

Becoming a Researcher

Reading Objects Teaching Pack 1: Letters

Guidance

This pack offers activities to aid a teaching workshop to undergraduate or postgraduate researchers new to Special Collections.

Activities begin with a detailed reading of specific items held in Special Collections and are designed to engage students in reading content, context, handwriting and materiality.

The aim of the session is to provide students with the questions and tools to rigorously read any letters they may encounter during their research, and to critically distinguish these from other types of material.

Session overview

Students work in small groups (of no more than 5), each group focusing on one letter. Progressing through 3 short activities, students gain experience of the skills needed to read letters rigorously.

Learning Objectives

At the end of the teaching session, students should be able to:

- Critically examine letters and compare and contrast them to other forms of discourse.
- Ask rigorous questions about letters in relation to their status as historical documents by examining related elements including: anticipated reader, language, tone, style and subject.
- Consider the physical properties of letters and their potential importance.
- Understand the importance of handwriting, particularly for pre- nineteenth century-letters.
- Understand the importance of provenance in relation to letters in Special Collections.

Planning a Session: Teaching sessions using Special Collections material are generally held in the Brotherton Room. This can comfortably accommodate up to 20 students looking at material.

Information on booking the Brotherton Room is available on the [Library website](#).



Primary materials to be consulted in library or via the Special Collections website

Howard Cruttenden Marten handwritten letter, 26th June 1916 (LIDDLE/WW1/CO/061):

<https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/30262>

Lesson Plan:

Introduction	Talking to group	5 minutes
Activity 1: Content and Context	Small Group Discussion	10 – 15 minutes
Activity 2: Handwriting and Materials	Small Group Discussion	10 – 15 minutes
Activity 3: Reading letters as historical documents	Small Group Discussion	10 – 15 minutes
Round up	Whole Group Discussion	5 minutes

Suggested reading in advance of visit:

Students can read [Special Collections Research Skills resources](#) in advance of their visit to Special Collections.

Introductions

Powerpoint introductions to Special Collections for use in teaching sessions are available [here](#).

Materials for follow-on activities

A transcript of Howard Cruttenden Marten's letter [available on the VLE].

Times articles [catalogue reference: <http://lib.leeds.ac.uk/record=b2661465>]

[William Crick's diary](#)



Case Study: Howard Cruttenden Marten

ACTIVITY 1: Content and Context

Read carefully through the letter written by Howard Cruttenden Marten.

1. What is the letter about?
2. What kind of language does the letter writer use and what does he refer to? Do these give us any indications of his interests or affiliations?
3. **Content** and **Context** are closely linked in this letter. What do the format of the letter and the printed rules and regulations at the beginning of the letter tell us about where it was sent from?
4. Taking into account the type of letter that this is and the language employed, what can we learn about the letter writer?
5. To what extent does the date of the letter influence how we read its contents?

ACTIVITY 2: Further Context

Most letters are intended to be read, but the printed rules and regulations at the beginning of this letter make it clear that it will be read by other individuals in addition to the addressee.

1. Consider the printed rules and regulations at the beginning of the letter. How might these affect what the letter writer has written?
2. These rules are very specific to the environment from which the letter was sent, but can you think about other, less formal, rules which might shape how we write letters?
3. Ask yourself who this letter is written to and whether this might affect the detail or the tone of the letter. How might the letter be different if addressed to someone else, for example a) an army friend, or b) a letter to a newspaper interested in his view of the war?

TEACHING NOTES for ACTIVITIES 1 and 2

Contextual information

- Howard Cruttenden Marten (born 1884) was a Conscientious Objector and member of the No-Conscription Fellowship during the First World War. Despite appearing at tribunals to assert his CO status he was sent to France in Spring 1916, where he was court martialled for refusing to obey formal orders and sentenced to death. The sentence was commuted to a prison sentence of ten years. He was imprisoned at Winchester and Wormwood Scrubs and later employed on the Home Office Work Scheme at Aberdeen (Dyce), Wakefield and Dartmoor (Princetown). Later he worked briefly with the Friends' War Victims Relief Committee.



