

Dear Mr. President

Contacting Your Elected Officials

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Published by *K20 Center*

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Grade Level	9th – 12th Grade	**Time Frame**	60-120 minutes
Subject	Social Studies	**Duration**	2
Course	U.S. Government, U.S. History		

Essential Question

What is civil discourse? How should you write to your elected officials? What are the benefits of civil discourse?

Summary

Elected officials are elected to help their constituents and work on their behalf, but how do we contact them to express our thoughts on issues or ask for help? This lesson explores civil discourse in the context of writing to elected officials. Students will review letters to past presidents, participate in a Card Sort activity, watch an interview with an Oklahoma representative, and write a letter to an elected official of their choosing.

Snapshot

Engage

Students review letters to past presidents and discuss characteristics of effective communication.

Explore

Students participate in a Card Sort to determine which civic issues can be addressed by different elected officials.

Explain

Students watch interviews with Jacob Rosecrants, a representative in the Oklahoma House of Representatives, and OKC Mayor David Holt.

Extend

Students brainstorm a list of issues they would like to address with an elected official. Then, students write a letter to address their concerns.

Evaluate

Students revise their letters based on peer feedback and complete a short Exit Ticket.

Standards

Oklahoma Academic Standards (Social Studies Practices PK-12)

1C: Students will demonstrate understanding of the processes and rules by which groups of people make decisions, govern themselves, and address public problems.
5A: Students will summarize and paraphrase, integrate evidence, and cite sources to create written products, research projects, and presentations for multiple purposes related to social studies content.

Attachments

- Card Sort—Dear Mr President - Spanish.docx
- Card Sort—Dear Mr President - Spanish.pdf
- Card Sort—Dear Mr President.docx
- Card Sort—Dear Mr President.pdf
- Lesson Slides—Dear Mr President.pptx
- Letter Rubric—Dear Mr President - Spanish.docx
- Letter Rubric—Dear Mr President - Spanish.pdf
- Letter Rubric—Dear Mr President.docx
- Letter Rubric—Dear Mr President.pdf
- Presidential Letter Packet—Dear Mr President - Spanish.docx
- Presidential Letter Packet—Dear Mr President - Spanish.pdf
- Presidential Letter Packet—Dear Mr President.docx
- Presidential Letter Packet—Dear Mr President.pdf
- Teacher Card Sort Answer Key—Dear Mr President.docx
- Teacher Card Sort Answer Key—Dear Mr President.pdf

Materials

- Lesson Slides (attached)
- Presidential Letter Packet (attached; one per student or group)
- Card Sort (attached; one set per group)
- Teacher – Card Sort Answer Key (attached)
- Letter Rubric (attached; one per student)
- Paper
- Highlighters
- Pens or pencils
- Internet access

20 minutes

Engage

Introduce the lesson using the attached **Lesson Slides**. Begin with **slides 2-3.** Ask students: *How should you write to your elected officials?* Give students time to process and then ask for volunteers to share out their thoughts. Move to **slide 4** and, briefly, go over the lesson objectives.

Next, invite students to read through several letters to the president. Pass out a copy of the attached **Presidental Letter Packet** to each student. Have students work individually or in groups, depending on your classroom preferences. Have students read through each letter, highlighting or underlining parts of the letters that they feel are effective examples of communication. As students review the letters their packets, display the same letters on **slides 5-13.**

Teacher's Note: Time Management

This lesson includes a variety of letters to past presidents from the National Archives. If you would like to shorten this activity, consider selecting two to four of the letters to present to students.

After students have had some time to work (but are not yet finished), display **slide 14**. Facilitate a brief class discussion about effective communication characteristics that students see in the letters. What things do students think should be included in letters to elected officials? What things should be left out? Create a class list on the board or a similar space.

Teacher's Note: Resources

If students are interested in the history behind writing letters to the president, consider sharing the Washington Post article "Dear Mr. President: Kids have been sending letters to the White House for years," or showing the video "Letters to the President," about former President Barack Obama responding to letters.

