Making Your Voice Heard

**Topic:** Voicing Civic Concerns through Letter-Writing

**Grade level:** Grades 3 – 6

**Subject:** Social Studies, ELA

**Time Required:** 2 – 3 class periods

**Goal/Rationale:**
- People in history have made a difference through writing letters.
- Young people can make their voice heard through letter-writing.

**Essential Question:**
How can individuals use the written word to effect change in their communities and government?

**Objectives:**
- Read and discuss *Dear Benjamin Banneker* by Andrea Davis Pinkney.
- Analyze letters of concern to President Kennedy and other public officials.
- Write a letter to a public official about a civic concern.

**Background:** Throughout American history, people have voiced a variety of concerns to public officials through letter-writing. The archives at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum include more than 48 million pages of documents related to JFK’s family, his pre-presidential years, and his time as president. Among the wealth of primary source material are thousands of letters, some of which can be used with elementary-age students. After learning about an important letter exchange between African American astronomer Benjamin Banneker and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, students investigate letters written to President Kennedy and other public officials before writing their own letter of concern.

**Materials:**

*Dear Benjamin Banneker* by Andrea Pinkney  
Packet of historic letters  
Chart paper  
*Making Your Voice Heard* handout

**Procedure:**

*Part I: Benjamin Banneker writes a letter*

1. Familiarize yourself with *Dear Benjamin Banneker* by Andrea Pinkney, especially with the excerpts of the letters exchanged between Benjamin Banneker.
and Thomas Jefferson. They contain sophisticated vocabulary and unfamiliar syntax and can be challenging even for adults to understand.

2. Introduce the book, using the cover of the book to draw out prior knowledge and predictions from students. Possible questions and information to include:
   a. What do you notice in this picture?
   b. Why is there a feather on the table?
   c. What do you think the man on the cover is doing?
   d. Do you think this story takes place now or long ago?
   e. What does the title suggest (about what the man is reading?)

   During the 1700s, when this story takes place, people from Africa were brought to America and sold as slaves. There were also some people of African descent who were not enslaved. We’re going to read about a free black man named Benjamin Banneker who was very interested in math and science. He believed strongly that slavery was wrong and wanted to make his voice heard. He wanted people to know that black people were smart and deserved to be treated with respect and dignity. Let’s learn about his important accomplishments and what action he took to make his voice heard.

3. Read the book aloud, but stop at after this passage, “Once his almanac was written, Benjamin realized he had another task to begin. On the evening of August 19, 1791, Benjamin lit a candle and sat down to write an important letter to Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson.”

   Who was Thomas Jefferson? What else was he famous for? What does the Secretary of State do?

4. Explain that Thomas Jefferson was the author of the Declaration of Independence. In this important document he wrote that “all men are created equal.” But Thomas Jefferson owned slaves. And that didn’t seem right to Benjamin Banneker. If you were Benjamin Banneker, what would you write in your letter to Thomas Jefferson? Keep in mind that Thomas Jefferson held a very important job in the government, the very first Secretary of State. He was one of President Washington’s chief advisors.

5. Have students brainstorm ideas about what Benjamin Banneker might include in his letter to Thomas Jefferson. Record their ideas on chart paper.

6. Continue reading the excerpts from Benjamin Banneker’s letter. Do you think Thomas Jefferson answered? What could he say in reply? Then read Thomas Jefferson’s reply. What difference do you think it made for Benjamin Banneker to enclose a copy of his almanac with the letter? How did he share his letter and Thomas Jefferson’s reply? How many years later until slavery finally ended?
After you finish the story, ask students why they thought Benjamin Banneker chose to write a letter.

7. **Summary:**

   Benjamin Banneker’s letter challenged one of the most important leaders of the new nation to examine the difference between his words and his actions with regard to slavery. Benjamin Banneker exercised a right that Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and others had fought for and that they put into the Constitution: the right to tell government officials when something is wrong and needs to be changed.

   Another right we have as Americans is the right to have access to government records, including the letters written by citizens to the government. Let’s look at some other examples from different times in history—and see what other reasons people had for sending letters to the president or another public figure.

**Part II: Powerful letters from the past**

1. Explain that people write letters to public officials to voice their opinion, make leaders aware of issues, and to try to make a difference. Writing a letter to a person with the power to make important decisions is a way to work towards change.

2. Students can investigate letters written to public officials at different times in history. Have students identify the effective elements in each letter.

