights here seemed perfect for the nature of my project, as I not only wanted to understand what the value of *The Letter as Genre* was to all stakeholders (administration, instructors, students) but also give these findings an avenue in which someone else could potentially use to improve their own classrooms, whether that someone be a future teacher of a letters type course, a graduate TA in the humanities, or even a tenured professor. Or, as Mohr et. al. write in 2004 *Teacher Research for Better Schools*, “action research involves more than just conducting research in the classroom. It is a public endeavor in which teacher researchers define teacher research as inquiry that is intentional, systematic, public, voluntary, ethical, and contextual” (Mohr et. al., 32). I believed that my involvement as the co-instructor for *The Letter as Genre* to be the highlight of my graduate career. Using the lens of action research, I hoped to analyze and reflect on that belief, in order to truly understand what the factors were that made the course what it was, and why that same course continues to impact so many individuals to this day.

***The Letter as Genre* Course Description and Formation**

The Letter as Genre began when Dr. Martha Townsend, Professor of Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Missouri-Columbia, read an article in the *New York Times* titled “The Death of Letter Writing”, which “decri[ed] the demise of letter writing” (1) in contemporary culture. As Townsend said in the course proposal to the English Department in February of 2014:

The proposer’s [Townsend’s] informal inquiries suggest that contemporary student’s knowledge about letters is slim. They rarely write or receive letters, nor have they had the opportunity to study the impact of letters and letter writing on our culture over time. This new WI course would seek to fill that gap for students from across the curriculum by taking a *rhetorical genre* approach to answer such questions as: What makes letters different from other forms of communication? Who writes letters, and why? Who reads them, and for what purpose? What is the impact of digital technology on letter writing? *Is* letter writing dead, as many journalists and critics suggest, or has the practice taken another form? And finally, why should we care? (Course Proposal)

This quote highlights many of the foundational themes that would be present in the course that Townsend and I co-taught in fall 2014. These questions would require our students to rigorously research open ended questions and present their findings in a wide variety of presentation formats, from small group presentations to formal papers, all the while making use of critical thinking skills in the process. The course proposal elaborates more fully on the specific goals and objectives for the course, locating those goals in seven major categories:

1. For students to acquire an awareness and understanding of the importance of letters and letter writing in our culture and over time
2. For students to reason critically
3. For students to solve—or address—complex problems
4. For students to communicate with clear, effective language in discipline specific ways
5. For students to understand their work scholarship, worthy of an audience beyond the classroom
6. For the GTA who helps prepare and teach the course, to acquire professional development in both teaching and research.
7. [Assorted goals for the teacher of record, Dr. Townsend, to include the acquisition of new knowledge of letter writing, to enhance the reputation of the Campus Writing Program (CWP) on the campus of the University of Missouri, etc.] (Townsend, 2)

These seven goals outlined on the course proposal would be critical in the evolution of the course moving forward into the summer of 2014. After being officially hired as the GTA for the course, I began meeting with Townsend on average once a week from June 2014-August 2014, in order to translate the goals she had for the course into tangible pedagogy for our students in the upcoming fall. Our weekly meetings were fairly brief (30 minutes to an hour on average) but effectively helped us prepare for what the course would look like in the fall, and to create our tentative syllabus, which can be seen in the appendix (Appendix 3).

Guest Speakers

From our very first meeting, Townsend established that ours would not be the only voices in the classroom, with the responsibility for student learning resting on our student's engagement with the course material. In order to facilitate this, numerous guest speakers were consulted on a wide variety of subjects in which their specific subject matter expertise would surpass either Townsend's or my own on a particular facet of letter writing. I personally chose our first two guest speakers: Dr. Stephen Karian from MU's English Department and Dr. Anne Stanton from the Art History Department. Karian's talk on the letters of "the Golden Era of Letter Writing" was the first guest speaker to the course. Karian set the bar high for our later guest speakers for both his subject matter knowledge on 18th century letter writing in Western Europe, but also for his enthusiasm for the material, which effectively engaged our class for the length of his time with us. Instead of simply giving a lecture on 18th century famous letter writers like Alexander Pope, Karian also moderated a class-led roundtable discussion on what Pope's letters could teach us about not only letter writing in 18th Century Europe, but also about contemporary letter writing as well. Stanton led our class through a fascinating slideshow of the letter as seen in the early middle ages period in Western Europe, concluding with a workshop in which our class each received his or her own fountain pen to practice their penmanship with.

Townsend picked the remaining three guest speakers for the course: Professor Emeritus Albert Devlin from MU's English department, Assistant Director of the Campus Writing Program at MU, Johnathan Cisco, and Professor Emerita from MU's College of Journalism, Mary Kay Blakely. Devlin led a brilliant question and answer session with

the class that covered topics ranging from Elia Kazan's memoir's (Devlin's most recent project at the time) to the "Golden Age of Hollywood" and that time period's relationship to letter writing. A self-professed Winston Churchill enthusiast, Cisco joined our class on its field trip to the Winston Churchill Museum and its display of wartime letters in its exhibit "Mail Call", traveling from the Smithsonian Institute on a brief national tour. Cisco personally helped lead our class through the Churchill museum, while also leading an excellent discussion in the Churchill library about Churchill, his character, and his relationship with letters. Mary Kay Blakely was the final guest speaker of the course, sharing an inside glimpse into one of her best-selling books "Wake Me When It's Over", an edited collection of her family's letters to one another as Blakely was in a life threatening coma.

Course Designations, Assignments, and Readings

The Letter as Genre was designated a "Writing Intensive" or "WI" course by both the University of Missouri's Honor's College and the University's English Department. This WI classification requires courses to:

"Maintain a low student-to-teacher ratio (20:1), require at least 5,000 words of writing, and give students ample opportunity to revise their work to improve their performance... Writing Intensive courses attempt to foster the ability to: pose worthwhile questions, evaluate arguments, give and receive criticism profitably, distinguish among fact, inference, and opinion, articulate complex ideas clearly, deal with problems that have no simple solutions, consider purpose and audience, understand how given disciplines define themselves, and to become informed, independent thinkers" – *Campus Writing Programs' Guidelines*

In order to meet these WI requirements, Townsend envisioned a three-part assignment system which would “include both informal writing-to learn assignments *and* longer, formal learning-to-write assignments”, as well as an end-of-term group research project (Syllabus). The informal assignments were generally 4-6 pages in length, based on topics that students would have a vested interest in, such as writing about their grandparent’s experiences with letters, analytic book reports on their favorite authors, or even short presentations on anything of interest to the class in general. The formal assignment was designed to either be a 6-8 page research paper “on letters by one or more authors in your major or an in depth ethnography of letter writing in your family or community, or a *prosopopoeial* reading of letters by historical figures (in costume perhaps) accompanied by a critical explanation or interpretation” (Syllabus). Or, as Kelsey Hurwitz and Shannon Robb described it in their introduction to the edited collection of these assignments entitled *You’ve Got Mail*: “In an effort to uncover additional information on letters and further examine their importance in society, we were instructed to write an essay addressed to the general public on any letter-related topic of our choice” (iii). The end-of-term group research project could be focused on “peer and public perceptions on letter writing...Each person in each group will survey 8-10 peers; groups will aggregate and analyze their data, which they will present to the class and then write a report for an external public audience” (2).

During our summer meetings, Townsend strongly emphasized the student driven nature and the experimental nature of the course as she envisioned it. Townsend made it clear that much of what we might try in *The Letter as Genre* could outright fail: student’s may not engage with some of the material, fail to develop the

writing and critical thinking skills we wanted them to out of as particular assignment, etc. Therefore, our student's involvement and investment were to be *critical* to the success of the course, as each assignment was to require each student to critically examine how and what he or she would get from their experience in *The Letter as Genre*, allowing us to adjust to the success and failure of our course content in real time. As Townsend stated in the course syllabus:

"I don't have my own set of well-worked out ideas related to the questions this course asks about letters and letter writing in our culture. I am, though, looking forward to learning what a select group of intelligent students from multiple disciplines thinks about them, and I'm excited about the conversations I know we'll have. So I'm going to ask you to help me "invent" some of the particulars of this course, based on your interests" (2).

This reliance on student "invention" and input can be seen in the evolution of the assignments offered in the course itself. Before the beginning of the semester in which *The Letter as Genre* was taught, Townsend envisioned the aforementioned two short papers about topics each student would be interested in, which would have been roughly 4-6 pages, with the opportunity for revision if students were not satisfied with their grade. After reviewing the collection of papers turned in during the first of the two assignments, we both realized that having the student's complete two informal assignments would be taking them away from completing their end of course project. Instead of planning on giving the assignment anyway, we approached the class together with the idea that the grades could be re-weighted so that a second informal assignment would no longer be assigned, in order that the class could have more time

to complete their group research projects and their creative essays. We took a quick vote, and the class unanimously agreed that their grades should be re-weighted with the second informal paper omitted. After the vote, many of the students looked around with a kind of stunned awe on their faces, as they had just taken a vote that actually impacted their grade. Moments like these drove home the message that *The Letter as Genre* belonged to them and not to anyone else, increasing their sense of “buy-in”, or vested interest in the course itself.

“Is Letter Writing Dead?” The Research Question of the *The Letter as Genre*

The question “is letter writing dead?” was *The Letter as Genre*’s impetus for entire semester. Kelsey Hurwitz and Shannon Robb, two students from the course who edited *You’ve Got Mail: Don’t Write Off the Letter*, a collection of all of the *The Letter as Genre*’s students formal essays, describe this research question in their introduction to the collection:

We began the course *The Letter as Genre* by reading a proclamation: Letter writing is dead. As a group of students in our late teens and early twenties who have grown up immersed in an internet-filled high tech world, we generally agreed with that statement. After all, most of us wrote letters on special occasions: birthdays, thank you’s, high school graduation etc. But as the course progressed, we quickly learned that there is so much more to letters than we originally thought...

Throughout the semester we began with early authors like Abelard and Heloise and Christine de Pizan...to American artists such as Mark Twain and Elia Kazan.

