

# WRITING LESSON

## Letters of Hope



Students will read and respond to Aura Bogado's YES! article, "Love Letters to the Resistance."

The article reviews the book, *Radical Hope: Letters of Love and Dissent in Dangerous Times*. The book is comprised of letters written by 30 novelists, poets, and activists who seek hope and guidance from people who hold importance in their lives—elders, grandparents, activists, future children, even strangers.

Students will use Aura Bogado's article to write about what matters most to them about our country's future and who they might look to for guidance as they imagine that future.

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"Love Letters to the Resistance"

### Part 2: The Writing Prompt

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### Part 5: Sample Essays

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"A Letter to Mary Magdalene," by Charlotte Wagner, grade 10

"The Righteous Path of María the Sage," by Malena Vargas Sáez, grade 11

"The Paradox of Support," by Carly Nelson, university

## Love Letters to the Resistance

More than 30 writers send messages of hope to loved ones in the time of Trump.



Photo by Kunal Mehta/Shutterstock

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By Aura Bogada

While some accepted the news of Trump's victory almost immediately on Election Day, the result hit others in waves of grief. Over the days, weeks, and months that followed, initial denial has yielded to belief—often dotted with moments of disbelief, reserved for times when the president says or does something that was previously unimaginable. Disappointment remains. And, for many, so does fear.

What words would you find to communicate any sense of critical optimism to a loved one right now? *Radical Hope: Letters of Love and Dissent in Dangerous Times* gleans written messages from more than 30 writers to grandparents, children, strangers, and entire generations.

Carolina de Robertis, the editor of *Radical Hope*, writes that she was thinking about you a few days after the election. You, the person reading this. You, the person who not only

survived Election Day, but also the inauguration and the sweeping changes that have taken place since. You, the person who might still feel hopeless but is nevertheless reading a review of a book about hope. De Robertis was writing to me, too. This was published with all of us in mind.

“What could we do, what must we do,” de Robertis wondered shortly after the election, writing in the introduction about how to get through the new threats facing vulnerable communities. She got to work right away, reaching out to writers for what was then a vague vision to collect “love letters in response to these political times.” She was stunned and humbled by the responses she received, remarking that the letters create “a collective mirror of precisely what makes this society strong and beautiful.”

It makes sense: So many people wanted—needed, even—to channel their energy into something positive after the election. For the collected authors in *Radical Hope*, letter writing to loved ones was a way to do that.

In these letters, writers dive into personal and historical origins to search for hope. In the section called “Roots,” you’ll read letters that point to history and how we got here. Alicia Garza, who helped found Black Lives Matter, writes to “Mama Harriet”—the woman who founded the Underground Railroad. Jewelle Gomez, the author and playwright, writes to her maternal great-grandmother. Others write not only to elders past, but also to children and grandchildren. The letters are tender in a way letters to loved ones tend to be—while acknowledging the urgency of this moment.

The ability to write what de Robertis describes in the opening as an “essay in letter form”—that gift of including personal details while also knowing there’s a bigger audience—is the thread that weaves *Radical Hope* together. These essays are personal. That’s the beauty of the epistolary form: The writers share their vulnerability because they trust the letters’ audience. These letter writers trust that we’ll find hope in their words.

This collection also invites you, dear reader, to participate in creating hope. In the section called “Branches,” you’re made conscious of your participation in this book. Cherríe Moraga, for example, addresses the book’s audience directly: “Dear ‘Radically Hopeful’ Artist.”

At this point I realized that, despite my cynicism, I’m still a radically hopeful person—it would make little sense otherwise to read these letters. So I went back to letters I’d already read, and I noted the intentional ambiguity with which some of the letters are addressed. Many of the letters invite participation. These writers have placed a hope in the readers that we will, in turn, take away some hope from the letters. It’s an engaging process that’s made whole when we, as readers, do find some hope.

And these letters invite us to find personal connections between ourselves and the strangers to whom these letters are addressed. In one letter, Elmaz Abinader, an author who founded Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation, writes to a woman who stood in front of her in line at the grocery store. Abinader overheard pieces of this stranger’s conversation: torture, jail, Buenos Aires. Abinader imagines the woman survived torture under Argentina’s military dictatorship several decades ago. “You are ahead of me,” she writes, describing the stranger’s physical location in line. But the text also signals that this woman is a survivor of the kind of dictatorship and torture many fear will occur in the Trump administration. By having survived something like it, she’s ahead of that experience.

