

'A Time for Letters': KS2

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of literacy, the wealth, time and education required to write letters, and the factors that determine the survival of historical documents, the letters are overwhelmingly from the middle ranks of society and above.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' search interface. 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 search area has a 'Search text' input field with a magnifying glass icon. Underneath the search field is a section titled 'Filters:' containing eight dropdown menus arranged in two rows of four. 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 left, there are 'Sort by:' and 'View:' dropdown menus. The 'View:' menu includes options for a grid icon and a list icon. A 'Reset' button is located at the bottom right.

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 KS2 English or History lesson. It focuses on letters sent to James Watt, the famous Birmingham-based inventor, from his young son whilst at boarding school. The plan is accompanied by a supporting PowerPoint.

This lesson plan has been used in several primary 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 understand letters written in the 18th century (or 1700s)
- To write our own letter
- To compare communication in the past and present

[5-10 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:

- Where are the 1700s in time? **[Slide 2]**
- What did Birmingham look like at this time? Brief discussion of Industrial Revolution **[Slide 3]**
- Discuss tools and skills needed for writing **[Slide 4]**
 - 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, professional people e.g. doctors, lawyers
- How did letters travel?
 - Carried by horse-drawn coaches, or maybe servants if close by

[40-60 mins] Main:

Introduce James Watt, key figure of Birmingham and the Industrial Revolution. We are going to look at a letter written to him by his son, aged 10 **[Slide 5]**

Letter 1: 1503 – James Watt (III) to father James Watt II, 22 November 1779 [Slide 6]

A short, neat letter. James Jr says he has good health and is looking forward to his Christmas holiday from boarding school. He sends compliments from friends and family, including his older sister Margaret

- Can anyone read what is written at the top? (Place and date – at school)
- Who is the letter addressed to? (Abbreviation: 'Hon[oure]d Papa')
- Discussion questions **[Slides 7 & Slide 8]:**
 - What is the writer's purpose?
 - How do you think he is feeling?

- How would you describe his relationship with his father?
- How would you describe the handwriting?
- Look at the address on the letter's exterior - envelopes rarely used at this time

[Slide 9]

- 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 its recipient? **[Slide 10]**
How is that different to communication today?

Writing activity [Slide 11]:

- Imagine you are James Sr and write a short reply to this letter.
- Think about how you will begin your letter (remember to include the date!)
- What do you want to say? How are you feeling?
- How will you end your letter?

A couple of volunteers can read their letter aloud.

[Optional] Letter 2: [1505 - James Watt \(III\) to father James Watt II, 13 Dec 1779](#)

[Slides 12 & 13]

James (away at school) reports on his health and those of friends in Birmingham, though he cannot report on his mother's health as she has not written to him. He reports on his education and apologises for mistakes in his previous letter. He seems to be spending Christmas at school.

• Discussion questions **[Slide 14]:**

- What is his purpose in this letter
 - Apologising to father for bad writing, gaining his father's approval)
- How have James' plans changed?
- What subjects is he studying at school?
- Can you find any strange spellings or grammar?
 - 'Holydays', 'you was not', 'dutiful son'

[5-10 mins] Plenary: Reflective question [Slide 15]

- Would you like to write letters to your friends or family?
- How does this compare with phone calls, texts, or using social media?

Alternative letters:

You might like to contrast one of the above letters by James Watt with one by his sister, Margaret (e.g. [6 November 1779](#)). These indicates the different childhoods of boys and girls in the 1770s.

The letters between the young sisters Elizabeth Nicholson and Mary-Ann Nicholson in the early nineteenth century detail the sorts of accomplishments that girls would undertake, as well as the games they would play. For example, whilst away from home on [29 September 1797](#), Elizabeth reports on the health of her doll and blackberry picking.

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](#))