From there we transitioned to historical events, reading war letters, immigration letters, and civil rights letters...We continually questioned the importance and practicality of letter writing in today's society, hoping to ultimately decide whether letter writing is dead. (*Hurwitz and Robb, iil*)

It is clear in Kelsey and Shannon's introduction above that the question of "is letter writing dead" was more than just a question to build a class on. This research question drove each student's commitment to creative inquiry and critical thinking throughout their time in the course, and was *the* central question behind the course's assignments and readings. In order to attempt to answer this question "is letter writing dead?", our students had to make connections between seemingly unrelated authors, events, and themes throughout the history and breadth of western culture.

Literature Review and Methodology

In this section I review the history of action research both in the United States and the United Kingdom, not only illuminating the potential benefits such research has had on instructors such as myself, but also some of the pitfalls and controversy still associated with action research in general. Finally, I show how action research has helped me create this project, and why action research was the most effective medium for doing so.

The idea of "Action research", or "teacher research" as it is sometimes called, is primarily thought to have come out of the private industrial sector in 1940's America, specifically from the work of the industrialist Kurt Lewin, often regarded as the founder of social psychology. Lewin's work focused on how "participation in decision making could lead to productivity" (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002) with line workers in assembly yards and how

they communicated with their immediate supervisors over ways to improve productivity, morale, and overall effectiveness of their factory. This work to “find ways to involve social actors with research through group decision making and elaborate problem solving procedures”, while originally meant for front-line supervisors to develop the most efficient means of production for those they oversaw, was soon taken up and modified for public education by American researchers in the 1950’s, most notably by Stephen M. Corey in *Action Research to Improve School Practices* (1953). As the first researcher to actually coin the phrase “action research” Corey effectively outlined many of the bedrocks of future studies of action research in this text, as a reviewer for *The Journal of Educational Psychology* highlights in 1955:

“His [Corey’s] conviction that dramatic changes must be made in public school curricula and practice if youth are to be prepared for the demands of a changing world. He believes that knowledge gained from research is most likely to be translated into action if teachers and school administrators are ego-involved...Some distinguishing characteristics of “action research” are stated: it is focused on practical problems facing the school participants; it is carried out amid the complexities of the school without the customary controls of the lab experiment; its value is measured in terms of improvement of educational practice; generalizations from research are extended vertically instead of laterally...It goes further than casual inquiry because evidence is systematically recorded, analyzed, and interpreted” (Wolfe and Wolfe, 1)

The main concepts highlighted in the above passage became recurrent themes in the history of action research. Action research promotes definite change in the educational

system it is a part of, including fellow educators, students, and administration as key actors. Practicality in terms of being able to apply the findings of action research to real-life organizations and settings is another key concept established in Corey's text: if your action research cannot be applied in a "real-world" setting or situation, it cannot be considered "true" action research. Normal research and laboratory controls are often impossible or impractical in action research, as this research is often done while in the act of teaching or learning, but action research is still methodical; it requires a definite system to record, interpret, and publish said research so that it can directly benefit the institution that it came from.

As Megan Manfra says in "Action Research: Exploring the Theoretical Divide between Practical and Critical Approaches" (2009), action research soon faced its first hurdle on its way to legitimacy as a research method in 1960's America, due to the government funded "Diffusion model" of academic research that gained favor in universities conducting research on teaching during this time. This model of research viewed research as separate from teaching, with the "researcher" or primary investigator as an outside investigator separate from the classroom, with teachers as consumers of that research. Consequently, teachers were once again thought incapable of producing "real" research that could be considered worthy of the academy, moving research once again out of control of teachers and instructors. According to McTaggart (1997), "action research was pushed aside by a dominant positivist research ideology", effectively halting the growth of action research until the late 1970's and early 1980's in the United States. However, this stunting of the idea of teachers doing their own research was not pushed

aside in the U.K. during this time period, allowing the principles of action research to survive.

Lawrence Stenhouse (1926-1982), a British educational pioneer and founding member of the Centre for Applied Research in Education (CARE) in the 1960's, became the next prominent researcher to take up the idea of action research, with CARE as his primary innovative mechanism. McNiff and Whitehead write in 2002 about the goals of CARE: "the goals of CARE included "the commitment to questioning one's own teaching as a basis for development; the commitment to and the skills to study one's own teaching; the concern to question and to test theory in practice by the use of one's skills" (McNiff and Whitehead, 264). Besides taking and evolving the ideas of action research from Lewin and Corey, Stenhouse and CARE realized the importance of political advocacy of teacher as researcher as well. McNiff and Whitehead highlight this when they say: "importantly, CARE emphasized emancipatory strategies and more critical outcomes [than did Corey]. Stenhouse saw teaching and research as closely related, and called for teachers to reflect critically and systematically about their practice as a form of curriculum theorizing." This "curriculum theorizing" would give teachers in the U.K. a platform to "push for social change, beginning in schools" (McNiff and Whitehead, 35), leading CARE to become a focal point for not only change in how teachers were viewed as researchers, but also actors for social change as well. Manfra comments on this phenomenon when she says: "During the 1970's, besides conducting a wide range of curriculum development and evaluation projects, CARE became a centre for defining educational research modalities in the public sphere", with its primary task evolving into "finding intellectual answers to the problems of empowering education for all" (Manfra, 35). Stenhouse

himself would describe this process later in 1983: “My theme is an old-fashioned one – emancipation... The essence of emancipation as I conceive it is intellectual, moral and spiritual autonomy which we recognize when we eschew paternalism and the role of authority and hold ourselves applied to judgement” (Stenhouse, 163).

Moving into the early 1970’s in the U.K., John Elliot, a member of the Ford Teaching Project (a “teacher as researcher” in the classroom project funded by the Ford Foundation in 1973), took up the mantle of action research from Stenhouse in Great Britain. Elliot, according to McNiff and Whitehead, “continued the tradition established by Stenhouse of moving beyond objective curriculum research to a focus on the process of teacher inquiry. Elliot insisted that “rather than consistently pursue a single aim in action research, the general idea should be allowed to shift” (McNiff and Whitehead, 40), meaning that there should be no end state in action research; an instructor should be involved in a cyclical cycle of planning, executing, and evaluating his or her own pedagogy and teaching performance. This way of thinking about action research as a cyclical process would become a tenet of action research, and would be developed further by educators in Australia, specifically Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart in the 1980’s.

Kemmis and McTaggart applied three new research paradigms to the cycle of action research; “technical control”, “practical knowledge”, and “emancipatory interest”, which can be found in their *Action Research Planner* (1988). “Technical control” describes the fact that teachers once again have the authority to plan conduct and review their own professional research. “Practical knowledge” was used by Kemmis and McTaggart as the justification for the “technical control” they placed in the hands of teachers, as teachers have the most experience in teaching under real-world scenarios,

therefore teachers make the best researchers for action research to be conducted through. Finally, “emancipatory interest” involved removing themselves and their students from the traditional patriarchal power system that has dominated modern education, seeking to truly democratize the classroom by making the teacher a facilitator of knowledge, not necessarily the source of it. As Manfra says,

“they used this [new] framework to articulate the levels at which teaching could engage in inquiry, with special emphasis placed on the emancipatory interest. They encouraged teachers to critically interrogate their understanding of practice, move to new ways of understanding, and work toward “democracy” in schooling. *The Action Research Planner*, co-authored by Kemmis and McTaggart, became a “well-known text for practitioners and university-based educators around the world. It outlined this new action research cycle, and its emancipatory interest. (Manfra, 36)

In other words, the flipped, democratic classroom with the teacher as facilitator of knowledge was now a part of the evolving idea of action research.

During this period of the 1980’s the United States would once again have a hand in shaping action research dynamics. As Cochrane-Smith and Lytle state in 1999, the United States saw five major trends in action research develop during the 1980’s: “(a) growth in the prominence of action research in teacher education, (b) development of conceptual frameworks and theories of action research, (c) dissemination of action research findings in journals and conference proceedings, (d) critique of action research, and (e) belief in the transformative potential of action research in education (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 16). As Manfra notes in 2009, it is important to realize that the United

States, while adopting the tenets and methods innovated by their counterparts in Europe in the 1960's and 70's, the American contributions to action research in the 1980's had more of a "practical" based approach to action research. Instead of focusing on de-establishing the patriarchy of school administration, or affecting social change on a macro level, American studies and interests in action research

"Focused on the empowerment of teachers by encouraging them to conduct their own classroom research and form conclusions about best practices. It extended from an interest in making professional development more relevant to teachers. Critical action research built on the work of British and Australian educators who, while acknowledging the importance of empowering teachers to form their own conclusions through systematic study, hoped to also bring about more democratic forms of schooling and society" (Manfra, 37).

This emphasis on teachers and how to empower them to get the most out of their classrooms was the focus for action research in 1980's America. Dubbed "practical inquiry" by action research theorists such as Gall, Gall, and Borg (2005), practical inquiry was championed as a teaching pedagogy that "can illuminate important issues of teachers and their students and, through reflection on practice, generate new knowledge about teaching and learning...Within practical inquiry, teachers study and redefine their "professional knowledge landscapes"" (Manfra, 37). The word "practical" carried the highest emphasis for American action practitioners during this time period, focusing on "real classrooms and real schools" (Alan and Miller, 196). Cochran-Smith and Lytle write about this time period in 1999 that "practical inquiry is more likely to respond to the immediacy of the knowledge needs teachers confront in everyday practice and to be

foundational for formal research by providing new questions and concerns” (Cochrane-Smith and Lytle, 19). Action research in the United States was all about practicality; such research was fast becoming considered more “relevant” and “authentic” (Manfra, 38) for not only teachers, but for their administration as well, as Glanz (1999) highlights below:

“Action research is a kind of research that has reemerged as a popular way of helping practitioners, teachers, and supervisors to better understand their work. In action research, we apply traditional research approaches (ethnographic, descriptive, quasi-experimental, and so forth) to real problems faced by the practitioner”. (Glanz, 301)

The emphasis Glanz places on specific teachers and supervisors is important here, and becomes a part of the action research movement in the United States. Action research in the United States is now directed at specific administrators, specific teachers, and specific situations, and not at the strategic or political level of an organization. The emancipatory and politicized rhetoric that was seen in Britain and Australia in the action research movement in the 1970’s is not seen in the United States post 1980. However the late 1980’s and the 1990’s would see theory and critical inquiry find traction once again in the field of action research.