There’s something devastating about Abinader’s letter in *Radical Hope*. The stranger in line isn’t the only woman she addresses. Defying time and space, Abinader writes to her grandmother who escaped Lebanon more than 100 years ago. She writes to countless women she’s encountered who’ve survived searches, checkpoints, and despots. She writes to so many women that it creates a shared sense of familiarity among all women who’ve experienced injustice.

“Many of us have not learned how to lose something,” Abinader writes. These women in line know about profound loss. And how to survive it.

Last, these letters address the future. In the section called “Seeds,” writers try to envision a hopeful future despite the political and social turmoil of the present. It’s here that you’ll read Meredith Russo’s letter to her child. “I am not ashamed to admit I am more afraid than ever,” the transgender novelist writes.

Russo’s honesty—that she’s worked to make a better world than the one she grew up with, but that her “hope was misplaced”—is as candid as it is compassionate. You may find tears in your eyes, and you may have to clear your throat as you’ve learned to do so many times under the Trump administration.

What makes the letters in *Radical Hope* powerful is the way they’re rooted in reality. The writers don’t turn from this moment, but instead accept it and its infinite challenges, just as they understand the past and its persistent legacies. The words here are often written to people we’ll never meet but whose obstacles we already share. There’s hope in imagining we’ll see a different day, together.

## Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Think about what matters most to you about our country's future. Write a letter to someone important to you, describing that future you imagine and hope for.

## Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. "9-10" is used as an example.

How did this lesson work for you and your students?

Share your feedback with us and other teachers

by leaving a comment on our website:

<https://bit.ly/2MOSBBI>

## Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Focus on topic</b>	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
<b>Organization</b>	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
<b>Originality and strength of ideas</b>	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.
<b>Evidence and/or reasoning</b>	Provides specific reasons and/or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea.
<b>Command of grammar and conventions</b>	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
<b>Voice</b>	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.

\* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.

## Dear Emma González

Lucy Shuler-Morgan, grade 6

Emma González  
5901 NW Pine Island Road  
Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School  
Parkland, FL 33076

Dear Emma,

My name is Lucy Shuler-Morgan. I am a sixth-grader from Washington Elementary in Omaha, Nebraska. I am writing you today because I want you to know what an inspiration you are to not only me but also to all of us kids who sometimes feel like we are too young to make a difference in the world.

It is unbelievable that we have to deal with gun violence in this country while our peers in other parts of the world don't have this problem. That is because their countries have common sense gun control. I can't even imagine what it would be like to experience what you and your friends have had to face.

If those 17 kids could come back for even just a few minutes, they wouldn't complain about that math test next period. They wouldn't complain about their parents' cooking. They wouldn't think that they weren't good enough or pretty enough, and they wouldn't dwell on their flaws. They wouldn't take anything for granted because having their lives cut short would make them appreciate the normal parts of being a kid. This has opened my eyes to how lucky I am to get to experience all the small wonders of my life: reading my little sister a bedtime story, going on walks with

my dog, singing show tunes in the car with my mom, and laughing at my dad's jokes.

You and all the other Marjory Stoneman Douglas kids who are standing up and making your voices heard on behalf of the 17 kids who can't are so empowering. It would be understandable if you wanted to put this terrible tragedy behind you and move on with your life. Instead, you are using your pain as a path to change and that is truly amazing.

It is hard for me to understand how people in power can continue to choose money over people's lives, especially after seeing what you and the many other survivors of mass shootings have had to go through. Even though you are getting pushback from the NRA, I hope that you know that there are countless kids who are looking up to you, finding hope from you, and cheering you on.

I hope that the next generation will never see its kids' lives turned upside down by gun violence. Never again.

Yours in power,

Lucy Shuler-Morgan

## A Letter to Mary Magdalene

By Charlotte Wagner, grade 10

Dear Mary,

Even though you do not have a voice in your own story, I feel your words in me.

Truth be told, I don't remember hearing your name before a visit to the Art Institute of Chicago. That's when I first learned of your "reputation." My grandma nudged me, her eyes locked on your half-naked portrait, your long red hair spilling down like a waterfall.

