

# Activity Plan

<i>Title</i>	Civil War Letters: What was it really like to live during the Civil War?
<i>Subject</i>	Theatre; Social Studies; ELA
<i>Author</i>	ArtsEdge: Rebecca Haden; Maureen Carroll
<i>Grade level</i>	5-8
<i>Time duration</i>	60 mins
<i>Overview</i>	Students will read letters written during the Civil War. Referring to their knowledge about the Civil War, they'll develop a clear understanding of the message of the letter. They will edit the letters for mechanics and create a dramatic reading based on their letter. Then students will create their own Civil War dramas, using a fictional letter they create
<i>Objective</i>	Creating and Connecting: Students will:  Watch a video dramatization of a Civil War letter. Read letters from the Civil War. Analyze the letters in light of their knowledge of history. Recognize the emotional tones of the letters. Edit a Civil War letter for mechanics. Plan and present a dramatization of the letter. Write a fictional letter. Develop and present a drama based on the fictional letter
<i>Materials</i>	<b>Materials</b> <b>Resources</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Printable</b></li><li>• <a href="#">Civil War Letter: Letter from Jim Lewis to Elizabeth Lewis</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Worksheet: Civil War Letter</a></li><li>• <a href="#">Rubric: Civil War Drama Rubric</a></li><li>• <b>Slideshow</b></li><li>• <a href="#">Matthew-Brady-Civil-War-Photography</a></li></ul> <b>Required Technology</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•</li></ul>

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*Activities and procedures*

- Projector
- Speakers
- Video Camera
- 1 Computer per Small Group

**Required Plugins**

-  [Quicktime](#)

**Technology Notes**

- QuickTime or iTunes, if using the video
- Shockwave, if using the Letter Generator

**1. As a class, watch *In Dreadful Conflict*, a dramatization of an 1865 letter from a woman living in a war-torn area to her son and daughter-in-law in California.** The letter mentions a number of historical events and describes the difficulties of life during the war.

**2. Discuss the way the letter presents the Civil War.** Use these questions to spark the discussion:

- a. Why does the writer of the letter say “in your country...” when writing to someone in California? *The writer is in Arkansas, a Confederate state which had seceded from the Union. Also, California was far away in terms of days of travel. Civil War letters from one state to another often use terms like “your country.”*
- b. What does the writer mean by “Federals” and “Yankees”? *The writer lives in the South, and is using slang terms of the time used to refer to people (especially soldiers) from the North.*
- c. What does the writer mean by “The Rebellion”? *Although the writer lives in the South, she describes the Confederacy as “rebellion.” Just as is true now, people had varied ideas during the Civil War.*
- d. What kinds of hardships does the writer describe? *Violence from soldiers and from criminals, death, robbery, arson, homelessness, lack of basic needs, economic hardship.*
- e. Did civilians as well as soldiers face hardship and danger? *Yes; the writer’s husband was not a soldier, but was shot by soldiers. There was also widespread looting.*
- f. Have you heard of the battles the writer describes? *If desired, learn more about the Battle of Pea Ridge (Elkhorn Tavern) at these sites: [Civil War Home](#), [Encyclopedia of Arkansas History](#), [Civil War Preservation Trust](#), [Civil War Animated](#).*
- g. Did anything about the writer’s description surprise you? *Answers will vary; students may not have thought about the effects of living in a place where a war was going on.*

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**3. Discuss the way the video dramatizes the letter.** Start with these questions:

- a. What did you notice about the speaker? *Answers will vary; students might notice that she sounds old, has a Southern accent, etc.?*
- b. Does she express the emotions the writer of the letter might have felt? How does she do so? *Tone of voice*
- c. What did you learn from the introduction? *When and where the letter was written, that there were battles taking place, who the letter was written to, etc.*
- d. How do the visual images add to your understanding?

**4. Alternatively, read the [Letter from Jim Lewis to Elizabeth Lewis](#) as a class. You may find a copy of this letter within the Resource Carousel.** Explain that this is a letter from a man working on a canal in Illinois to his wife, who is visiting family in Missouri. While neither of them is a soldier, the writer of this letter is worried about his wife's safety during this time of war. Discuss the emotions the writer expresses, and how it could be possible to show those emotions in reading the letter.

#### **BUILD KNOWLEDGE**

**1. Examine [Civil War Photos](#).** Ask students to notice differences these photos show between their daily lives and daily life during the Civil War.