In contrast to what we have seen with “practical action research” above, “critical action research” can be seen as a new research paradigm within the umbrella of action research, once again focusing on the “macro” issues involved in teaching and education. Manfra highlights what critical action research is when she says “rather than describing schools and classrooms, the goals of critical action researchers involve changing

educational structures and transforming society” (Manfra, 39). Cochrane-Smith and Lytle make similar observations about critical action research when they say “The emphasis is on transforming educational practice toward emancipatory ends and thus raising fundamental questions about curriculum, teacher’s roles, and the ends as well as the means of schooling” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 18). Similar to what has been seen in Action research studies in the U.K. in the 1970’s, action research in the 1990’s once again focused on teachers not only performing their own research in their own classrooms, but also placed the instructor in the role as a necessary agent for social change at the macro level (school/district administration, local communities, etc.) as well. Joe Kincheloe, writing in 1991, talks about the role of this new conceptualized version of the instructor as “critical teacher”: “The critical teacher researcher asks questions of deep structure of his or her school or classroom settings – in other words, he or she takes Habermas’ notion of emancipatory interest of knowledge seriously” (Kincheloe, 81).

The 2000’s up to the present day saw what Manfra calls the “division between practical and critical research” that saw ebb and flow in the United States from the early 1990’s. The table below gives more detail into what this split entails for current day action research:

A Summary: Practical Action Research Compared to Critical Action Research

<p>Practical Action Research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Practical-Deliberative”(McKernan, 1996) • Concerned with practical knowledge or “Craft knowledge” 	<p>Critical Action Research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Critical-Emancipatory” (McKernan, 1996) • Concerned with social and cultural factors that impact school
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest in day-to-day issues of teacher practice • May result in improved practice and student performance but not social or cultural change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest in democratic participation and emancipation • Seeks deep change and enlightenment within the classroom • Implicit goal towards improving society
--	--

(Manfra, 38)

As this table shows, the previous “separate” innovations with action research in the U.K. is seen as the “critical” camp, with mostly practical American innovations in action research in the “practical” camp. Unfortunately, as Manfra highlights, the two “camps” of action research have yet to find middle ground, with theorists on each side reluctant to share what Manfra calls “insider knowledge” with one another: “While advocates of action research agree that it provides a means to formalize teacher inquiry and empower teachers...they disagree on what questions those teachers should ask. As a result of this divide between the two forms of action research, important questions about teacher practice have been allowed to go unanswered” (Manfra, 41). While Manfra does go on to say that both sides of the “divide” that exists in action research agree that “action research...provides a means to formalize teacher inquiry and empower teachers to share their “insider knowledge”” (Manfra, 41) with an audience outside of their classrooms, there currently does not exist a “dialogue in the literature between the two [practical action research and critical action research], and it appears that they are separated across a divide with no middle ground” (Manfra, 41).

It is this split between the critical and practical that motivated my approach in conducting this thesis project. I wanted to produce a study on my own teaching that would lend itself to a practical application in current and future classrooms seeking to achieve

the same or similar goals of *The Letter as Genre* while having roots in the critical theory of action research as well (or, what Manfra would hopefully call “the exploration of a middle ground between the two approaches” (Manfra, 42)). Therefore, I hope to combine both the tenets of practical action research with critical action research in this project: the research questions answered in this study point to very practical goals: did the students of *The Letter as Genre* improve their critical thinking skills? How did they grow as writers? Questions such as these would easily be identifiable as practical questions designed to assess the “day to day issues of teacher practice” (Manfra, 41) that either contributed to or detracted from the learning objectives of *The Letter as Genre*. However, our course did not seek to stop with developing our student’s skill sets in academic areas. The fifth and sixth goals of *The Letter as Genre* outlined in the course syllabus show that Townsend and I were also concerned with how our course would impact our students *outside* of the classroom and the academy as well:

5. To understand undergraduate work as scholarship, worthy of an audience beyond the classroom:

Your work and thinking will be archived, so students in future classes on letter writing will have your work to draw on

You’ll prepare a written group report based on research with your peers seeking to answer the question, “Is letter writing dead?” to be read by a public audience

Two scholars visiting from China will join us for the entire semester as participant/observers, and one more, from Russia, will join us for the first month; all are being hosted by Dr. Marty and are at MU to learn how American college

faculty employ “writing across the curriculum/writing in the disciplines” pedagogies in order to adapt these at their home institutions; these scholars will learn from you how students think and write critically, and they will share insights about how Chinese and Russian students would respond to the course

6. To begin developing a theory of the importance of letters and letter writing for the current time—the culmination of all points above. – *The Letter as Genre* Course Syllabus

These two course goals fit into the “critical action research “ category that Manfra highlights, specifically the requirement that critical action research is “concerned with social and cultural factors that impact school” and that a classroom identifying with critical action research is “interest[ed] in democratic participation and emancipation” (Manfra, 41) from traditional forms of instruction. Course goal #5 specifically states that *The Letter as Genre* was interested in our student’s work as true scholarship “worthy of an audience outside of the classroom”, with the edited collection *Mail Call* serving as proof that this goal was executed by our students. Course goal #6 highlights the fact that *The Letter as Genre* was concerned with another facet of critical action research that Manfra highlights, namely that a classroom must be concerned with “social and cultural factors that impact school”. The working theory of the importance and place of letter writing that the students of *The letter as Genre* created directly sought to connect letter writing with a myriad of factors that impact how our society and culture transmits information to one another, and how mediums for doing so are evolving and changing with the advent of social media, e-mail, or even the fact that elementary schools no longer instruct their students in cursive handwriting. All of these factors directly impact the form and quality of education in

today's schools, and our course examined these issues throughout the course.

Hopefully this goal of combining the two major “camps” of practical and theoretical action research will be evident in how this project was executed: the following three research questions are not only concerned with practical action research goals (such as evaluating the growth of critical thinking skills in the students of *The Letter as Genre*), but also critical action research goals as well (did the students of *The Letter as Genre* grow as individuals? Did the instructors?)

Research Question #1: Did *The Letter as Genre* Achieve the Goals of its Stakeholder's?

One of the primary research questions I developed in order to help with my overall reflection of the course *The Letter as Genre* was “did the course achieve its stakeholder's objectives”? In terms of support from my theoretical framework, I believe asking a “macro” level question such as this would fall squarely in the critical action research paradigm discussed in the literature review section of this project, with productive research questions that teachers should ask themselves of their work having an “emphasis on transforming educational theory and practice toward emancipatory ends and thus raising fundamental questions about curriculum, teachers roles, and the ends as well as the means of schooling” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, pg. 18). Asking if *The Letter as Genre* achieved the goals set for it by the instructor would be an examination of the impact of the course *outside* the classroom, making it by definition a “macro” examination, according to the action research theory described earlier.

Townsend, writing in the course proposal for *The Letter as Genre*, identified two of the three primary stakeholders of the course in the “benefits” section of the proposal as The

Campus Writing Program and Honors College of the University of Missouri Columbia (Course Proposal). I would add a third; Townsend herself, as she is not only the primary instructor but also the creator of the course. This section shows that *the Letter as Genre* met the goals of its primary three stakeholders.

The first two primary stakeholders of the course, the Honor's College and the Campus Writing program at the University of Missouri, are transparent about their goals for each of the courses they authorize, with these goals being readily available on their respective websites. The Campus Writing Program (CWP) says the following of courses that it designates "Writing Intensive" (WI), which are certified by its campus writing board, a committee that convenes to reject or accept proposals for new or continuing courses wishing to receive the WI designation:

The Campus Writing Board is looking for classes that use writing as a vehicle for learning, classes that require students to express, reformulate, or apply the concepts of an academic discipline. The emphasis on writing is not intended primarily to give students additional practice in basic composition skills but to encourage students to think more clearly and express their thoughts more precisely – to think critically and communicate effectively. The Board approves Writing Intensive courses that follow two important learning principles: 1) students will comprehend content better through writing, and 2) professors will improve the quality of students' performance by giving feedback and requiring revision. "Writing Intensive" status is conferred on a by-instructor, by-semester (up to academic-year) basis. – (CWP Guidelines)

The emphasis is placed not on “basic writing skills” such as punctuation or grammar in course bearing the WI designation, but on the ability “to think clearly and communicate effectively”, two advanced skills that have a wide range of applicability in a variety of contexts, both in and outside of the academy. Dr. Nancy West, the Director of the Honor’s College at the University of Missouri – Columbia, had this to say about the relationship between the Honors College’s goals four courses that bear the honors college designation, when writing in support of *The Letter as Genre* course proposal in February of 2014: “I am writing to support Dr. Marty Townsend’s course development proposal for the English Honors 4070/Gen Hon 4070. Her subject for the course – The Letter as Genre – is a timely and exciting topic, one sure to appeal to the high number of honors students we have in English and Journalism. As a course that also draws attention to the varied history and cultural significance of written communication, it speaks to our new emphasis in the honors curriculum on developing four key characteristics in all of our honors students: 1. Critical thinking 2. Creativity 3. Collaboration and 4. Communication” (West).

By juxtaposing the goals that the CWP and Honors College had for *The Letters as Genre*, definite similarities can be seen between the outcomes both organizations had for the course. For the goals of the CWP, for its students to “think critically and communicate effectively”, I would argue all four of the honors college’s goals for the course would have to be achieved as well; critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication are all necessary if your end state for the student is to develop the ability to think critically and communicate effectively. Therefore, this project examines how *The Letter as Genre* fulfilled the Honor’s College’s four key characteristics they

want developed in all their students, and how developing those characteristics led to the fulfillment of the CWP's goals of its course's teaching students to think critically and communicate effectively.