"She was a prostitute, you know."

Isn't it strange what history does to dead women? The Cleopatras, the Elizabeths, the Theodoras. There was never one mention of you being a prostitute, but due to a mix up with a couple of other biblical Marys, the notion stuck.

I suppose that was the only excuse Renaissance painters needed to practice their female anatomy (all in the name of the Bible, of course). And while I can go on for hours and hours about the objectification and suppression of female sexuality, as well as the dehumanization of those forced into prostitution, I'll save that discussion for another time.

Does history not remember that you were one of Jesus's most attentive followers? That you were present at the crucifixion, the burial, and the resurrection? That you—not Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John—were the first to witness the Good News? That after the resurrection, you went off on

your own to spread the message of Jesus?

Not to point fingers, but I think I know why your role was downplayed, Mary. Anyone who has taken a basic World History class knows why.

In the grand scale of things, though notions of gender equality have been able to spread rapidly, our century of progress is nothing compared to eras of suppression. Most instances of female power have been squandered by the constraints of patriarchy.

You traveled every step alongside the disciples but were mentioned only fourteen times. Why is it that Jesus appeared to you first, while all his other disciples fought among themselves? Not only that, but you stuck by him every step of the way without even the slightest hesitation. As much as we Christians like to believe that the Bible was divinely inspired, it was still written by men seeking to immortalize their legacies.

Legacies that do not seem to have room for you.

How many girls have chosen the name Mary, after the Virgin instead of you?

So many things make me mad about your story, Mary. I'm sure you can't feel anger anymore. You're in heaven, surrounded by love and warmth and happiness. But I, my dear Mary, am not.

Things have gotten better since your time. There are now women scientists, women astronauts, and women authors, all writing their own stories for further generations to study and dissect. Things may not be perfect yet, but by your grace we're getting there.

There is still so much history buried by time. So many women whose stories will never be told. Whose struggles will never be recognized. Whose deaths will never be remembered.

But don't worry, I'm working on it.

So are millions of others, female and male, young and old, and everything in between. Someday, Mary, I hope that we can be as magnificent as you. But for now, you are our tower of light, guiding our hands and our work towards brighter ways.

Much love,

Charlotte

## The Righteous Path of María the Sage

By Malena Vargas Sáez, grade 11

Querida María:

I have so much to thank you for. I would like to start with thanking you for your ever-growing understanding and receptivity to this changing world. I thank you for confronting all the adversities that came your way throughout your life, and for every tear you held back for your young siblings, your children, and their children. Thank you for your unbreakable will despite the crack of patriarchy's whip. For swallowing your pride for not finishing school and for becoming a strong and loving figure for your siblings and your children at home, even if it cost you getting judged by people who would not have done the same. And I begin with all this gratitude because we, the world, are in need of individuals like you—more Marías.

Inside that cement house, nestled high up in the rural mountains in the heart of Borinquen, your parents, aware of it or not, admired President Woodrow Wilson as he signed a law in 1917 that finally made us citizens of a powerful nation. Thanks to Luis Muñoz Marín and his negotiations with the United States, you got your first good pair of shoes—shoes that would hop on rocks and cross the river on your way to the only school in town. And don't forget that moment your tongue discovered the taste of peanut butter the first day American food was served in the school cafeteria. What an experience!

Remember how you would put all these honorable men on a pedestal, like your favorite wooden saint or porcelain Baby Jesus? But, to ponder the possibility that those political figures were corrupt, while

most people could not access decent education, was terrifying! It was because of this that you forbade your children and husband, even the cousins and tíos and tías who came to visit, from ever speaking politics and religion at the dinner table, or anywhere within your hearing range. *It is like putting water and a computer together—things just will not end well*, you would always tell yourself.

You had given up on these lying puppets when Pedro Rosselló demanded a place on your pedestal. He was followed by four governors and his son Ricardo, our current governor, who stood at the end of the line. And to top it off, *Mr. Donal Trom*, a magnet for controversy, walked right through the door, demanding a pedestal of his own.