**2. Have students read the Civil War letters.** Divide students into five groups and assign each group one of these letters to analyze:

- [Soldier asking for supplies in Connecticut, 1862](#)
- [New recruit in Iowa, 1862](#)
- [Just before the Battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia, 1862](#)
- [Explosion in Mississippi, 1863](#)
- [Letter from hospital, Washington, D.C., 1864](#)

**3. Have students fill out the [Civil War Letter](#) handout.** Encourage students to search online for more background information if they need it to understand the letter their group is reading.

**4. Have students edit the letters to make them easier to read.** Explain that Civil War era letters often have many errors in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Transcriptions of these letters preserve the original writing, since these are primary documents. Discuss the importance of this. Dramatizing the letter will be much easier if these mechanical errors are corrected, though – and it will give students good practice in proofreading, too. Ask students to work together to write their letters with the errors corrected.

**5. Have a student from each group perform a dramatic reading of their letter.** Groups will also be creating an original drama of their own, so students who don't have the chance to act in this step will have another opportunity. Note that the letters are from writers in different circumstances

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and contain different emotions. Student groups can also choose to perform the letters in different ways: sorrow, courage, anger, and even humor can be found in the various examples, depending on the reader's interpretation.

**6. Discuss the ways groups expressed the emotional content of the letters.** Tone of voice, facial expression, and movements or gestures might be among the elements used.

**7. Discuss the content of the letters.** What did students learn from the letters? List facts about daily life, challenges faced by soldiers and their families, and other details noted by students.

### **APPLY**

**1. Have students write their own Civil War letters in their small groups.** Encourage students to use their prior knowledge and the new things they've learned to make their letters authentic. Students should determine, as a group, a scenario they want to use. Then each student should write his or her own letter from an individual in the scenario. Some possible scenarios to work with:

- Mother writing to a relative about the recent death of her son
- Young wife writing to her husband about their newborn, whom he hasn't yet met
- Slave who decides to become a soldier for the Union
- Cousin from the North writing to a cousin in the South
- Sister telling her soldier brother about the news at home

**2. Remind students to sign and date their letters as the fictional characters in whose name they're writing.** Letters should have a greeting to the fictional recipient, and should be identified by the place as well. The content of the letter should include descriptions of events in the war, descriptions of life during the war, and/or emotions of the letter writer.

**3. Give groups time to examine their letters and give one another suggestions for improvement.** Collect the completed letters for grading.

**4. Have groups plan a drama based on their letters.** This could be a dramatic reading of one or more letters, but it could also include other characters. One character could read the letter to another, while another character reads the answer. A letter could serve as narration for a dramatic scene being described in the letter but acted out or pantomimed by multiple characters. In addition to the letters, any other characters will need to have lines written for them. Remind students to include emotions in their dramas.

**5. Review the [Civil War Drama Rubric](#) so that students understand how they will be graded.** You may find this rubric within the Resource Carousel.

**6. Give students time to stage and practice their dramas.** You might choose to give students a time limit for their dramas. If so, students should time their rehearsals to be sure they can meet the time limit.

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## REFLECT

**1. Allow students to perform their dramas.** Consider inviting other classes, parents, etc. to the performances. You might also record the dramas for future classes, or for the school website.

**2. Discuss what students learned about the Civil War from this experience.** Do students have a greater understanding of the daily experience of Civil War soldiers? Did the experience of working to make their dramas authentic bring their knowledge into clearer focus? Ask students to volunteer new information they learned in the process.

**3. Discuss what students learned about drama from this experience.** The authentic letters they read weren't written with performance in mind, while their dramas were. Discuss how students used nonverbal communication to express emotions and make their interpretations of the letters clear, and how they chose words to make their original dramas effective.

### Extending the Learning

**Create a video** like *In Dreadful Conflict*. Depending on the software available, students might use footage of their performances, or images found online.

### Conclusions

Teachers should know about the Civil War.

History.com's Civil War page

Detailed animations of individual battles

Fredericksburg.com (lots of ads, but also lots of information)

Prior Student Knowledge

Students should be familiar with the following:

Students should be familiar with the basic facts about the Civil War: the dates, the sides of the conflict, the areas affected by the war, the central causes of the war, and its place in our history in terms of the technology and daily life of the time (that is, before telephone communication, for example).

Students should have read and written letters.

Students should be able to use a dictionary.

Physical Space

Theater or Stage

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Grouping

Small Group Instruction

Large Group Instruction

Staging

Cue up the video or letter for projection.

Print out and copy the Civil War Letters for Step 2.

*Adaptations*

Accessibility Notes

Students with physical disabilities may need modified movements.

*Links and Websites*