Critical Thinking

As stated in the introduction, the primary question driving the course was “is letter writing dead”? In order to answer this question, students in *The Letter as Genre* first had to examine what letter writing was, what it is now, and even investigate where it may be going. To facilitate this for our students, Townsend and I grouped our instruction into period specific lectures that encompassed seventy-five minute class periods twice a week, with week one starting with some of the earliest women writers of the middle ages and Victorian periods in Europe, moving on through the 18th and 19th century letters of famous men and women such as Alexander Pope, Abraham Lincoln, and Winston Churchill. The course ended with contemporary writers, one of whom was Mizzou's own Dr. Mary Kay Blakely, who led the class in a discussion revolving around the devastating and remarkable letters Dr. Blakely's family wrote to one another while she was under a nine day coma. While we examined these works in specific blocks, we expected our students to make associations across time periods and cultures, in order to create their own working definitions on what letters were and are, and whether their own ideas on what letters are can survive in the digital age (our students most certainly had their critical thinking skills honed and put to the test throughout our course). In order to create their own working definition of what letter writing *is*, our students had to piece evidence together from over a thousand years of letter writing examples, in order to pick a worthy topic for their final paper in the course which, in turn, became part of

The Letter as Genre's edited collection of essays *You've Got Mail*. This collection can be considered evidence itself for the presence of critical thinking in the course; each student brought forth his or her own unique example of what proved, for them, that letter writing still has the power to impact their lives today. As Kelsey Hurwitz and Shannon Robb, Co-editors of *You've Got Mail* state in their introduction

“*The Letter as Genre* was cross-listed as both an English and general honors course; we each came from different disciplines in the university and brought varied perspectives and interests to this assignment as a result. In this book you will find essays on topics ranging from art to inmates, and from presidents to personal discovery. We think the broad scope of these essay topics and the captivating thoughts and ideas within them are a testament to just how relevant letters still are” (*You've Got Mail*, iv).

Creativity manifested itself consistently in *The Letter as Genre*, with obvious proof of this once again contained within *You've Got Mail*, as the topics students chose to write about ranged from the influence letters had on famous figures in history, such as Truman Capote and President Obama, to how personal letters are still the main form of communication in our prison systems. Each essay is a unique and personal piece of scholarship written by each student, expressing their own original ideas in the process of studying the power of letter writing has in their lives. Creativity did not only manifest itself in the class's edited collection; the course's many informal assignments were projects that all required varying levels of creativity to be successful. One of the most memorable examples of this for me was an in class exercise devised by the group that presented on “salacious love letters” in week twelve of the course. For this assignment,

the group had each member of the class take fifteen minutes to write an anonymous love letter to their “true” love, remembering to use the “salacious” language we had encountered during that week’s review of the letters of figures such as Marlon Brando, and former President of The United States Warren G. Harding. What the group *didn’t* tell the class was that those letters would be collected, mixed, and then returned to the class, in order to be read out-loud to the rest of the class, with each student reading a random letter from the pile that wasn’t theirs. Not only did hilarity ensue while the letters were read, but that week’s reading and discussion was effectively reinforced via a new medium by that group who had devised the exercise, truly showing their creativity in the process.

Many examples from *The Letter as Genre* coursework could be used as evidence that collaboration and communication with the edited collection of *You’ve Got Mail* a prime example once again. However, one course project that truly exemplified the related ideas of collaboration and communication would be the end of course research project that all student in the course had to complete with their groupmates. The course syllabus briefly outlines the basics of this assignment: “Group research project on peer and public perceptions of letter writing; each person in each group will survey 8-10 peers, groups will aggregate and analyze their data, which they will present to the class and then write into a report for an external public audience” (course syllabus), with a more detailed explanation of the project handed out during class (see appendix). After discussing this assignment with the class, the class collaborated on the requirements of the assignment and voted on a proposal to open up the “8-10 peers” category to include other demographics, such as parents, grandparents,

supervisors at work, etc. Each group also came up with two original research questions that only their group would ask participants, allowing each group to imprint its' own individual touch to the assignment. Needless to say, collaboration and communication were instrumental to our student's ability to analyze a particular assignment, discuss that assignment within their research group, and to then propose modifications to that assignment to fit their individual group's interests and needs.

Summation of the Achievement of *The Letter as Genre*'s Stakeholder's Goals

After reviewing how *The Letter as Genre* successfully fulfilled the goals set out for it by the University of Missouri's Honors College for all students enrolled in an honors college course (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication), it is clear that in the process of fulfilling these goals for the honors college, the course also fulfilled the goals set for it by the CWP as well, namely that students in a WI course "think critically and communicate effectively." This section shows that not only were these goals cultivated in our students in the *Letter as Genre*, but also tested via our assignments as well, showing that *The Letter as Genre* was a success for its primary stakeholders.

Research Question #2: What Were the Benefits to the TA?

Given that I was the TA for *The Letter as Genre*, it seems appropriate that one of my three main research questions be concerned with the impact the course had on me. Besides the obvious answer that the course gave me my topic for my Master's thesis, *The Letter as Genre* developed my skills as an instructor in many important ways, all of which will stay with me as I transition from academia to the private sector. The most important way *The Letter as Genre* impacted me is related to my field of study in my

Master's program at the University of Missouri, Rhetoric and Composition, and one of its subfields, the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement. Although I had taken one survey course in graduate school at that point which had touched on the tenets of Rhetoric and Composition and WAC in post-secondary schools, I had never seen them in person, let alone been given the chance to co-teach with a full professor in those fields. The experience of seeing Rhetoric and Composition and WAC pedagogical methods such as "writing to learn" showed me how to apply abstract theory to real life situations; a lesson I will continue to benefit from regardless of what field I end up pursuing. This section briefly gives a background of the Writing to Learn movement and its impact in WAC and composition studies in general, followed by how my experience as a TA in *The Letter as Genre* allowed me to apply these principles to my teaching for the first time.

The Letter as Genre: "Writing to Learn" in Action

A Brief History of Writing to Learn in WAC and Composition Studies

It can be argued that there is no more important tenet to the pedagogical movement of WAC and by association, the larger field of Rhetoric and Composition, than the idea of "Writing to learn." Bazerman et. al. in their *Reference Guide to Writing Across the Curriculum* give an excellent summation of what exactly "writing to learn" means when they say

Writing to Learn is based on the observation that students' thought and understanding can grow and clarify through the process of writing. A saying attributed to E.M Forster, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say"

(Auden 1962) captures the spirit of this approach, and is widely cited by its adherents. This observation has been elaborated, researched, and made the heart of a pedagogy that focuses on personal, expressivist, journal, and other forms of exploratory writing (Bazerman et. al., 67).

This concept of “writing to learn” was first introduced in the 1970’s by James Britton, who identified three types of “functional” writing, as Bazerman et al. point out:

transactional, for communicating information; poetic, for creating beautiful objects; and expressive, for exploring and reflecting upon ideas. Important to the writing to learn movement is the last category, expressive writing, which he and his colleagues argued could play a cardinal role in learning in every developmental stage, in part because it resembled what Vygotsky had identified as “inner speech” (Bazerman et. al., 57).

By the late 1980’s a “considerable body” of research on writing to learn had been amassed, with three additional characteristics of what the writing to learn movement represented identified by Langer and Applebee in their 1987 *How Writing Shapes Thinking*: first, writing activities “lead to better learning than activities involving reading and studying only” (Langer and Applebee, 139). Second, different kinds of writing activities lead students to focus on different kinds of information, and that writing within a specific genre or genres has a dramatic impact on how information is processed by the writer:

Writing is not writing is not writing; different kinds of writing activities lead students to focus on different kinds of information, to think about that information

in different ways, and in turn to take quantitatively and qualitatively different kinds of knowledge away from their writing experiences (Langer and Applebee, 139)

Finally, Langer and Applebee effectively underscore the difference that the length of a written response impacts the growth of student writers:

Short answer study questions, for example, lead students to focus on particular items of information either located in the text or implied by it. When completing writing tasks of this sort little rethinking of the material usually takes place. However... it generally leads to short term recall of a good deal of specific information...In contrast analytic writing leads to a more thoughtful focus on a smaller amount of information...Although less information is likely to be remembered immediately, this information is longer lived (Langer and Applebee, 139).

Understanding and applying these concepts to the classroom have definite effects on student learning according to Bazerman et. al.:

In other words, although writing promotes more focused, complex consideration of the subject matter, the volume of information is narrowed. Whereas summary writing and notetaking lead to comprehensive but superficial understandings of the subject matter, analytic writing [writing to learn], by promoting depth rather than breadth, inevitably neglects whatever information was not included in the essay (Bazerman, 61).

From the 1990's up until the present day, journal or daily classroom writing is another characteristic that is associated with the writing to learn movement. Susan Peck

McDonald and Charles Cooper studied the effects of journal writing on the quality and sophistication of final exam essays in a Chinese literature course:

The students who kept academic journals outperformed the students who kept dialogic (non-critical thinking), as well as those who kept no journal, on the three measures of essay quality and sophistication considered. Those students who kept dialogic journals based on a more open ended prompt calling for personal response, in fact, performed more poorly than student show did no writing at all...This story is a cautionary tale for composition teachers who uncritically advocate dialogic journals across the curriculum (MacDonald and Cooper, 154).

This passage is important in understanding both the benefits and hazards of incorporating journal writing correctly in the classroom; if the journal prompt is specific, content focused, and has direct tie-in to course material and learning objectives, journal writing can develop both critical thinking and information retention in students. If the journal prompt is too open-ended, relies on uncritical personal response, or is done infrequently, then the results can be minimal (even harmful) to student learning in the classroom.

Applying Writing to Learn in The Letter as Genre

As stated above, one of the many “successes” of the course for my own development was learning how to apply theoretical perspectives from WAC and Composition studies to an actual classroom. I can confidently call the application of the theories listed in the previous section a “success” because the evidence of this application can be found in every major assignment and project that existed in *The*

Letter as Genre. For instance, the two final projects of the course, the formal research paper and research project, both required a multi-stage submission and revision process, requiring the students to reason and think critically in their writing, while constantly revising and adding to that writing as their knowledge base of course material expanded. While these assignments certainly were rigorously assessed, each final draft of each assignment was allowed to be turned in again, in order to make up any points “missed” the first time around. I believe this shows the proper emphasis that was placed on the assignments in the course; a “grade” for a particular assignment took a backseat to student learning and the understanding of “writing as process” in a *specific* content area. Such a pedagogical approach aligns with what Bazerman et. al. state as the chief purpose for implementing writing to learn techniques; writing to learn is primarily concerned with student growth, not grades, and how such learning can be translated to a student’s particular experience outside of the academy. This can be found in the description of the formal paper assignment in *The Letter as Genre* syllabus:

A slightly longer formal paper (3-4 single-spaced pgs) or presentation: a multi-stage (i.e., revised) research paper on letters by one or more authors in your major or an in-depth ethnography of letter writing in your family or someone in your community, or a *prosopopoeia* reading of letters by historical figures (in costume, perhaps) accompanied by a critical explanation or interpretation (this option could also be done by two students taking the roles of two figures who exchanged letters); or other creative assignments that you propose.