- Although he was not a member of the Society of Friends at the time of his tribunals, Howard Cruttenden Marten had been brought up as a Quaker and was a pacifist. He purposefully refused to join the Society of Friends at the time of the First World War in order to state his beliefs as an individual, rather than feeling that he was protected by a religious organisation. While he was drafted and during his time in prison he took part in Friends' meetings whenever he could.
- His letter dated 26th June 1916 was the only one that Howard Cruttenden Marten sent from prison. Prisoners were allowed to receive a letter once every four months, and although all letters sent to prisoners had to be shown to them, they were not allowed to be read.
- The letter is addressed from Winchester prison, and the person who has filled in the first portion of the letter has misspelled Marten. The misspelled name and evidence of two different types of handwriting show that the first section of the letter (top of page 1) was filled in by someone other than the letter writer. This, in addition to the printed rules, indicates the level of surveillance to which prison correspondence was subject.
- The letter is addressed to 'Dearest Folks' and makes reference throughout to Mum and Dad, suggesting that it was written to his parents. Confusingly, it is signed Toby, but references within the letter to Grace (later his wife) and the fact that the letter was deposited in Special Collections by Howard Cruttenden Marten himself, confirm that the letter was written by Marten.

ACTIVITY 3: Handwriting and Materials

Read through the transcript of the same letter.

1. How does reading a typescript differ from reading the actual letter? Does it change your engagement with the letter as a reader? Are you likely to consider a handwritten object as more subjective, for example, than a typewritten one? Are you more likely find yourself emotionally connected to a handwritten letter?
2. How does the materiality of the letter (for example, the size of the booklet and its colour) shape both the way it is written and the way it might be received?
3. Can we learn anything from the handwriting of the letter?



ACTIVITY 4: Reading archival letters as historical documents

Read a historian's description of Conscientious Objectors during the First World War. Think about how letters from the men themselves can add to this information, but also what kind of questions need to be asked of these letters in order to be academically rigorous in our thinking about historical accounts.

Descriptions of COs available electronically via the library website include:

A.J.P Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (p. 54) [catalogue record: <http://lib.leeds.ac.uk/record=b3567274>]

The Oxford Companion to Military History [catalogue record: <http://lib.leeds.ac.uk/record=b3504105>]

1. Why might letters supplement, contrast or contradict official histories?
2. Given the subjective nature of letters, the way in which they are written with an intended recipient in mind and the formal and informal rules and regulations to which letters are subject, to what extent do we need to question the reliability of letters as historical documents?
3. Look back at Howard Cruttenden Marten's letter. How might his beliefs shape his record of events?
4. Are there any ethical considerations we should take into account when reading letters from archives?
5. What is meant by the provenance of a letter? How might the way in which the letter was deposited in Special Collections affect how we read it?

TEACHING NOTES for ACTIVITIES 3 and 4

Palaeography

Palaeography is the study of old and ancient writing which encompasses handwriting up to the late eighteenth century. Later examples of handwriting, such as that found in this letter cannot be assessed so easily, because handwriting styles became less formal. What can be inferred from the handwriting of this letter however, alongside the use of language and grammar, is that Howard Cruttenden Marten was educated (he attended school and then a polytechnic).

Embargoes

Letters in archives may be subject to embargoes or restrictions. Donors may wish to restrict access to letters for the period of their lifetime, or the lifetime of the letter writer, or because the letter might refer to an individual for whom it may cause embarrassment or offence. Researchers using archives need to be aware of any embargoes or restriction on the material they are consulting, and be sensitive to the nature of the correspondence they may uncover.



Teaching notes continued

Provenance

Provenance refers to where a book or manuscript has come from, who it has been owned by previously, and how it came to be deposited in Special Collections. Annotations, inscriptions and bookplates placed in books are just some of the means by which we can determine their provenance. Provenance is very important in relation to letters and can help archivists to understand gaps in collections as well as what is there. Writers, recipients, or owners of letters may not choose to deposit all of the letters in their possession for a variety of reasons: the letters might contain sensitive information for example. In this way collections are curated or edited by their depositors, so it is important to know who has been a part of this process.

