

'A Time for Letters': KS3

Background

The public website, [Material Bodies, Social Bodies](#), makes accessible many hundreds of letters written by British men, women and children between 1680-1820. The letters were exchanged amongst family, friends and acquaintance and contain a wealth of information about everyday personal life, though also discuss work, politics and public life. Due to rates of literacy, the wealth, time and education required to write letters, and the factors that determine the survival of historical documents, the letters are overwhelmingly from the middle ranks of society and above. The letters have been selected to reflect different regions of Britain, as well as religious denominations (overwhelming Protestant but including some Catholic and Jewish letters), and to reflect an equal number of male and female letter writers.

The letters were collected as part of a research project funded by the [Leverhulme Trust](#) and supported by the [University of Birmingham](#). That project explores the experiences and ideas about the body, and this is a particular focus of many of the letters included. However, the content of these letters extends into many other areas.

From the [homepage](#), you can navigate to the ‘Letters’ page, which allows you to filter and search the letters.

The screenshot shows the 'Letters' page of the 'Material Bodies, Social Bodies' website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links: WELCOME, ABOUT, LETTERS (which is highlighted in yellow), PEOPLE, and TRANSCRIBE. Below the navigation bar, the word 'Letters' is centered in a bold, yellow font. The main area contains a search bar with the placeholder 'Search text' and a magnifying glass icon. Below the search bar is a section titled 'Filters:' with two rows of dropdown menus. The first row includes 'Collection', 'Repository', 'Specific State', and 'Emotion'. The second row includes 'Body Part', 'Bodily Activity', 'Year Sent (from)', and 'Year Sent (to)'. At the bottom of the filter section are 'Sort by: Title' and 'Asc (A-Z, 0-9)' dropdowns, along with a 'View:' button that has grid and list icons, and a 'Reset' button.

The page has a free text search field at the top. There are also drop-down menus as follows:

- Collection (the name given to a group of letters by the archive, usually a family or person's name)
- Repository (the current location of the physical letters, usually an archive or library)
- Specific state (such as fever, pregnancy or smallpox)
- Emotion (such as grief, happy or shame)
- Body part (such as hand, head or heart)

- Bodily activity (such as eating, walking and horse-riding)
- Date (of the letter, with two fields to allow searches with a range)

Searching ‘Letters’

- Keywords can be a good way to start, and introduce users to the kinds of material included. Using the free-text search field allows you to search using a keyword or phrase. This will find the words in either the transcription of the letters themselves, the summary of the letter written by a researcher, or the tags attached to the letters by the project researchers.
- As example keywords, try places ('London', 'town', 'prison' or 'mountain'), objects ('wine', 'shoes'), feelings ('shame', 'excitement'), or activity ('dancing', 'concert').
- Another way to call up a more varied group of letters on a range of topics is to pick a month and a year: for example enter 'November' into the search field and select a year from the drop-down menu.
- You can also combine searches. For example, you can find any letters in the database currently held by Derbyshire Record Office that discuss eating by selecting 'Derbyshire Record Office' as Repository and 'eating' from Bodily Activity.

On the next page, you will find a suggested lesson plan for a KS3 English or History lesson. It focuses on letters by Margaret Watt, teenage daughter of James Watt, the famous Birmingham-based inventor. The plan is accompanied by a supporting PowerPoint.

This lesson plan has been used in several secondary schools with success. However, it is indicative only and can be adapted to suit the ages and abilities of classes, and to compliment the school's curriculum. You can find alternative letters to those used here at the end of the plan.

Lesson plan

Aims:

- To read and analyse letters written in the 18th century
- To write our own letter in a similar style
- To compare communication in the past and present

[10 mins] Starter:

Questions:

- How do you usually communicate with your family and friends? How often?
- Who has ever written or received a letter? Who from/to? What was it about?