Scores of websites are devoted to letters of various kinds, and Ellis Library’s holdings related to letters are vast—all of which allow for rich research

opportunities. Ellis Library's Special Collections may offer revealing opportunities, as well. (Syllabus)

Both "multi-stage" and "in-depth" writing as process characteristics are emphasized along with the expectation that each individual student will create body of work that is reflective of his/her own personal experience and interests, all tenets of the writing to learn movement described above. Townsend and I quickly realized in our summer planning sessions that we had collected *far* too much content for us to cover concerning letters in one semester. In order to keep with the WAC/writing to learn idea that classroom writing and learning need to focus on a detailed examination of a specific topic to be effective, each student was required to align the course assignments to his or her own particular interests, majors, etc. As seen in the edited collection *You've Got Mail*, each student's essay, even if written about a topic similar to someone else's, was a unique piece of scholarship that showcased each student's ability to apply critical thinking skills developed in our course to his or her own life, a bedrock principle of writing to learn, WAC, and composition studies in general. This can be seen in the two essays about the same topic in *You've Got Mail* - prison correspondence. While Jamie Berry in "Sincerely, Your Prison Pen Pal" writes on the medium of prison pen pal websites and the deep and often heart-breaking connections inmates and their correspondents make over them, Jessica Journey in "A Final Word: Letters from Death Row" takes a completely different approach to letter writing and the American criminal justice system. Instead of focusing on inmate pen-pal relationships with the outside world, Journey is interested in examining Hamilton Nolan's "Letters from Death Row", where the author "offered prisoners with upcoming prison dates one final chance to

make their voices heard before death” (*You’ve Got Mail*, 61). Seemingly both written on the same subject, both essays were successful because the authors used their own interests and experiences as a driving force in the creative process, resulting in two strikingly different essays on the same general topic.

Conclusion

Seeing both the process of implementing sound pedagogical theory in a newly-created class and the results attained by its students upon course completion drove home the message that the theoretical framework of composition studies, specifically WAC and writing to learn, are much more than something you list in your teaching philosophy; they are concepts that need to be practically applied to the classroom to truly understand their impact. By being able to see such an application of theory by a full professor, I began to understand how such applications happen and how to make use of them in the future in my own teaching of freshman composition. Instead of frantically scrambling around the internet and library stacks to find a pedagogy to hang my hat on, I already knew a system that would encourage and develop my student’s critical thinking while giving them something concrete to connect to their own life experience. My experience in co-teaching *The Letter as Genre* made this possible.

Research Question #3: What Impact did *The Letter as Genre’s* Curriculum have on Student Writing and Learning?

The students in *The Letter as Genre* had an opportunity to grow in both in their writing and critical thinking skills, with the course fostering both skills simultaneously through the “writing to learn” model championed by the WAC movement. Peter Elbow, one of the chief proponents within both composition studies and the WAC movement in

the United States, writes about the two goals of writing we need to have for our students, the significant difference between those two goals, and what this means for students when he says

It is helpful to distinguish between two very different goals of writing. The normal and conventional goal is writing to demonstrate learning...We all know and value this kind of writing so I don't need to argue for it here....But there is another important kind of writing that is less commonly used and valued , and so I want to stress it here: writing for learning. This is low stakes writing. The goal isn't so much good writing as coming to learn, understand, remember and figure out what you don't yet know. Even though low stakes writing is not always good at writing, it is particularly effective at promoting learning and involvement in course material... (Elbow, 1).

This passage, taken from Elbows' 1994 "Writing for Learning—Not Just for Demonstrating Learning", further makes the point that both kinds of writing are necessary for students to not only grow in their writing, but also in their critical thinking skills, subject matter knowledge of course material, as well as to write within a specific convention or discipline. This section is devoted to examining how *The Letter as Genre* effectively incorporated both of what Peter Elbow called "high stakes" writing (writing to demonstrate learning) and "low stakes" writing (writing to learn), both of which WAC and composition scholars like Elbow argue are necessary for an effective course.

High Stakes Writing

Elbow further characterizes "High Stakes" writing is in the following passage:

These [high stakes learning assignments] are not just “writing to learn”-fruitful explorations or wrestlings above- but genuine essays that must be revised: clearly written, coherently organized, carefully copy-edited, and typed...

Rethinking is needed, not just cosmetic touching up. Otherwise some students assume, from the lessons in low stakes writing, that I am completely casual about writing. It makes sense to evaluate these essays strictly and perhaps comment on them (Elbow, 2).

The Letter as Genre had multiple assignments that followed this “high stakes” format, with the most notable being the “formal paper assignment”, which would eventually turn into each student’s submission for the edited collection *You’ve Got Mail: Don’t Write Off the Letter*. The assignment described on page 37 illustrates how formal, high stakes writing was integrated into the course.

Comparing the guidelines for this assignment and its execution to what Peter Elbow states should be included in high stakes assignments show that *The Letter as Genre* followed his guidelines. Elbow’s emphasis on writing as process, with a product that has gone through multiple stages of revision and editing also shows itself in our formal paper assignment, as our students were taken through at least two drafts, with a third optional if the student wanted to increase his or her score after the final draft was graded. As far as Elbow’s insistence that “rethinking be required”, our formal assignment mandated that our students synthesize multiple authors, points of view, or critical theories to complete this assignment, while juxtaposing them with insightful analysis. These rigorous expectations demanded that our student’s reevaluate and

revise their drafts based upon extensive written comments from Townsend, as well as comments from me during my office hours and during class.

The Letter as Genre also incorporated one of the tenets of WAC championed by Elbow and other WAC scholars, namely that of “writing within the disciplines”, or “genre writing”, as it is sometimes called. Fiona English, in *Student Writing and Genre: Reconfiguring Academic Knowledge*, examines what writing within a genre (such as the genre of letters) or academic discipline requires of both students and instructors, and what benefits students gain from genre scholarship. English discusses these points when she says

The work I have presented in this book, the student’s work and my own, has led me to (re)consider the ways in which students are expected, and expect, to represent their disciplinary learning. It has helped me to see how important is the relationship between disciplinary knowledge, learning and the kinds of production our students are expected to work on....The requirement for students to do something with the disciplinary materials that comprise their courses of study is crucial. Recontextualizing is key to learning because it engenders reflection in the making of the material (English, 208).

Unpacking this statement by English shows us that genre studies (and writing within them) should no longer be understood as a purely theoretical pursuit, but can have definite, practical benefits to students, such as giving them a framework for understanding texts, more knowledge about those texts, and an effective vehicle for stimulating discussion in the classroom (contextual and discursive orientation).

These benefits to writing within the disciplines outlined by English were experienced by the students of *The Letter as Genre*, and evidence of this can be seen in the end of course evaluations. One student said “I loved all of the wonderful opportunities that were presented to us. The museum, the pens, the exposure to the letters from different time periods...I liked all the discussion we did as well. It helped me dissect the letters and analyze them from different perspectives” (Student Evaluation, 1). This evaluation highlights the impact(s) English states that writing within a given discipline or genre can have for students; it gives them additional perspectives to understand and analyze course content, making both writing and discussing topics within a genre that much more productive. *The Letter as Genre* accomplished this by using genre studies as an approach to not just picking texts for our students but as an analytical lens. While all the students were exposed to the same letters, time periods, etc. in class, we required our students to bring their own perspectives and interests into those discussions, ensuring that interesting new angles, viewpoints, and insights readily appeared in both their writing and discussion, “personalizing” each genre of letters for each student. Proof of this personalization can be seen in the formal assignment’s final form, a submission to the edited collection *You’ve Got Mail*. In it, no two topics are the same, nor could they be; each student was required to bring his or her own interests and experiences to the genres we studied in class, creating a truly unique product in the process.

Low Stakes

Low stakes writing can take many forms, and Peter Elbow outlines some of the most effective of those forms in “Writing for Learning- Not Just for Demonstrating

Learning”: in-class writing, journal writing, and think pieces. *The Letter as Genre* incorporated all three of these low stakes writing forms.

In Class Writing

In class writing can take many forms, as Peter Elbow describes:

We can treat this kind of writing as entirely private or as a spot quiz- or anything in between. I find it most important to collect these pieces for a while at the beginning of a course, and I often have students share them quickly with a partner or a small group. I don't grade them or comment, but I insist students use the writing to try to think the material through on paper...After a number of sessions like this, they [the students] discover the usefulness of this kind of low stakes writing (Elbow, 1).

Our format for in class writing assignments, true to Elbow's description, took many forms: spot writing quizzes asking our students about the culture of letters surrounding Jewish immigrants in 19th century America, or to write down 5 questions that they would have liked to ask a guest speaker who would be speaking in the coming days, etc. These assignments were never “graded” per se, but analyzed using the check plus, check, and check minus system, also championed by Elbow and other WAC scholars. The effect of all this on our students was exactly as Elbow describes: “this kind of writing helps students get more out of discussions and lectures. In a lecture or discussion, there are often only one or two minds at work in the room; when I ask students to write [these kinds of assignments] most minds are at work” (Elbow, 2). Our discussions were always robust and insightful, with the vast majority of the class

population contributing, as every student would always have a point or question prepared in advance, thanks to our in class writing assignments.

Journal Writing

Journal writing in *The Letter as Genre* was often indistinguishable from the free writing exercises described above; our students were expected to write on short prompts and to keep those responses in a notebook for continual review by them and us throughout the semester. Peter Elbow again shows us the value of journal writing when he says

Many teachers enhance learning by requiring students to keep reading journals, thinking journals, or lecture journals. The goal is to get students to connect what they are studying to the rest of the experience, thoughts, and feelings. Teachers handle journals in various ways; exhortation alone, periodic inspection but no reading, fast browsing, full reading, responding, grading... (Elbow, 2).

In terms of this course, journal writing was reviewed by us periodically to not only check to see if our students were doing the required readings, but also to see if they were in fact making significant connections to the material that we were hoping they would make, and talking about those connections in class discussion. By using journal entries as both a reading and comprehension check and a discussion springboard, *The Letter as Genre* created an environment that encouraged and facilitated learning. As one student wrote in his or her evaluation "Use of class time was always great. It was always easy to pay attention in class. The instructors were great teachers and mentors and facilitated great discussions. They care very much about student learning and were

always available for extra help” (Student Evaluation, 2). Journal writing contributed to all of the successes the student lists above; it made it easier to see the process of learning developing in our students, so we had the raw material to mentor and facilitate student growth and learning throughout the course.