Give students time to complete their review. Next, display **slide 15,** and ask students: *What is civil discourse?* Give students time to process and again ask for volunteers to share out their thoughts. Write down some of their answers on the board.

Teacher's Note: Civil Discourse

Civil discourse is a chance to further one's understanding, even when one disagrees. Let students know it is a key concept to remember when engaging with anyone, but it is particularly important when engaging with elected officials with whom they may disagree. The activities in this lesson are meant to help students establish a working definition of civil discourse by examining examples and characteristics of good civil discourse, reflecting on the jobs of elected officials, and finally, practicing civil discourse in a letter of their own.

Explain to students that they will be learning about civil discourse and how citizens can participate in civil discourse with their elected officials.

20 minutes

Explore

Teacher's Note: Activity Preparation

Before you begin this portion of the lesson, print and cut out the attached **Card Sort** activity. You'll need one set of cards for each group of students. Depending on class size, consider having students work through the card sort in pairs or small groups. Consider printing and laminating the cards so they can be used again in the future.

Explain to students that it is important to participate in civil discourse with our elected officials. This goes beyond the president, as the president only has certain powers over certain things. Some problems we might need help solving will require responses from elected officials at the city, state, tribal, or national levels and from various branches of government. Since it is important to know whom to communicate with depending on the problem, let students know they will consider various issues and then think about which elected officials would make the most sense to contact about those issues.

Pass out the attached **Card Sort** to each student or student group. Explain the Card Sort strategy to students and tell them that there are two types of cards: elected officials and constituent scenarios. Display **slide 16**. First, ask students to sort the elected officials into the three levels of government: city, state, and federal. After students have sorted the cards, check for understanding to make sure they have the right officials in each group. Use **slide 17** to check answers.

Next, display **slide 18**. Students should read through each card and determine which elected official (or officials) would be the best choice for addressing the constituent concerns in each scenario. Remind students that they do not need to personally agree with the scenario—they should focus on who can best address the constituent's needs.

After students have completed their Card Sort, ask groups to briefly share out their reasoning. Allow a few minutes for students to re-sort their cards based on other students' explanations.

Teacher's Note: Additional Student Support

You might need to provide more one-on-one feedback for groups. In this case, use the attached **Teacher – Card Sort Answer Key** to help students re-sort their cards to the correct officials.

Ask students why it is important for constituents to contact the correct elected officials about different issues. Have students share out their responses.

20 minutes

Explain

Display **slide 19**. Explain to students that they will watch a short video featuring Jacob Rosecrants, a representative in the Oklahoma House who will discuss his career path and talk about the importance of writing or contacting elected officials. If students are unfamiliar with Rep. Rosecrants, read the information in the Teacher's Note below to students.

Teacher's Note: Legislator Bio

Jacob Rosecrants was born in Oklahoma City and has lived in Norman for nearly 30 years. Shortly after his graduation from Norman High School, he decided being a teacher was his goal. He graduated from the University of Oklahoma in 2008 as a history major with a minor in classical cultures. He became a teacher in 2012 and has been teaching at the high school and middle school levels in Oklahoma City Public Schools ever since. He is the proud father of a 9-year-old daughter, Isabella, and an 8-year-old son, Jonah, both of whom attend Norman Public Schools. Jacob has been a loud activist for public education for years, with his main concerns being the lack of funding given to schools, low pay for teachers, and the harmful high-stakes tests that are unnecessarily forced upon students, especially in lower-income schools. Before becoming an elected representative in 2017, Jacob taught 7th grade geography at Roosevelt Middle School in southwest Oklahoma City. He has a passion for public education, has the patience to listen to constituents, and has the strength and ability to help our communities to progress into the future.

Given this information about Rep. Rosecrants, what types of issues would he care about or be able to address for his constituents? Allow time for students to share out their hypotheses.

