

Dear Teacher,

FIRST YEAR LETTERS is a terrific book to introduce letter writing in grades 1-3.

As you teach the parts of a friendly letter, you'll find examples of dates, greetings, indented paragraphs, and closings. Your students will be intrigued by the familiar classroom setting and will be delighted to see how Mrs. Hartwell's students coach her during her first year of teaching.

Sarah Jane Hartwell made her first appearance in FIRST DAY JITTERS. Children (and teachers) love being surprised by the ending of this book. Who would have guessed that a TEACHER (well, all right, a brand new teacher) could feel as reluctant and frightened as a child about going to school on the first day?

We hope both books will make a contribution to your classroom.

Best Wishes,

Your Friends at Charlesbridge

Classroom Activities

Introducing *First Day Jitters* and *First Year Letters*

Introduce Mrs. Sarah Jane Hartwell to your class by reading *First Day Jitters*.

Discussion questions: Were you surprised at the end of the book? Why? How did Mrs. Hartwell feel about the first day of school? Can you remember how you felt on the first day of school? What about other "first" times—sleeping over at a friend's house, riding a bike without training wheels, going to the dentist, or diving off a diving board?

Read *First Year Letters*. This is Mrs. Sarah Jane Hartwell's first year of teaching. What does "experience" mean?

Discussion Question: Look at the dates on the letters and the decorations in the classroom. What time of year is it? What are the holidays? What is the weather? Does this story follow the sequence of the calendar? When you tell a story, do you have a beginning, middle, and an end?

Read other books about letters

- *The Jolly Postman*, Janet and Allan Ahlberg
- *Stringbean's Trip to the Shining Sea*, Vera B. and Jennifer Williams
- *Arthur's Pen Pal*, Lillian Hoban
- *Dear Mr. Blueberry*, Simon James
- *The Journey of Oliver K. Woodman*, Darcy Patterson

Read other books about teachers

- *Miss Nelson Is Missing*, James Marshall
- *Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten*, Joseph Slate
- *My Great-Aunt Arizona*, Gloria Houston

Create a Venn diagram comparing Mrs. Hartwell to other teachers, both fictional and real.

Set up a classroom Post Office

Have on hand paper and envelopes, rubber stamps, postcards and other supplies to make letter-writing fun.

Write to authors and illustrators

Write to favorite authors and illustrators in care of their publishers. Invite local authors to visit the classroom, then follow-up with thank you letters.

The Parts of a Friendly Letter

Discussion questions on the five parts of a friendly letter:

The Heading: The heading always includes the date and can include your address.

Why do we include our address in the heading? Do we want our friends to write back to us?

How will they know where to send a letter? What about the students in Mrs. Hartwell's class? Did anyone include an address? Why not? Are all the children in Room 203?

(Look on the title page to see.) Do the letters all go into the classroom mailbox?

What dates can you find on the letters in the book? Do any of them include the year?

Can you guess why not? Should you include the year?

The Greeting: This usually begins with Dear _____, Remember to put a comma after your friend's name.

Most of the letters in this book begin, "Dear Mrs. Hartwell,

Can you find any that begin in a different way? Can you find one that doesn't have a "period" after Mrs.? What greeting would you use to write a letter to: your teacher, your father or mother, your principal, your friend?

The Body: What do you want to tell your friend? A friendly letter can have one paragraph or several. Each paragraph in a friendly letter is indented.

Can you find a letter with only one paragraph? Is the first sentence indented? Can you find a letter with two paragraphs? Is the first sentence of each new paragraph indented?

Is writing a friendly letter like talking to a friend? If your best friend moved to the deep woods, where there were no telephones or e-mail, and letters were dropped from small airplanes, think how happy he or she would be to hear from you. What would you like to tell your friend?

The Closing: In the closing, the first word is capitalized. Always put a comma after the last word.

Here are some of the closings you'll find in *First Year Letters*:

- Sincerely,
- Fondly,
- Excitedly yours,
- Your friend,
- Love,

Can you find any others?

Do the closings tell you something about the way the letter writer feels?

Can you think of some other closings?

Can you find a letter with no closing? How would this make you feel?

Can you find a closing with no comma?

Your signature

Practice writing your first name and nickname if you have one.

P.S. Have you forgotten something?

You can always add a P.S. Can you find out what P.S. stands for?

Addressing an Envelope

Can you find the picture of the envelope on the title page? Has this letter been mailed yet?

Where does the return address go?

Can you find a reminder about ZIP CODES in *First Year Letters*?