Think Pieces

The writing of what Elbow calls “think pieces” would often manifest itself in both in class writing and journal writing. Elbow describes how think pieces are supposed to function:

This is the name I give to writing that is a bit more thought out and worked over-but not yet an essay: exploratory but not merely free writing. I tell students to think of these pieces as thoughtful letters to an interested friend. Teachers often assign weekly think pieces as thoughtful letters to an interested friend. They make it a simple matter-of-fact requirement-“no big deal”-but by making sure substantial credit depend on doing them all. One can read think pieces quickly and just check to see if students have engaged the task, or read them carefully... (Elbow, 3).

Once again, Elbow’s recommendations concerning think pieces were well implemented in our classroom; think piece prompts would often be something like “What do war letters tell us about the significance of writing letters during war time? Who is/are effected by war letters? Are there common themes present in this genre?” Such questions would not only prepare our students for the following discussion, but would also help them begin to generate connections between texts, people, and ideas that

would serve as the basis for their formal paper, group presentation, or group research project. In effect, think pieces in *The Letter as Genre* served as a kind of bridge from our low stakes writing assignments to the high stakes assignments. Peter Elbow describes this process in the following statement: “When students understand they are being asked for two very different kinds of writing in the course, their essays get better because of their extensive practice with low stakes think pieces, and their writing gets more thoughtful when they experience it as practice for their high stakes essays (and relief from them too)” (Elbow, 3)

Conclusion

While this thesis project has been my biggest academic endeavor to date, I have learned from multiple sources in the academy who have completed theses and dissertations that unanswered questions and concerns will always present themselves at the close of any major project. After writing the report on my last research question, the same can be said for this project as well. Therefore, this conclusion is devoted to answering some of the questions that the three primary research questions of this thesis may have failed to address for the readers of this thesis: “What were some things that could have been done “better” in the course?” is a question that I received most often from those who have helped me in the creation of this project, and is addressed in this section, with a final thoughts section appearing after I examine this question.

The old saying goes that “hindsight is 20/20”, or, that you can always see your mistakes once you have made them. *The Letter as Genre* as a course was not immune to this truism, and Townsend and I made our fair share of mistakes in our planning and execution of this class, just as in all classes that have ever been taught at any level of

education. However, in order to help others teaching or planning to teach future courses involving letters or genre studies, (and to complete a true study in the name of action research), the major mistakes that Townsend and I made while developing and teaching *The Letter as Genre* need to be mentioned in this project. After a careful review of our experiences in *The Letter as Genre*, it seems that the greatest area of improvement could be in course organization and communication.

Course Organization and Communication

A lack of organization and communication in *The Letter as Genre* were the most cited deficiencies in end of course evaluations. The following comment made by an anonymous student who completed one of those evaluations can be seen as typifying the other comments made on the organization of the course: "Content was fascinating and sparked great discussions. I personally felt that some assignments perhaps needed more turnaround time, the final project assignment sheet would have been helpful to have prior to Thanksgiving break, for instance. Some of the structure and organization may have simply been due to the fact that this was the first semester the course was being taught." While more often than not critiques on *The Letter as Genre* were couched between high praise for the course's positive impact on student growth and learning, the fact remains that 18% of students in the course disagreed with the statement that "The syllabus clearly outlined course objectives, requirements, and grading system", and 12% of the students disagreed with the statements "I was well-informed about my performance in the course" and "assignments/projects/exams were graded fairly based on clearly communicated criteria." In order to perform a true

reflection of my teaching based on the principles of action research discussed earlier in this project, it is important to recognize this and hypothesize solutions.

My first impulse after identifying that the chief deficiency found in course evaluations was concentrated in course organization and communication was to simply agree with the anonymous student above that this was probably due to the course being taught for the first time, necessitating that many course elements and assignments be constantly reviewed and modified to the needs of the class as the semester moved on; Townsend and I had modified the class syllabus several times throughout the semester in order to accomplish this. Certain authors were left out in favor of others that the class voted on in class (the content on Mark Twain was reduced in favor of continuing a discussion on the letters of Walt Whitman and Emerson, for example). Other changes were instigated by Townsend herself; during one of our weekly meetings mid-semester, she put forth the idea that one of our informal papers should be completely cut from the course; our students had proved their proficiency in this area, but needed more help with their final assignment, the “formal paper”, which was significantly more important to both their growth and assessment in the course. The impact of changes such as these in WAC and Writing Intensive (WI) courses is discussed at length in Christy Teranishi Martinez, Ned Kock and Jeffrey Cass’ “Pain and Pleasure in Short Essay Writing: Factors Predicting University Students’ Writing Anxiety and Writing Self Efficacy”, published in 2011. As they say in one of their opening paragraphs

Anxiety is prevalent among college students. While many factors contribute to college students’ anxiety, high expectations for writing across the curriculum are likely to contribute to increased writing anxiety, which can affect student’s

motivation and willingness to take writing courses. Writing anxiety is also related to poor performance on English writing exams and in jobs requiring writing.

Therefore, writing anxiety is a central concern for university faculty (Martinez, Kock, and Cass, 351).

The authors go on to state, among other things, the “traditional power discourse” present in most classrooms (i.e. instructors tell students what to write about, students then write about that topic) is one factor that prevents growth in student writing, along with unclear feedback and expectations for that writing in general (Martinez, Kock, and Cass, 358). If we apply this working theory to *The Letter as Genre*, I believe a few modifications of the course are necessary to reduce the percentage of future students in the course (and courses like it) from feeling the course is unorganized and unclear in its communication of expectations. As previously stated, much of this may be due to the course being taught for the first time, and the “growing pains” associated with the process of tailoring a course to a particular body of students; in the future, the course syllabus will more likely than not need to be modified nearly as much, and the second informal assignment will probably be removed from the syllabus before the course even begins. Even with these changes, the responsibility for the problems with organization and communication in *The Letter as Genre* rest with me; as a first time instructor in an academic setting, I was occasionally late in responding to e-mails and posting additional course content in response to student needs. Certain material for students was posted on two to three days before the class session devoted to them came around, causing unneeded anxiety to students who were expected to be well versed in that content before class began. While this was a fantastic learning experience for me as a new

instructor on how to balance tailoring course material to student feedback and needs, our students may have benefitted from a more experienced TA who had either taught a stand-alone course before, or who had already been a TA for another instructor. Future primary instructors of a genre studies course or letters course of this kind may wish to hire a more experienced TA.

Final Thoughts

It is important to note that even though I recommend a more experienced TA be used in future iterations of *The Letter as Genre*, I continue to remain thankful that Townsend did not follow that advice when she brought me into the project. Previous to working with Townsend as a TA, I had often expressed to my fellow graduate students that our “training” as future instructors in the academy had been minimal at best, with most of us only receiving three days of basic instruction before our teaching assignments began that semester by MU’s English Department. Through my experience as a co-instructor for *The Letter as Genre* I was given the opportunity to see the whole spectrum of the teaching process from start to finish, allowing me insight into what it takes to teach a college course that was impossible to find anywhere else. The dedication of *You Got Mail: Don’t Write Off the Letter* may also indicate that our students benefitted from my presence in the course as well, with the class dedicating the edited collection to Dr. Marty and me, with the third paragraph of that dedication applying to me personally:

Joe – Thank you for sharing your personal experiences with letters with our class and for allowing them to be a part of our learning. Your experiences are reason to believe that letters are still an effective way to communicate with those we love, even

when they are far away. You always brought something extra to our discussions, and you encouraged us to seek out the stories behind those letters, proving they aren't throwaway words written on a page but rather emotions and memories that have something more to say –(*You've Got Mail*)

In closing, regardless of whatever career path I end up walking down in my life I will always treasure my experience with *the Letter as Genre*, and believe that it achieved the mandates set out for it by the Campus Writing Program and Honors College of MU, and will benefit future classrooms of students and instructors if it is taught again in the future.

Appendix Content

ENGL 4100H / Gen Hon 3120H, Fall 2015
Townsend & Simpson

***The Letter as Genre* Group Research Project: Peer and Public Perceptions about Letter Writing**

As outlined on the course syllabus, this group research project involves teams of four or five students, each member surveying eight (or more) peers, family members, and other acquaintances to discern contemporary perceptions about letter writing.

(A) All class members have completed IRB certification, which is filed with the instructors.

(B) The interview protocol decided upon by the class is:

Questions for Research Project

Demographic Information: gender, age, occupation, level of education, where they are from, [name], date and location of interview. Names will not be reported in your written document and are mentioned here only for your own tracking purposes.

1. What exactly is a letter?
2. Do you write letters? When was the last time you wrote a letter? If so, what was your purpose and who was your audience? If not, why not? Do you wish you did? Does something keep you from writing letters? (Inconvenience? Lack of someone to write to? Etc.)?
3. How often do you receive letters? Who writes them? When you do, what makes them memorable?
4. Does your family have a history of letter writing?
5. Do you care whether letters are hand-written or typed? Why or why not?
6. Do you consider e-mail equivalent of letter writing? Do you think technology has replaced letter writing?
7. Do you think writing and receiving letters is an effective form of communication? Why or why not?

8. Do you think letter writing is an important skill to have? Why or why not?
9. Do you think letter writing is "dead" or "dying out"? Why or why not?
10. What else do you want us to know about letter writing? Other thoughts about letters or letter writing?

(C) Preliminary presentations (Nov 20) This 10-minute informal presentation is intended simply for groups to let the whole class know how the various projects are developing. How many interviews have you completed? How many are yet to come? Are you able yet to discern any general patterns in the replies you're getting? In general, are the people you're approaching willing to discuss this topic with you? To what degree do they find your inquiries interesting? Data is not yet aggregated nor analyzed.

(D) Formal presentations (Dec 4) This 15-minute formal presentation (much more organized and structured than the informal ones above) is intended for each group to let the other groups know specifically what your complete set of responses shows. Data are aggregated and analyzed. Overall findings are summarized. Power Points organize your presentation. Group members select which specific portions of the material each member presents. *You will need to time your presentations carefully to fit within your 15-min limit.* You will prepare a one-page handout for all class members summarizing your group's demographic data (as given above in B, *with no names*), overall findings, and your conclusions.