   Here is a list of letters with related fiction and non-fiction resources.

Letters from two eighth grade students from Junior High School 43 in New York City wrote to President Kennedy immediately following the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama on September 15, 1963. Four young girls were killed in the incident and many others were injured.


   Related literature:
   - *Birmingham, 1963* by Carole Boston Weatherford
   - *A Dream of Freedom: The Civil Rights Movement from 1954 to 1968* by Diane McWhorter

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sent several telegrams to President Kennedy. Some were pleas for the President’s intervention at key points in the struggle for civil rights. He also sent a
telegram thanking the President for contacting his wife when King was in jail in Birmingham and another praising the president’s June 11, 1963 speech on civil rights.


Related literature:

*MLK: Journey of a King* by Tonya Bolden

*My Brother Martin: a Sister Remembers Growing Up with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* by Christine Farris King

*I've Seen the Promised Land: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* by Walter Dean Myers

*Martin's Big Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* by Doreen Rappaport

Sarah Josepha Hale, one of the most influential women’s magazine editors of the nineteenth century (and the author of *Mary Had a Little Lamb*), wrote to governors, congressmen and five presidents in an effort to make Thanksgiving a national holiday. Her letter to President Lincoln made a difference! He responded to her plea and proclaimed the fourth Thursday of November a national holiday of thanksgiving.

Access the letter to Lincoln with a transcription from the Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress:

- [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mal&fileName=mal1/266/2669900/malpage.db&recNum=0](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mal&fileName=mal1/266/2669900/malpage.db&recNum=0)

Related literature:

*Thank you, Sarah: the Woman Who Saved Thanksgiving* by Anderson, Laurie Halse.

A group of 195 schoolchildren from Concord, Massachusetts sent a petition to President Lincoln on April 5, 1864, asking that children everywhere be freed. (He had issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1963, freeing slaves in states that had seceded, but not in Southern states that remained part of the Union.) Background information and his response can be found on p. 80 in *Abraham Lincoln: The Writer*, compiled and edited by Harold Holzer.

The petition, Lincoln’s response to Mary Mann, and her response back are in the Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress (Enter “Mary Mann” in the Search paper to access the letter exchange and petition.)

- [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/malquery.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/malquery.html)

Related literature:

*Abe’s Honest Words* by Doreen Rappaport
Dear Mr. President: Abraham Lincoln, Letters from a Slave Girl by Andrea Davis Pinkney

Part III: Making Your Voice Heard

1. Explain that students will have the opportunity to make their own voices heard. We’ve learned about people in history, such as Benjamin Banneker, who wrote letters about important beliefs they held or changes they wanted to see happen. Now you will have a chance to write to a public official about an issue that is important to you or a change you would like to see in your school or community.

2. Brainstorm a list of issues that are important to students. Prompt students to consider school, community, national, and international issues that affect their lives or that they care about. Where do they stand on the issue? How can they find out more about it? Who would they write to if they want to express their opinion or have an impact on addressing the issue?

3. Before students write their letters, guide them to research their topic, organize their ideas, and think through how their letter can make the greatest impact. Questions to consider:
   a. Should they include a petition?
   b. Should they conduct a survey and include the results?
   c. Should they interview people and include quotes in the letter?
   d. Who would be the best person to address the letter to?
   e. How can they find the correct address?

4. Use the handout, Making Your Voice Heard: Writing a Letter to a Public Official, to help students prepare their letters.

5. Provide envelopes and stamps and wait for a response!

6. Post responses on a bulletin board.

Handout
Making Your Voice Heard: Writing a Letter to a Public Official

Identify the public official who can best address your concern.

Name of Public Official ____________________________
Title (Ex. Mayor, Governor, President, etc) _________________________________

Address of Public Official

_________________________________

_________________________________

_________________________________

Create a salutation or greeting:

Dear [Title] [Last Name],

Explain why you are writing the letter:

I want to voice my concern about ______________________________. This issue is important to me because

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

Give additional details about the issue or situation and why you think the official should be concerned, too.

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

Make a suggestion for how to address the concern.

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________
Thank the official for his/her time and attention.

Use an appropriate closing and sign your name. See examples below:

Sincerely,  Best regards,  Respectfully yours,

Include your return address to receive a response to your letter:

First and last name: ______________________________
Street address: ________________________________
City: ________________ State: ______ Zip Code: ____________