Types of Friendly Letters

The types of letters found in First Year Letters

The students in Mrs. Hartwell's class write a variety of letters. Talk about what each word means and make a class list of occasions and situations to use each.

- Sympathetic (I figured you might be a little scared, just like me).
- Informative (. . . most kids don't eat cauliflower).
- Encouraging (Yesterday was THE BEST!)
- Apologetic (I'm sorry about throwing up all over your shoes.)

In *First Year Letters* can you find:

- A thank-you letter?
- A letter of apology?
- A letter of encouragement?
- An informative letter?

Can you write one of each kind of letter of one paragraph each? Don't forget to indent!

Basic letters everyone needs to write.

Thank you letters

Emphasize the importance of promptness!

Have the class brainstorm a list of great birthday gifts and boring birthday gifts. Put slips of paper in two containers and have each child draw one of each. Write a thank you note to an imaginary aunt or uncle for each, dated the day after the child's birthday.

Invitations

Draw names for partners. One child writes an invitation to a party with RSVP on the bottom, addresses the envelope and delivers. The recipient answers, accepting or declining.

Sympathy

Write a letter of one paragraph to an imaginary friend whose pet has died. You can make up the kind of pet and its name.

Using Letter Writing Across the Curriculum

Speaking and Listening

Dramatize the story as Readers Theater. Have different children take the parts of all the letter writers in *First Year Letters*.

Pick a partner and read letters to each other.

Writing

Keep in mind the Six Traits of Writing: Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, and Conventions.

Ideas

- “I don’t know what to write about!” is a familiar refrain, but content will be easier if each student writes about what is happening in Mrs. Hartwell’s class. Have each child pretend to be a student in Mrs. Hartwell’s class and write a letter home or to a pen pal describing what is happening. You could choose one spread a month for this activity.
- On November 8, the principal, Mrs. Burton visited Mrs. Hartwell’s classroom. Carl tried to peek, but he couldn’t see what she was writing. If you were the principal, what would you write?

Organization

- Keep a list of ideas. Then write key words underneath.
- Try TELLING a friend about something, and then WRITING about the same thing to a different friend. Try to move smoothly from the beginning to the middle to the end.

Voice

- If some of your favorite fairy tale characters or superheroes were writing a letter, how would they sound? What kinds of words would they choose?
- Write a note as if you were Fireman Phil or the Principal.

Word Bank

- Read *First Year Letters* looking for all the most interesting words, such as “messy” and “smithereens”.
- Look closely at a spread to describe action, reaction, sights, sounds and even smells.
- Try to come up with as many interesting and descriptive words as possible. Use powerful verbs. Use these words when writing letters about Mrs. Hartwell’s class.

Sentence Fluency

- Listen for the rhythm and sound of language in books you know such as Wanda Gag’s *Millions of Cats*. Is there a way for you to use some of these ideas?

Conventions

- Look at the first letter Josh wrote on September 14 and the last letter on May 6. Has he learned more about using punctuation? Can you help him edit his first letter?

Math

Devise appropriate postage problems using addition, subtraction, multiplication and division skills.

Sort and classify stamps according to denomination, country, and theme of design.

Weigh mail and packages on a classroom scale.

Find the most inexpensive/expensive way to ship something.

Count and graph junk mail. Have students work with their families to sort mail each day into junk and other. Count the junk and bring the number to school each day.

Distance and time: Have each child pick a relative or friend and write a brief letter asking that person to respond with the day the mail was received. Use a map to measure distance and make a chart correlating time and distance.

Science

Write letters home describing science lessons.

Create a class book about a science topic in the form of letters (Postcards from Pluto).

Try papermaking.

Write letters to support an environmental cause.

Write letters from the point of view of an animal, the rainforest, the ocean, etc.

Social Studies

Collect stamps from different countries and attach them to a world map.

Visit the Post Office.

Make a chart of the life of a letter.

Create a classroom post office.

Read *The Post Office Book: Mail and How It Moves* by Gail Gibbons.

Contact returned Peace Corps Volunteers in your area. Ask them to bring letters to school and to use a map to introduce children to the country in which they worked.

Help your students find Pen Pals in other countries.

Art

Illustrate letters.

Collect beautiful stamps.

Create a new stamp for your own hero, planet, or imaginary country.

Bring in copies of *Griffin & Sabine* (Nick Bantock).

Ask your librarian for help in locating books of illustrated artist's letters. *Sketches for Friends* by Edward Ardizzone is a good example.