To begin your analysis, you will create a spreadsheet on which all members' data can be entered together for each of the ten items (categories, questions) on the protocol. This will allow you to see all responses to each item so that you can begin to make sense of patterns and trends. You will need to abbreviate long responses in order to encapsulate them in cells on the spreadsheet. Use initials or numbers to key each response to the interviewer who collected it. When all the responses are entered, stand back to get some perspective on what you've got. Then, begin to group similar responses for each question, so you can see patterns and trends in the data. Further organize the data in several different ways, i.e., by gender, by age, etc., to see if there are patterns here. *Keep the spreadsheet with your notes. Do not discard. If it's online, print it out.*

When you believe you have understood (by counting and classifying) the overall set of responses for each question, you can begin making some generalizations about what you've found. You can do this either (1) individually and then later comparing your tentative generalizations with your other group members or (2) you can do the whole thing as a group, talking your way through all the material. Either way, this part should take you, minimally, 3-4 hours and will likely involve some negotiation with collegial give and take. And it will feel messy. That's normal when you're dealing with human researchers working with human data. Enjoy the process!

Imagine your team presenting this material to an external audience of educated, interested non-academics who find the subject matter intriguing. You don't have to "win them over," but you do need to convince them you engaged in a credible research project and that you know what you're talking about. Expect them to have questions when you're finished. All four teams will present in order (one hour total), then groups will pose questions to one another (for 15 minutes).

You'll have from Thursday's formal presentations to the following Tuesday to finalize your draft.

(E) Written reports (a good draft on Dec 4; final draft for group grade on Dec 9)

Once you have agreed on what your group has found, you can begin writing your group report, the sections of which are:

1. Introduction

Background: why are you doing this? What the class has studied so far? Hint - revisit the syllabus; take course goals into account. Here, you identify the overarching research question.

2. Methodology

How did you decide whom to interview? How did you decide when and where to interview your respondents? How did your group do the analysis you're about to describe, e.g., (1) or (2) above? Did you use lots of emails? Did you use Google docs or similar tools? Did you tape record and transcribe? Or just take notes? How else can you describe the process by which you did the work?

3. Findings

Summarize the demographic data first; then show in organized fashion what you learned for each item; finally make generalizations about the themes and trends that you observe. (This appears deceptively simple; it will be harder than it sounds here.)

4. Discussion

What do you believe is most interesting about what you found, and why? What seemed fairly obvious? What problems did you run into? How does gender factor into your findings? Did the setting in which the interviews took place have an effect? Your great quotations go here, as you discuss what this all means.

5. Conclusion

What do you want the public to take away from what you learned? What do you want them to know about the prognosticators who claim that letter writing is dying or even dead? What's the "so what?"

As with all research projects, you will put much more time into the analysis than you feel like you have time to fully present, either in your oral presentation or your written report. Do not despair; it's part of the research process.

Formatting

- One-inch margins (top, bottom, and sides).
- Single-spaced; block format (i.e., one black line between paragraphs, no indentation)
- Cambria font, size 12
- MLA format style for in-text citation and Works Cited (if there are any)

Need Help? Access any or all of these:

- Joe's office hours (TT 1:45-3:00 in Ellis Library Coffee Shop)
- Dr. Marty's office hours (TT 1:45-3:00 in 226 Tate Hall)
- Writing Center (call 882-2496 or go online to schedule an appointment)
- Online Writery (available 24/7, with replies *generally* in 48 hours)
- MLA Handbook
- Purdue OWL

Grading

All of the above is 30% of total course grade. Presentation and written report are essential parts of the whole.

Joe and Dr. Marty will look for group presentations that

- are well thought out and well organized,
- give information in a clear, easy to understand PP format,
- stay within the 15 minute time allotment,
- have each team member playing a more-or-less equal role,
- distribute a one-page, well-formatted summary handout for the class, and
- turn in a draft of the written report at the end.

They will look for written reports that

- contain all five of the sections above,
- follow the formatting requirements,
- show evidence of equitable involvement of all team members (indicated by the confidential evaluation each team member turns in),
- present information in an interesting and lively way,
- control for quality of writing conventions and correctness, and
- offer some form of "so what?" take-away for the public audience that is addressed.

There is no minimum or maximum length required. Draft what your team believes will be a good "public" report, remembering, of course, that your audience will appreciate succinct, straightforward prose.

Course Syllabus

English 4100H & General Honors 3120H: *The Letter as Genre*

Fall 2014

Section 1 (67056 & 67057)

TT 12:30 – 1:45 104 Geology

Professor Martha Townsend (“Dr. Marty”)
Department of English
226 Tate Hall
573-882-8068 (office)

Office hours: TT 1:45-3:00 (and by appointment)
Email: TownsendM@missouri.edu (preferred contact)
<http://english.missouri.edu/>
573-874-0125 (home, for emergencies)

Grad Teaching Asst. Joseph Simpson (Joe)
Department of English
7 Tate Hall
314-443-1007 (cell)

Office Hours: TT 2:00-4:00 Bookmark Café, Ellis
Email: jj4d9@mail.missouri.edu

Welcome to ENGL 4100H & GN_HON 3120H

Laments appear frequently in the popular press decrying the demise of letter writing (e.g., “The Death of Letter-Writing,” *New York Times*, 11/10/13), and informal queries do suggest that contemporary students’ knowledge about letters is slim. They rarely write or receive letters, nor have they had an opportunity to study the impact of letters and letter writing in our culture or over time. This course seeks to fill that gap for students from across the curriculum by taking a *rhetorical genre* approach to answer such questions as: What makes letters different from other forms of communication? Who writes letters and why? Who reads them, and for what purpose? What is the impact of digital technology on letter writing? Is letter writing dead, as many journalists and critics suggest, or has the practice taken another form? And finally, why should we care?

Texts – Required & Optional

Material provided by the instructors, on Facebook REQUIRED
Readings selected by students in this class REQUIRED
Garfield, Simon. *To The Letter: A Celebration of the Lost Art of Letter Writing* (Gotham Books, 2013) OPTIONAL

Course Goals & Objectives

1. To acquire an understanding of the importance of letters and letter writing in our culture and over time:

- We will study letters across a range of subjects: literary and cultural, political and civil rights, classical and historical, and sports, among other areas.
- We will hear from several expert guests who discuss their knowledge of letters.
- We will take a class trip to the Churchill Museum in Fulton on September 30, 12:30-5:00 (includes lunch) to learn about Churchill’s letters and see the Smithsonian exhibit *Mail Call*.
- We will dip into tangential, but related topics such as the tradition of pen pals and the recent controversy over whether schools should teach penmanship.
- We will try our hand at writing with a fountain pen (alas, not a quill nor chisel and stone) and explore the technical and tactile elements of ink making, handwriting, and papermaking

2. To reason critically. We will apply five basic elements of the “rhetorical situation” to letters and letter writers—text, author, audience, purpose, and setting—to answer such questions as:

- What makes letters different from other forms of communication?
- Who writes letters and why?
- Who read/s them, and for what purpose?

- How has letter writing changed over time?

3. To solve—or at least address—complex problems. Although questions of the kind we are asking may not produce “right” answers, we will consider such questions as:

- What differences have letters and letter writing made at certain points in time and in various contexts?
- What is the impact of digital technology on letter writing?
- *Is letter writing dead*, as many journalists and critics suggest? If so, should it be revived? If it isn't, why do so many think it is?
- Why should we care?

4. To communicate with clear, effective language in discipline-specific ways. Because the class includes students from multiple disciplines, you will research and write papers appropriate to your respective majors, for example:

- English majors may analyze letters by their favorite author,
- Religious Studies majors might write about the Biblical letters of Paul,
- Music majors might analyze books as *Chopin's Letters* (1931) or *The Letters of Leonard Bernstein* (2013) or trace themes within them as expressed in a series of letters
- Sociology or Black Studies students may elect to write about Hill Harper's tripartite collection of *Letters to...* (2006, 2008, 2013),
- Education majors might explore ways to incorporate letter writing into school curricula,
- Technology, computer science, or engineering students could report on changes in writing technology from ancient to digital times; finally,
- Whatever your major may be, you will research some aspect of letter-writing appropriate to your field of study.

5. To understand undergraduate work as scholarship, worthy of an audience beyond the classroom:

- Your work and thinking will be archived, so students in future classes on letter writing will have your work to draw on
- You'll prepare a written group report based on research with your peers seeking to answer the question, “Is letter writing dead?” to be read by a public audience
- Two scholars visiting from China will join us for the entire semester as participant/observers, and one more, from Russia, will join us for the first month; all are being hosted by Dr. Marty and are at MU to learn how American college faculty employ “writing across the curriculum/writing in the disciplines” pedagogies in order to adapt these at their home institutions; these scholars will learn from you how students think and write critically, and they will share insights about how Chinese and Russian students would respond to the course

6. To begin developing a theory of the importance of letters and letter writing for the current time—the culmination of all points above.

Assignments

As a Writing-Intensive course, ENGL 4100H and GH_HON 3120H include both informal, writing-to-learn assignments *and* longer, formal learning-to-write assignments. These assignments include:

- Informal: two short papers (2-3 single-spaced pgs) based on interviews with parents and grandparents about letter writing in their lives; letters written to real or imagined audiences (including to/from the instructor); analytic book reports on the many books of letters by/on an array of authors; regular (but staggered) short reports to the class
- A slightly longer formal paper (3-4 single-spaced pgs) or presentation: a multi-stage (i.e., revised) research paper on letters by one or more authors in your major or an in-depth ethnography of letter

writing in your family or someone in your community, or a *prosopopoeia* reading of letters by historical figures (in costume, perhaps) accompanied by a critical explanation or interpretation (this option could also be done by two students taking the roles of two figures who exchanged letters); or other creative assignments that you propose. Scores of websites are devoted to letters of various kinds, and Ellis Library's holdings related to letters are vast—all of which allow for rich research opportunities. Ellis Library's Special Collections may offer revealing opportunities, as well.

- Group research project on peer and public perceptions about letter writing; each person in each group will survey 8-10 peers; groups will aggregate and analyze their data, which they will present to class and then write into a report for an external public audience.