Remind students of their working definition of "civil discourse" prior to watching the video. Ask students to think of these questions as they watch the interview: *What things will he confirm about our civil discourse definition? What might we be able to add?*

Finally, invite students to watch two interviews: an interview with Rep. Jacob Rosecrants and an interview with OKC Mayor David Holt.

Embedded video

https://youtube.com/watch?v=CQKqFpuGlVw

Embedded video

https://youtube.com/watch?v=82ZRk_KhHgU

Revisit the working definition of "civil discourse" from the Engage section of the lesson, and ask students if they have any more to add to their definition or characteristics.

25 minutes

Extend

Teacher's Note: Letters or Emails?

This lesson uses letters as the medium for contacting elected officials. However, many officials use emails or even social media messages to correspond with constituents. Make sure students know the process of writing a letter (a physical email, essentially) is a good place to start practicing for other mediums of communication. This way, what they send to their elected officials is appropriate and well written.

Explain to students that, so far, the class has reviewed letters to past presidents and has begun to develop a working definition of civil discourse. Next, remind them of the Card Sort and the interview with Rep. Rosecrants. Tell students they will now work to put their understanding of civil discourse into action.

Display **slide 20.** Ask students to brainstorm a list of issues that they might want to address with one of their elected officials. To keep those issues organized, consider writing their ideas in three columns listed on the board (or similar): "local," "state," and "federal." If applicable to your community, add a fourth column for "tribal."

Teacher's Note: Preparation

Before starting the next activity, consider looking up a list of elected officials that students could contact. You can find the officials using "Find My Legislator" websites, such as Openstates. It may also be helpful to access ward maps of your community or even look up bills on the docket for the current legislative session using websites such as GovTrack or LegiScan.

Once the list has been created, invite students to write a mock letter to one of their elected officials about one of the topics they brainstormed. Hand out the attached **Letter Rubric** to students and have them review what they will be evaluated on in their letters. The rubric (first page) and letter template (second page) contain sentence starters and examples to help them as they write.

If students struggle with where to begin, ask them to reflect on the letters they saw at the beginning of the lesson and think about what Rep. Rosecrants mentioned in his interview video. The letter should be short, with one to three body paragraphs maximum, depending on the content being addressed by students.

25 minutes

Evaluate

Once students have completed their letters, transition to **slide 21.** Have students swap letters and rubrics with a partner.

Review the tips for feedback on the slide. Each student should review their partner's letter and provide feedback: *Where does the writer make a particularly good point? If there are any confusing or unclear parts, is there a better word or phrase the writer could use to fix this issue? Are there any typos or grammatical errors? How could the writer improve their letter?*

Optional: Technology Integration

If students have internet access and laptops, consider having them share their letters and rubrics virtually with their peers.

Remind students that they are not "grading" the letters, and they should be offering only constructive feedback to make the letter *better*. Students can write their feedback on their partner's rubric and return both items when they are done.

Give students time to complete their revisions before collecting the letters as a formative assessment.

Teacher's Note: Evaluation

Note that the "Score" column of the Letter Rubric is for teacher use. Address and modify the scoring system as you see fit.

As the lesson comes to an end, transition to **slide 22** and have students create an Exit Ticket responding to this prompt: *Explain how your letter reflects civil discourse or is an example of civil discourse.*

Optional: Real Letters

If student interest is piqued and students express a desire to contact their elected officials "for real," consider helping them mail their letters or send emails to elected officials where appropriate.

Resources

- Elasfar, D. (2018, July 30). *Dear Mr. President: Kids have been sending letters to the White House for years*. KidsPost. Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/kidspost/dear-mr-president-letters-from-children-throughout-history/2018/07/30/6ed74836-8f4e-11e8-bcd5-9d911c784c38_story.html
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- Oklahoma State Legislature. (2020). *Representative Jacob Rosecrants: District 46 - Democrat*. Member's Page. Oklahoma House of Representatives. https://www.okhouse.gov/members/District.aspx?District=46