And María, your waking up at 4 a.m. just to make sure the house was holding up in the face of three straight days of the hurricane was simply incredible. Holding back your anger while being thrown paper towels by the “president” of the United States instead of medications and meals for your frail husband takes unbelievable strength. One might even say you live up to your hurricane namesake. Woman, how do you do it?

Tell me, what is your secret? We are watching how this government makes education unaffordable and inaccessible; watching our honorable teachers get fired while the news exposes what ridiculously large salaries new and old secretaries and assessors make. They make protests look bad, and even spew on social media that demonstrations waste their time and that we are being inconsiderate toward drivers

and tourists. María, you have every reason to lose hope!

In a country where powerful figures lead us to hate our differences, you accept every race, age, gender, and sexual orientation with love and respect. In a community that is divided and riddled with the holes of ever-growing violence, you do your best to keep our family together and on good terms. María, it is like you swim against the tide, but you do not seem to mind.

Is it something that comes with age? Does this radical hope come with being a mother, a grandmother, a good neighbor, a hardworking woman? Is this the true definition of being human?

I am running out of words, and I am still filled with questions and doubts, but I am hoping your memory, our origins, will guide us all through these turbulent and dangerous times. You, like so many Marías, deserve to be on that pedestal in the living room instead.

With admiration from your  
granddaughter,

Malena

# The Paradox of Support

By Carly Nelson, university

Dear Peach,

When you first came to live with me, I naively hoped you would no longer have to fight for respect, safety, and even survival.

As a gay, autistic, non-binary person, you weathered some rough teenage years. You also escaped a number of abusive situations and survived years of physical pain and exhaustion, the source of which remains undiagnosed. Knowing how resilient you are, I thought that if I could just get you into a safe home, help you get to doctor's appointments regularly, and apply for benefits, your life would be entirely turned around.

And yet, there are still innumerable obstacles.

For instance, the Ohio Works First program requires that you hold employment to be eligible for food stamps. Additionally, the doctor was unwilling to sign off on the form to exclude you from the work requirement until you underwent a series of tests. These tests needed to be scheduled several months in advance and would require you to get up very early in the morning, which I know would exhaust you physically and mentally. This was the first of many times your disability would stand in the way of proving that you actually have a disability. And it was the first of many times that the public assistance system forced us to jump through many fruitless hoops and find a way to make things work on our own.

Advocacy is more than simply stating your

needs. It's defending them in a world that seems to do everything in its power to refute them. People don't think you need support because you were able to escape an abusive situation—never mind you would have died had you not escaped.

You may get approved for social security income at a hearing one to two years from now, but if anyone gives you money in the meantime—in any form other than a loan—they'll count it as income and cut back the amount they give you if you're ever approved. It seems that any time you're able to get your needs met while waiting for the system to catch up, it's held against you. I think of how many others like you struggle in similar ways, and I can't help but wonder how much blood is on the hands of the systems that are supposed to keep people alive.

We are both exhausted by the constant onslaught of work it takes to get people to understand and respect what you need to be independent. It becomes easy to feel as though we will have to spend the rest of our lives trying to convince people that you have the right to be on your own.

Amazingly, those who have given us the most hope are not the people in positions of power, but people in similar situations—those who understand that the world can be horrendously difficult. These Good Samaritans have offered to lighten the load, or at least offered solidarity. In the words of our beloved Mr. Rogers, we have learned to “look for the helpers,” and we've found them among people whose resources are often not much more than

our own.

While I wish it didn't have to be that way, I am inspired by our ability to find what we need amidst all the chaos and difficulty. In line with negotiation theory as described by Roger Fisher and William Ury, when negotiation isn't possible due to power imbalance, we continue to improve our best alternative to a negotiated agreement with the help of those who are willing to help us. Sometimes our best alternative involves asking for donations, pooling resources with others, or finding creative ways to meet your needs.

Like Aura Bogado said in her YES! Magazine article, "Love Letters to the Resistance," we "don't turn from this moment, but instead accept it and its infinite challenges." We may never escape bureaucracy and other obstacles, from people who won't let you use AAC or let me speak for you when you're nonverbal to doctors who tell you "you'll just have to learn to deal with" your pain when it's at a level eight on a ten-point scale. Still, we will write our own deliverance and work toward systems that allow you and other multiply marginalized people to flourish. My dream is that the future will follow our example.

Love,

Carly