Course Evaluation

You grade will be based on the percentages below. I will give you directions and grading criteria for the first three. The research project includes peer review, instructor review, and revision prior to final submission. I discourage late submissions, but will consider requests under special circumstances.

Two short papers	20%	(10% each, revision optional; 2-3 single-spaced pgs)
One paper/presentation	20%	(lots of room for creativity here; revision required; 3-4 single-spaced pgs)
Group research project	30%	(includes class presentation, revision, & final public report)
Class participation	<u>30%</u>	(based on daily & group participation on a variety of informal assigns)
Total	100%	

Grading in General

A = exemplary work that combines excellent analysis with top notch writing

B = solid work that grasps almost all of the assignment's requirements

C = a reasonable attempt that may lack analysis or professionalism

D = something was turned in, but requirements are lacking

F = does not satisfy the assignment

My Teaching Philosophy & Expectations for This Class

I don't have my own set of well-worked-out ideas related to the questions this course asks about letters and letter writing in our culture. I am, though, looking forward to learning what a select group of intelligent students from multiple disciplines thinks about them, and I'm excited by the conversations I know we'll have. So, I'm going to ask you to help me "invent" some of the particulars of this course, based on your interests. Most of you selected this course for some reason: what was it—beyond scheduling and needing to fulfill a humanities requirement?

We'll use a workshop/discussion format for most of our classes (i.e., no formal lectures), with everyone sharing her or his work throughout. I expect our class discussions to be highly interactive, with the responsibility for learning shared by all participants. I don't allow open laptops during class, except for on-the-spot research when our discussions warrant gathering quick information.

This course relies on the active, informed participation of all members at every class meeting. The quality of your overall performance—both what you contribute to the class as well as what you derive from it—depends on your being in class, your completing assignments on time, and especially your thoughtful remarks during class.

If you can't attend class for any reason, I expect you to call or email me explaining your absence, preferably before class begins. If you need to be absent or tardy due to an event that is related to

your course of study, and you provide written documentation of the event, I'll work with you to accommodate the situation.

Per the A&S Dean's Office, students who miss more than four class sessions (for twice-a-week courses) may be dropped for nonattendance. If four absences occur before the add/drop period ends, a grade of "W" is reported; if four occur after add/drop, a grade of "F" is recorded. *This does NOT mean that you are "allowed" four absences.* Missing class will affect your grade. If you experience problems that affect your work, I hope you'll discuss them with me sooner rather than later so that we can resolve them together.

MU's Writing Center: An Important Resource

All MU students are invited to make free 50-minute, one-on-one appointments with tutors at the Writing Center who can assist with brainstorming through early drafting and beyond. The tutor specifically assigned to our class is Stephanie Kimmy. She is a fourth year PhD student in Art History and Archeology, with undergraduate and Masters degrees in Classics. (WOW! Go work with this woman!) Call 882-2496 or visit <https://cf.iats.missouri.edu/cwp> to schedule an appointment. You may also submit drafts to the *Online Writery* at <https://writingcenter.missouri.edu/> We will, of course, be discussing our writing in class with one another frequently, and you are welcome to consult with me and Joe at any time.

ADA Consideration for Students with Disabilities

If you anticipate barriers related to the format or requirements of this course, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need to make arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please let me know as soon as possible.

If disability related accommodations are necessary (for example, a note taker, extended time on exams, captioning), please register with the Disability Center (<http://disabilitycenter.missouri.edu>), S5 Memorial Union, 573-882-4696, and then notify me of your eligibility for reasonable accommodations. For other MU resources for persons with disabilities, click on "Disability Resources" on the MU homepage.

Academic Dishonesty

My personal take on academic dishonesty is that it's better to educate ahead of time than to punish after the fact. Feel free to ask me any questions at any time. We will clarify in class any issues related to your assignments; discussing citation and documentation will be a normal part of our work. The following statement is recommended by the Provost:

Per the University's *Collected Rules, Section 200.010, Standard of Conduct*, all faculty have an obligation to report incidents of academic dishonesty to the Office of the Provost, to inform the department chair, and to inform the student of the alleged incident. Academic integrity is fundamental to the activities and principles of a university. All members of the academic community must be confident that each person's work has been responsibly and honorably acquired, developed, and presented. Any effort to gain an advantage not given to all students is dishonest whether or not the effort is successful. The academic community regards breaches of the academic integrity rules as extremely serious matters. Sanctions for such a breach may include academic sanctions from the instructor, including failing the course for any violation, to disciplinary sanctions ranging from probation to expulsion.

Acknowledgements

By way of modeling for you how academic writers acknowledge their sources, I credit here some of the scholars and friends who have helped me think about how this course might come together. Their enthusiastic suggestions have made planning this course tremendously fun.

- Dr. Phil Smith, professor of mathematics and former president of Southern Connecticut State University, and Ms. Loretta Smith, at whose home this course was inspired on Nov 11, 2013, while we were discussing the *New York Times*' column "The Death of Letter-Writing"
- Dr. Mark Heidman, professor of English (retired), Southern Connecticut State University
- Dr. Amy Lannin, assistant professor of English Education and director of MU's Campus Writing Program
- Dr. Nancy West, professor of English and director of MU's Honors College
- My (mostly) MU book club members: J. Norregaard, B. Rupp, B. Shay, C. Swisher
- Dr. Kathy Wills, director of the English program, Indiana University-Purdue University
- Dr. Betty Winfield, professor of Journalism (retired), University of Missouri
- Dr. Vicki Tolar Burton, professor of English, Oregon State University
- All of our guest speakers: Professors Karian; Stanton; Devlin; Blakely; & Professor-to-be Cisco
- Ms. Mandy Plybon, Education & Public Programs Coordinator, Churchill Museum
- Dr. David Schenker, professor of Classics, University of Missouri
- Assorted others: Serey Sar, Columbia College student; Christian [last name unknown], Viewer Communication Management, CNN; & personnel from the NYC Immigrant Museum, the Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum, and the Clinton Presidential Library & Museum
- And, not least, *especially* Joe Simpson. Yea, Joe!

Tentative Calendar – ENGL 4100H/GEN HON 3120H

Week 1 Introduction / Early Authors

Guest Speaker

Aug 26 Intro to course, groups, & assignments

Aug 28 Abelard & Heloise, Hildegard von Bingen, news articles on writing

Week 2 Early Authors, cont / 18th Century - Golden Era of Letter Writing

Sept 2 Christine de Pizan, Boland's poem "The Lost Art of Letter Writing"

Sept 4 Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson
Karian

Week 3 18th Century, cont. / History & Technology of Handwriting

Sept 9 Lady Mary Wortley Montague

Sept 11 History & Technology of Handwriting: Medieval to Modern
Stanton

Week 4 American Literature: Theater, Film, Stories, & Poetry

Sept 16 American Theater & Film: Letters of Elia Kazan, esp. Brando
Devlin

Sept 18 Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson

Week 5 War Letters: Civil War

Sept 23 Abraham Lincoln, clips from "Saving Private Ryan" & "Lincoln"

Sept 25 Charles Babb, Boone County soldier; groups on Lincoln & the
Constitution,

in MU Law Library; preview of Churchill field trip

Week 6 War Letters: World War I, II, Iraq

Sept 30 Churchill Museum, Smithsonian *Mail Call* exhibit
Cisco

Oct 2 Joe Simpson, grandfather (WWII), Joe Simpson, GTA (Iraq); C-Span
video clip

Week 7 Immigration to America (paper #1 due 10/7)

Oct 7 "Becoming American," DVD from Immigrant Museum, NYC; intro research
project

Oct 9 *Bintel Brief* letters; art & letters by Danh Vo, Vietnamese immigrant; research groups

Week 8 Immigration, cont.

Oct 14 Frethorne, *to His Mother & Father*; St. John De Crevecoeur, *from an American Farmer*;

Mann, *to Walter von Monn*; finalize interview protocol

Oct 16 No class; research day for groups

Week 9 American Sports / Sports & Civil Rights

Oct 21 Letters to/from Lou Gehrig, his wife, his doctor; letters from Roger Goodell

Oct 23 Jackie Robinson, Letters to U.S. President (and more)

Oct 25 **HOME COMING / Theme: Diversity**

Week 10 Civil Rights, cont. / Diversity (paper #2 due 10/28)

Oct 28 "Long March to Freedom," DVD from CNN; M L King's Letter from Birmingham Jail

Oct 30 Robert Beech, *Report from Hattiesburg*, Week of May 18-23 [1964]

Week 11 Civil Rights / Diversity, cont. / MU History

Nov 4 James Baldwin, *Open Letter to My Sister Angela Davis*; revisit M. L. King, Jr. Letter

Nov 6 Chancellor Deaton's Cotton Ball letter to campus & UC-Davis comparison

Week 12 Love Letters

Nov 11 Serious & Sincere: John & Abigail Adams, Truman, Brando, & Johnny Cash by student panel

Nov 13 Salacious: Warren G. Harding, Virginia Woolf, & others, by student panel

Week 13 A Journalist's Letter Writing / Preliminary Research Reports

Nov 18 Mary Kay Blakely, including letter by Gloria Steinem (Paper #2 returned)

Blakely

Nov 20 Blakely free-write; Call for Editors; 10-min group research reports

Week 14 Research Preparation & Presentations

Dec 2 In-class workshops for groups to prep, ask Q&A, be ready for Thursday

Simpson 60

Dec 4 Final group research presentations w/class handouts

Week 15 Research Presentations / Wrap Up (*group reports due 12/9*)

Dec 9 Submit formal group reports, discuss synthesizing into one whole-class
report

Dec 11 Class celebration: letters to one another / evaluations



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February 3 2014

Dear Committee Members:

I am writing to support Dr. Marty Townsend's course development proposal for English Honors 4070/Gen Hon 4070. Her subject for the course – The Letter as Genre – is a timely and exciting topic, one sure to appeal to the high number of honors students we have in English and Journalism. As a course that also draws attention to the varied history and cultural significance of written communication, it speaks to our new emphasis in the honors curriculum on developing four key characteristics in all our honors students: 1. Critical thinking 2. Creativity 3. Collaboration and 4. Communication.

Yours sincerely,



Nancy West
Director, the Honors College

*please note:
the English course
above s/b
4/00*

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