

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- Ask rigorous questions about letters in relation to their status as historical documents by examining related elements including: anticipated reader, language, tone, style and subject.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](#).

Selecting material: A list of letters which have been successfully used in this activity, alongside contextual information and transcriptions is also available.

Special Collections holds thousands of letters, many of which may be suitable for these activities. Search the catalogue at: <https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/>

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Activity 3: Reading letters as historical documents	Small Group Discussion	10 – 15 minutes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](#).



ACTIVITY 1: Content and Context

Read carefully through the letter in front of you.

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** can be closely linked in letters. Does the format of the letter effect our understanding of its contents?
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: 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 letter 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 3: Reading archival letters as historical documents

How might letters as primary sources supplement an historian's account? Think about what kind of questions need to be asked of these letters in order to be academically rigorous in our thinking about historical accounts.

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. How might the beliefs or prejudices of an individual shape their record of events? Are there any ethical considerations we should take into account when reading letters from archives?
4. 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 ACTIVITY 3

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.

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.

Related Resources

- [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](#)



Becoming a Researcher: Letters

Student Handout: 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?