ACTIVITY 5: Extension Activities - reading across sources

1. Read the following letters and articles from *The Times*:
'Objector in Pit: Story of Ill-treatment in Cleethorpes', *The Times*, 28 July, 1917, p. 3.
'Starve or Fight', Letters to the Editor, *The Times*, 6 September, 1917, p. 4.
'Conscientious Objectors', *The Times*, 15 September, 1917, p. 5.
[These can be accessed via the library website: <http://lib.leeds.ac.uk/record=b2661465>].

You might also want to look at the [Imperial War Museum's podcast on Conscientious Objection](#). This webpage includes a satirical cartoon on conscientious objectors entitled 'This Little Pig Stayed at Home'.

- a. What do they suggest about the diverse ways in which Conscientious Objectors were viewed?
 - b. How do the published letters differ from editorials in their treatment of the subject? Do letters intended for publication differ from letters sent to another private individual?
2. Read a few entries from the diary of [William Crick](#), a boy telegraphist serving in the Royal Navy during the First World War.
 - a. Think about the language and tone with which he describes his experiences. Compare this to the letter written by Howard Cruttenden Marten. What do these two objects suggest about the diversity of experiences during the First World War?
 - b. How does the diary format and absence of an intended recipient (as in letters) shape the way that William Crick writes about his experiences?



Related Resources

If you have enjoyed this workshop and would like to research further into any of the ideas or questions raised, you might be interested in the following resources held by Special Collections.

- [Howard Cruttenden Marten Archive File](#)
Further material relating to Howard Cruttenden Marten including correspondence, scrap books, and material relating to the No-conscription Fellowship.
- [The Liddle Collection](#)
The Liddle Collection includes the personal papers of over 6,000 people who lived through the First World War and over 500 who experienced the Second World War. These include individuals on active service in the military or as medical personnel, conscientious objectors, and those who experienced the war from the 'domestic front'.
- [Conscientious Objectors](#)
The Liddle Collection holds diverse material relating to Conscientious Objection to World War One and World War Two. Most of this can be accessed in Special Collections, but some is also currently exhibited in the [Treasures of the Brotherton Gallery](#). Other ways to find out how people viewed Conscientious Objectors include newspaper searches of the period. Many archive editions of newspapers are now available online including [The Times](#) and the [Manchester Guardian](#). Alternatively you could research the extent to which Conscientious Objectors feature in contemporary historical accounts, as well as history books written later.
- [Quaker Collections](#)
Special Collections holds a substantial collection of material relating to Quakers living and practicing in Yorkshire
- [Letters Database](#)
If you have found letters of particular interest you may want to browse the letters database to see some of the wide range of letters held by Special Collections.

External Links

Letters

- Lancaster University: [Reading Medieval letters seminar](#)
- National Archives tutorial on [Palaeography](#) and [Latin Palaeography](#)

First World War Resources

- [The National Archive](#) has a [First World War Research Guide](#)
- ['Conscientious Objectors in their Own Words'](#) : resource from the Imperial War Museum.
- [The Conscientious Objectors' Register](#) at the Imperial War Museum.



Becoming a Researcher: Letters – Handout 1

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Handout 2: Key questions to ask

Content

- What is the letter about? Is there a particular purpose for the letter, - is it to distribute news, to persuade, or to invite, for example?
- What language is used in the letter and what tone is conveyed? How do these affect your reading of the subject of the letter?
- Does the subject or language of the letter require prior knowledge? Is it written in more than one language, or does it employ specific terminology or jargon? Are the meanings of the letter obvious or are they discreet, or coded? Is the meaning of the letter dependent upon other correspondence?

Context

- Who wrote the letter?
- Who is the letter written to?
- What date was the letter written?
- Where was the letter written?
- Who donated the letter to the archive? Is it part of a wider collection?

Structure and Materials

- How would you describe the colour, texture, or quality of the paper? Does this tell us anything about the writer or the purpose of the letter?
- Has the letter been damaged or repaired? Can we learn from this whether it has been frequently read? Have any annotations been added?

Handwriting

- Is the letter written in a particular script? For older letters, does this tell us anything about the profession or education of the writer?
- Was the letter hurriedly written down? Is it a formal or an informal note?