Context:

- What was the Birmingham like at the 1700s? Brief discussion of Industrial Revolution [**Slide 3: Birmingham in 1740s, prior to IR**]
- What was Britain like at this time? Brief discussion of Empire [**Slide 4**]
- Discuss tools and skills needed for writing [**Slide 5**]
 - Literacy, time, paper, ink, a sharp pen/quill, access to post
- What percentage of the population could read/write?
 - Around 40% of women, 60-70% of men. Mostly wealthy, educated people, people in towns/cities, professionals e.g. doctors, lawyers
- How did letters travel?
 - Carried by horse-drawn coaches, or maybe servants if close by

[50-70 mins] Main:

Introduce James Watt, key figure of Birmingham and the Industrial Revolution. We are going to look at letters written to him by his young daughter [**Slide 6**]

Letter 1: 1502 - Margaret Watt (jnr) to her father James Watt (II), 6 November 1779 [Slides 7 & 8]

Margaret (aged 12) writes from Birmingham to tell her father, working in Cornwall, that she and her younger brother James ('Jemmy') are well.

- Discussion questions [**Slide 9**]:
 - What is Margaret's purpose?
 - How would you describe her relationship with her father?
 - Can prompt discussion of parent-child relations in this period – formality, separation, obedience etc.)
 - How would you describe the handwriting?

- Look at the address on the letter's exterior - envelopes rarely used at this time
- [Slide 10]**
- NB: If you are able to print off double-sided copies of the digital images, these can be handled and folded in order to recreate the object of the letter. This brings attention to the absence of envelopes, and the use of the wax seal to keep the contents of the letter private.
- How long do you think this letter would take to reach James in Cornwall?
- [Slide 10]** How is that different to communication today?

Letter 2: 2247 - Margaret Watt to her father James Watt (II), 18 September 1787

[Slides 11 & 12]

Margaret is now aged 19 or 20. Her father has reprimanded her for something, and she replies to thank him for 'your good advice' and give an apology. She will behave respectfully to her stepmother when she is in town. She hopes her father will be able to visit her in Scotland, where she is living with her aunts who are treating her very well.

• Discussion questions **[Slide 13]:**

- What is Margaret's purpose in this letter? What techniques/language does she use to achieve it?
 - 'Heartily sorry', 'meant no disrespect', 'with hopes of pardon I remain your dutiful daughter' etc.
- How has her relationship with her father changed since Letter 1? How would you describe it now?
 - E.g. 'Hon[oure]d Sir' compared with 'Dear Papa' as previously
- What do you think has happened before this letter?
- Can you highlight any interesting spellings or uses of grammar?
 - Abbreviations (Hond, Septr, Margt), eighteenth-century spelling ('freindly', 'oblidged', 'ashured', 'travilling') and capitalisation, lack of commas in list of three, etc.

Writing activity [Slide 14]:

Imagine you are James and write a short reply to Margaret's letter (Letter 2). Think about:

- Form (date, address, sign-off)
- Structure (how will you open?)
- Content (what do you want to say? Any questions to ask?)
- Tone (how are you feeling?)
- Language (if you can, try to write in the same style and use similar vocabulary to letters we have read today)

A couple of volunteers can read their letter aloud.

[5 mins] Plenary: Reflective question [Slide 15]

- How does letter-writing compare with phone calls, texts, or using social media?
What are the advantages/disadvantages of each?
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Alternative letters:

You might like to compare one of the above letters by Margaret Watt with one by her brother, James (e.g. [22 November 1779](#) or [13 December 1779](#)). These indicates the different childhoods of boys and girls in the 1770s.

You might also like to look at the letter from her father, sent on [28 August 1787](#), which prompted Margaret's apology in Letter 2. Here, James Watt reprimands her for a disrespectful letter she wrote to her stepmother ('Mamma') and hopes she will write letters in future that will allow him to write more pleasant letters to her. This raises interesting questions about the disciplinary role of parents, expectation for children to be obedient, and relations with step-parents.

Thank you for using our website. If you have any feedback or comments, please email us at socialbodies@contacts.bham.ac.uk

You can also reach us on X ([@SocialBodiesUoB](#)) or Bluesky ([@socialbodiesuob.bsky.social](#))